



The Journey

a fairy tale, sort of ...

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R. C. Smith

The Journey
by R. C. Smith
A Fairy Tale, Sort Of

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A Dunyazad Digital Library book
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**Do not read this book if you are offended by descriptions
of sexuality and violence.**
The author asks you not to read it just for those descriptions, either.

In gratitude
to E
for, among everything else,
love, care, patience and understanding,
and to S
for friendship, encouragement, advice,
and indispensable thoughtful editing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

R. C. Smith (an assumed name) is a native and resident of Austria, of advanced age and undisclosed gender.

The Journey, begun in January 2007 and completed in December 2011, is the author's first and so far only novel.

For stories, short stories and vignettes, see the author's website, www.rc-smith.net

ABOUT THIS BOOK (EDITOR'S PREFACE/DISCLAIMER)

What is this book?

“She could just as well have washed everybody’s feet, but who would want to read some 200 pages of feet-washing?” — R. C. S.

A snuff porn adventure story with pretensions?

A philosophical text that uses sex and pain as a metaphor?

Something else/something in between?

You will have to decide for yourself, if you care to do so.

Just be warned.

Another issue is style.

“Where I come from, writing short and simple sentences is considered to be one small step away from illiteracy.” — R. C. S.

This shows.

According to the author, who, when in doubt, favors rhythm over rules of style and grammar, the text is meant to be read aloud.

Be advised to read it aloud only in your mind, though; otherwise take care of who might be within hearing range.

Including yourself.

The Editor

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FOREWORD: A PAIR OF DRESSY SANDALS

I am indebted to Ms Candy C. and Ms Emily R. from Virginia for sharing with us their pleasure in watching executions, which in their home state is an accepted and officially endorsed pastime.

Especially I thank Ms C., aged 36 at the time, for her words, “He’s staring at me ... Oh my god, he’s looking right at me,” referring to the tied up dying man in front of her, and for her comment, “I think they need to feel some kind of pain.”

To Ms R., aged 27, I am thankful for the deliberations she gave to choosing the right clothes to be seen in by a man dying in agony (“I was like, ‘What the hell do you wear to someone’s execution?’”), for finally deciding on “a conservative button-down linen shirt, khaki capri pants and a pair of dressy sandals,” and for her words, “It takes a lot of courage to watch people die, it takes a lot of courage to actually go and keep your eyes open the whole time.”

All this has nothing whatever to do with the following story, but it kind of gave me the incentive to write it.

Unlike Mses C. and R., all characters in this story, whether living, dead, dying or watching somebody die, are strictly fictional, and bear no intended resemblance to any real persons neither in this world, nor in the one in which the story is set.

INTRODUCTION: THE QUEENDOM OF FORTUNE

The Queendom of Fortune is a very fortunate country indeed. Though its northern shores and provinces suffer from a cold climate, and its western shore is exposed to a stormy and hostile sea, while its central regions are mountainous and their southern parts largely impassable during the winter, there are many fertile regions suitable for agriculture and stock farming, large forests providing an abundance of timber and game, and softly flowing rivers that can be navigated and that bring water to the fields and the towns. The Queendom's mountains harbor iron, coal, silver and salt, and its southern provinces enjoy a warm and sunny climate that allows for the growing of wine, citrus fruits and olives, while they border on a calm sea rich with fish, across which lie the distant countries of the South and the East, making the southern port cities of Fortune wealthy from peaceful trade, with the foremost of those cities being the capital, the Beautiful City, with its famous White Palace which is the seat of the Queen.

To the east, the Queendom is separated from more backward countries by a barrier of high mountains, and another such barrier separates it from a country that lies in the South-West, so that the Queendom of Fortune's western and southern shores do not meet.

It is a big country, with roughly 500 miles between the northern and the southern shores as the seagull flies, and some 400 miles between the western shore and the border mountains in the East. For those of you who might be familiar with some of the well-known writings about the mythological planet Earth, think of Fortune's outlines and size resembling vaguely, though very vaguely, that of the often mentioned

country called “France,” with the Beautiful City in this analogy being near the place where the poets on their imaginary maps have put the town they named “Marseille,” which is not to suggest that those two cities, or those two countries, have anything else in common. I only mentioned the superficial geographic resemblance so that I didn’t have to draw a map of the place myself — “I” being the writer, not the “I” of the following narration. I am only the one who relays her harrowing tale to you, building upon her own words for this task as faithfully as I can. But enough of this.

The Queendom of Fortune is a fortunate place not only for the benefits that nature has bestowed upon it, but also because it is inhabited by honest, hard-working, and law-abiding people, and because those laws they abide by have been given to them and always benevolently been enforced by a succession of wise, farsighted and gracious Queens, who have ensured stability, prosperity and, the most important prerequisite for those achievements, unity, for many generations.

This is the story of a journey — *the* Journey — that leads from a backward village in the North to the imperial splendor of the Queen’s palace under the southern sun, a long and dangerous journey, done for the good of the Queendom; a journey like it has been ventured, from always varying points of departure, once every four years since ancient and almost forgotten times.

Come along, if you choose to do so, at your own risk.

CHAPTER 1: THE GIFT

“I will see *him* again,” was the first thought I had, when they came to tell me.

He, the hero of my childhood. Sir Edmond, *our* hero, the famous warrior, the victor of the legendary battle of Swamp Rock.

There are not many wars that anyone here can remember. The Lands of the Queendom of Fortune live in peace with each other, governed by their Princesses and Princes, under the prudent and provident rule of the Queen, as had been the rules of all the Queens before her. No violence between the Lands erupts over matters of trade and natural resources, nor over the question to which god or gods, if at all, their people pray. The Queendom also lives in secure peace with its neighbors, with whom it trades, to its own benefit as well as theirs. And, despite living in peace, the Queendom is strong, and by its very strength and determination deters possible attackers from without or within.

These are rare occasions on which this strength and determination have to be tested, so that not many men or women have ever seen a battle, and have lived through the opportunity, or the necessity, to witness or perform heroic deeds. And even when there had been wars, they were waged in parts of the Queendom far away from the remote and somewhat backward northern Land of Slain which is my home, and, from what I have been told by much older people, the few reports that had ever reached us here about those wars had been received with little attention. And even if the name Slain has a martial sound to it, and in older days the full name had been Land of Slain Ogres, those

ogres who in the dark past were said to have come across the Northern Sea to our shores, and whose giant bodies turned into stones that now lie strewn across our meadows and forests as the hallmarks of our landscape, according to our own myths had not been defeated in fierce battles by fearless sword-wielding warriors amongst our ancestors, but had been felled by the apple wine they had drunk, of which in our Land they found plenty, but to which they had not been accustomed in their distant dark and frozen abodes.

Only the last war, now more than seventeen years in the past, had come closer to our home than the wars before, and many of my Land had fought in it, and many of them had come back, telling tales of blood and pain and horror and bravery and victory, but only one of them had come back at the head of a triumphal procession, riding on a colossal black horse, wearing the silver armor of honor that the Queen bestows upon the bravest of her loyal subjects. Only one of them had risen to the rank of a General in the Royal Army, only one of them had won the battle of Swamp Rock for us all and for the Queendom, only one of them had been the hero we had all come out to see.

I was a pretty little girl of four years then, and in honor of my father, who had fought bravely and had been severely wounded, I was chosen to be the pretty little girl who had to hand a bunch of red and white flowers to Sir Edmond as he rode through the main street of our village, on his way to our Land's Princetown, to be received by the Princess who then lived in the castle.

And I, in all my excitement, stumbled forward as I saw him approaching, holding the flowers firmly in both of my hands, and I raised my face to look at the hero on his big horse, not seeing the holes and the stones on the unpaved road, and fell down, never letting go of the flowers, never letting my gaze leave the face of the hero, and I saw

him halt his horse, and dismount, and he came to me, and bent down, and helped me up, and took the flowers from my hands, and gave me a kiss on my forehead, so that my tears dried, and he escorted me back to the side of the road, and gave me back into the hands of my father and my mother, and then he returned to his horse, and gave the flowers to one of his adjutants, a middle-aged woman with large breasts and a kind face, and he mounted his horse again, and waved, and rode on.

And soon after that we heard that he had gone south, to the Land of More, to the splendorous Beautiful City, the residence of the Queen, to live there as our Land's ambassador at the Queen's court.

And now I was going to see him again.

Not only to see him again, but to go on a journey with him, on *the* Journey, to spend four months together with him, *alone* with him — I could not think of anything else.

Not quite alone, I had to correct my thoughts. There would be the Artist with us, whoever that would be. And there would be a small escort of armed guards, but they would keep their respectful distance, they would not share our talk, and not share our accommodations, and they would not be the same throughout the Journey, there would be a new escort from each Land to the next.

~

We sat in the kitchen. Although it was morning I had offered wine, and we were drinking it. They had knocked, and somehow I had known who they were, and why they had come, the moment I opened the door and saw them, before one word had been spoken. One of them I knew, he was one of the Aldermen of the village. The other two, a man and a woman, I had never seen before, but their genteel

clothing, and their assertive posture, told me at first glance that they had come from the Princetown.

“Is this a dream, or is it really true?” had been the words with which I greeted them, and the man from the Princetown, who was the oldest of the three, in return had asked, “May we come in?”

And now we were sitting in the kitchen of the house that I shared with my two brothers, just them and me, since our parents had died many years ago, and my sister had married a merchant and moved to the Princetown of our Land. Now, in early May, it was *my* house, as my brothers were off for several weeks, working at the sea coast; being carpenters they went from one fishing village to the next, offering their services for the repair of the fishing boats, at the start of the fishing season, after the winter storms had subsided. So it was just me in the house, and the three bringers of the tidings.

“How is it possible that I have been chosen?” I asked. And then, as if that mattered, “How did even our Land get chosen?”

“There are twenty-nine Lands in the Queendom,” the man from the Princetown who was a Minister at the Prince’s court explained, as if I did not know it, “and though it is true that some are chosen more often than others, and ours is not among those chosen frequently, the Queen takes care that sooner or later the honor is bestowed on each of her Lands. And probably our Land was chosen now because of Sir Edmond, who, as we all are, is getting older each year, and soon might not be able to undertake the Journey any more. So the Queen honors him, and with him the Land of Slain, but of course she also wants to use his skills as a diplomat, for in the years since he has not been a warrior anymore he has become a respected statesman, and he is now one of the Queen’s most trusted advisors. She wants this year’s Journey to lead through some of the smaller and less frequently visited

Lands, and hopes that an Envoy who comes from a small remote Land himself will successfully strengthen the ties of those Lands to the Queendom.”

I did not really listen. Or, probably I did listen — for else how could I repeat these words now, if I have repeated them correctly? — but my thoughts were somewhere else.

“But why me?” I asked.

“The Queen decides during the winter which Land will have the honor to provide the Envoy, the Artist and the Gift, and through which Lands the Journey will lead, as the Queendom is too large for to have the Journey touch all the Lands each time.” It was obvious that the Minister was embarking on something like a rehearsed speech, telling me the things that I should know, which were more important than the question that I had asked.

“She decided on the Land of Slain this year, and so it was clear that Sir Edmond would be the Envoy. During the winter the central mountains can not be crossed, so the Queen waited for the route to the northern provinces to be passable again, which this year happened at the beginning of April, and then she sent her messenger, who needed three weeks to traverse the Queendom and reach the Princetown of Slain, where she arrived in the last week of April to tell the Prince that his Land has been chosen. The Envoy has to make the same trip as the messenger, but there are some preparations he had to make, some last minute conferences with the Queen and her advisors, so he started one week later, and he travels slower, needing four weeks instead of three, so he will arrive two weeks after the messenger. We have heard from him, he is traveling according to plan, and will be at our Princetown tomorrow.

“There must be no delay then. The Journey has to start before the

middle of May, for it will take at least four months, and has to reach the Beautiful City before the end of September, so the weather will still be fine for the great ceremony, which will be held some two weeks after your arrival. This means, the Gift has to be chosen and ready by the time the Envoy is expected to arrive, who will only have a short time of rest and talks before the Journey starts. So this gave us exactly two weeks to decide upon who she would be, and to travel to her village, and to make the necessary arrangements, and to tell her, and to return with her to the Princetown.”

“Are you telling me that you had to choose hastily, and therefore took the first one that came to your mind?” I asked, though I did not understand how I might have come to anybody’s mind at all.

“Oh no,” he said. “Though we never know in advance when our Land will get chosen, and we have to wait a great number of years until it finally happens, we always have to be prepared for it, and this means that we always have to be aware of possible candidates for being the Gift. Your father has not been forgotten, and we know that your family has always been loyal, and that your brothers are decent men, and then, of course, there is your sister. Her husband does business with the court, and is in contact with the Prince, and your sister herself has been introduced to him, and has shared his bed on several occasions, and, I can add with pleasure, also mine.”

“So you are saying that it is my sister to whom I owe this distinction?”

“I am not saying this,” the Minister answered. “I cannot talk in detail about how decisions are reached at the court, not even to you.”

“I thank you for what you *have* said, Minister,” I replied, and refilled his cup, which he had emptied during his long speech.

“Do you have much sexual experience?” the woman asked, changing the subject.

“Not much,” I said truthfully. “With my brothers, of course, as I had to, and with some of their friends they have occasionally brought with them, but mostly I have led a solitary life, by my own choosing, preferring work and reading to the company of others.”

“And with women?”

“Only a few times, with my sister, but more to please her husband or our brothers who watched us than out of our own desires. I do not even know if we did it right, the way others may do it.”

“It does not matter,” she said. “You will learn. Have you touched yourself?”

“Yes ... often,” I replied. “I like it better than ...”

I did not finish the sentence. I saw her look at my hands, or thought she did, and felt myself blush.

“*Better?*” she asked.

“I like that, too ... I like it that others can have pleasure with me.”

“You fully understand what the duties of the Gift are?” the Alderman asked.

“Yes, I do,” I said. “And sometimes ...” I lowered my eyes.

“You are the Gift,” he said, “you are honored. You do not lower your eyes when you speak. You are not ashamed of what you say. Say what you were saying.”

I looked up, and saw the solemn expressions on their faces. “Sometimes ... when touching myself ... I have dreamed of this.”

Was this true? Had I really dreamed about being the Gift, with everything that it implied? I tried to think, but my mind went blank.

“There will be pain.” It was a statement, not a question, but one that still asked for an answer.

“I ... I have been hurt before.” I had to struggle not to lower my eyes again. “I know pain. I do not like it, like some do, but sometimes it can feel ... right. If I have to be strong, I will be.”

“And you feel no fear?” the Minister wanted to know.

Fear? It made me realize that the full consequence of what was happening, of what would happen, had not sunk in yet. Soon enough, I knew, it would, but this was nothing I wanted to think about now.

“Later, I am sure, I will feel fear, but not now. For now, I am just overwhelmed. And later I will also feel pride, and joy. And curiosity for all that I’ll be going to see, and learn, and experience. And gratitude. All those feelings will come, I am sure, and they will help me to fulfill my mission.” And maybe love, I thought but did not say, thinking about Sir Edmond.

“We can see that you have been wisely chosen,” the Minister said.

“Thank you,” I replied. I had passed a test, I felt. There was a moment of silence. “May I offer you another jug of wine?” I asked.

“No,” the Minister answered, and his face was grave, but his voice was kind. “You may not offer us anything. You have not got anything that is yours to offer, anymore.”

“Not even yourself,” the woman said. “*You* are the *Gift*. You are our Land’s gift to the Queen, and the Queen’s gift to her Queendom. This is what you are. This is *all* you are. Do you understand that?”

“Yes,” I said, “I understand.”

“Let us seal it, then,” the Minister said. “Take off your clothes.”

It was still a test, wasn’t it? What if I failed? What if I refused? *Could* I have refused, at this point, or at any other?

Did I hesitate for the fraction of a moment? I do not remember, but I remember that I thought of Sir Edmond, and of the time with him

that lay before me, and that my clothes fell to the floor swiftly, and I was standing before them naked.

“I am sorry that my breasts are so small,” I said.

“They are all right,” the woman said graciously. “You are slim, supple and strong. It is a pleasure to look at you, and it will be a pleasure to use you.”

“Thank you,” I said, for the second time now. I was glad I had not only washed, but also freshly waxed this morning. My nipples were hard, and my body felt ready.

“Your room is upstairs?” the Alderman asked.

I nodded. Down here were the kitchen, and my brothers’ workshop, and upstairs were three rooms, one of them mine, now that only three people lived in this house. Only two, soon, until one of my brothers would marry one day. Or they might decide to rent out, maybe.

“Let us go,” one of them said, and we went up the narrow stairs.

They must have settled this in advance, for there was no discussion among them now, and no hesitation. The Minister sat down upon the edge of the bed, and opened his trousers, and beckoned me to kneel down before him, while the Alderman sat down in the only chair, and the woman kept standing. I took the Minister’s penis into my mouth, where it soon got erect, and I worked on it with my tongue and my lips and carefully with my teeth, until his semen shot out. I felt his hands holding my head down, but there would have been no need to do this, I was not going to withdraw before having swallowed his sperm.

The Alderman was next, and he wanted to use my vagina. He undressed and lay down on his back upon the bed which had been mine, and after using my fingers and lips to provide him with an erection I straddled him, and moved up and down upon him, until he turned us

both around and lay upon me and brought himself to an orgasm by a few quick thrusts.

While serving the Alderman I kept watching the woman, who had undressed, revealing a body that was not young anymore but still looked good, and then had started to go through the drawers of the dresser, until she found the cherry-wood box with the silver fittings in which I kept my jewelry. With the Alderman's penis inside my vagina I watched her examine the pieces, appraising them, putting some of them back, and finally taking three pieces of silver, my bracelet, my necklace with the goddess figurine, and my bodice chain. I watched as she put them on, looking at herself in the mirror, pleased with what she saw, and I knew that it all was rightfully *hers* now, to do with as she pleased, as nothing was mine anymore, nothing at all, not even the body into which the Alderman now deposited his sperm.

She saw me looking at her in the mirror.

"As the Gift," she said, "you may want to give your full attention to the person or persons you are serving." She said it amiably, with a smile, not reprimandingly. I blushed, not knowing whether I should apologize to her or to him, but before I could utter a word she put a finger to her lips, and made a hushing sound. Then the Alderman left the bed and she entered it. Now that she wore them, the formerly so familiar pieces of jewelry felt strange as they touched my skin, stranger than her soft body felt. She pleased herself with my face.

"You have still some things to learn," she said to me afterwards, but her voice sounded friendly and content.

"How can I learn them?" I asked.

"You are the Gift," she said, "how could I tell you?"

~

When we got up from the bed, the men had already gone downstairs; the woman put on her clothes again, and we followed them. The Alderman had brought some more wine from the cellar, and the Minister had put up a small iron brazier, which they had brought along, and in which now charcoal was burning, radiating a sharp heat. To protect the floor from the fire, the brazier stood on a round metal plate.

I understood what he was doing, before I saw him take a piece of iron with a wooden handle out of his bag, and put it into the coals.

“Where?” I asked, and he touched me with his outstretched finger, in the small space between my vulva and the root of my left leg.

I almost asked, “What does it show?” but withheld the question, for I would see it soon enough, but the Minister answered as if I had spoken.

“It is the Queen’s signet,” he said, “an upward-facing crescent that symbolizes her crown, above a vertical line that symbolizes herself, above a horizontal line that symbolizes the Queendom. I’ve always thought it looks like a cup,” he added somewhat irreverently.

“It is not what it looks like, but what it stands for, that will make me wear it with pride,” I said, and only after I had spoken I realized that this sounded like a reproof to what he had said, and I blushed in shame, but his attention was with the branding iron, and he seemed not to have noticed either my blunder nor my blushing.

“There exists an elaborate version with intricate details, which is beautiful to look at,” the woman said, who *had* noticed, “but for the small brandings we use the simplified version.”

“I am sorry,” I said.

“As I told you before, you have still some things to learn,” she replied, but again her voice was friendly, not making me feel scolded.

“It is ready,” the Minister said, and took the iron out of the flame,

holding it with its wooden handle. In a swift movement he sat down, stretching out the hand that held the iron, just at the height where I was to receive it. The Queen's signet glowed at me in a dark red. "Do not let it cool off," he said. I stepped forward, stopping short before the menacing and beckoning heat, and then slowly made this small last step and pressed myself against the glowing royal seal, feeling how it burned my skin, feeling how it wrote its message into my body and into my soul.

I stood there, taking in the pain, and time stopped ... I think I could have stood there forever. It was the Minister who, after what can only have been a few moments, retracted his arm in a sudden motion, tearing the iron from my flesh in another bout of agony.

I did not move, I stood there in the middle of the room, I did not speak, and I think I closed my eyes, for I did not see but only heard and sensed that the Minister carried the brazier out of the house where he doused the flames and left it to cool down in the fresh morning air before he returned, and I heard them talk among each other but I did not listen, and did not care, and did not think. I just stood there and felt the pain spread through my whole body, and ebb off again, and return in waves, until it had become a part of me, a part never to be parted with again.

I opened my eyes, and saw the men and the woman sitting at the table, drinking wine, and saw that they noticed that I had come back from wherever I had been.

"When do we leave?" I asked.

"Now," they said.

"What happens with my chickens, and the goats, and the vegetables, and the flowers?"

"Your neighbors will care for them, until your brothers return."

“I will not say goodbye to my brothers?” I said, but it was not a question, it was a statement of something that I had just realized.

“No, you will not,” the Alderman said, although his answer was unneeded.

“But they will be invited to the Princetown,” the Minister added, “to attend the presentation of your statue, next summer, and they will have seats of honor during that ceremony, and they will be greeted by the Prince, and they will be introduced to the Artist.”

“Is there anything I take with me?”

“No,” the woman answered, “nothing,” and as she saw me looking at my clothes that still lay on the kitchen floor she went on, “not even those. You come with us naked now, to the Alderman’s house where we stay, and there will be a reception at which the villagers will have a chance to say goodbye to you.”

“This means they will use me?” I asked.

“Of course,” she replied, “and of course only some of them. And then you will be given clothes, and in the afternoon we will mount the horses and start on our way to the Princetown, where we will arrive the day after tomorrow.”

“But she may wear sandals, on the walk through the village to my house,” the Alderman remarked, addressing the woman. “It is not pleasant to walk barefoot on these roads here.”

“If I am to be naked, I will be naked,” I said. “I will walk without shoes.”

I could see that they were pleased.

“Is there still something you want to know before we leave?” the Minister asked me.

No, there was not. Or, just one question that suddenly came to my mind, though it was a question I hesitated to ask.

“What would have happened if I had failed the test?”

“There was no test. We only tried to help you to ... adjust.”

“And if I ... had not been able to adjust?”

There was a moment of hesitation. “We have another girl we would have sought out, in another village,” the woman finally said.

“And had she not ... adjusted either?”

Another short silence. “There *has* to be a Gift,” the Minister answered. “There would have been no time to look for someone else. We would have had to come back to you.”

“It has happened before,” the woman said. “A Gift not suited for her task, taken along the Journey weeping, pleading to be relieved of her duty at every step, crying even as she has to be dragged to the ceremony. A shameful disgrace for her Land, and for herself. A terrible insult to the Queen. But, it has happened.”

“I am happy that I spared us this disgrace,” I said.

“So are we,” the Minister replied.

CHAPTER 2: THE ENVOY, THE ARTIST AND THE PRINCE

He had aged, but he had aged well. A servant girl had brought me to the guest room that was now his, leaving immediately after I had stepped through the door, closing it hastily behind her as if she were unreasonably frightened by him. The room was big, and he stood almost thirty feet across a precious parquet floor away from me, but I recognized him immediately, and my heart leaped. I had remembered him in his silver armor, and how the shiny metal had contrasted his shoulder-length raven-black hair — now the contrast was between the black leather outfit that he wore, jacket, trousers and boots, and his hair and carefully trimmed beard that now were silver-gray, their brightness taking nothing away from the prowess that he radiated, but rather adding the appearance of wisdom and preeminence to the strength that was unmistakably still his.

There was little furniture in the room, a four-poster bed, a desk, a fauteuil, two chairs, and a cupboard, and in a corner there was a door with draped glass panes that seemed to lead to a balcony or a terrace. Sir Edmond stood between the bed and the desk, as if he had stood there for a long time awaiting me, erect to his full height, his right hand resting against the desk on which his dagger and his sword lay, but relaxed, there was nothing threatening in his posture. Even from the distance I felt he still towered over me like he had done those many years ago, when I had been a child, and had fallen down, and he had comforted me and helped me up.

I was completely at a loss what to do. I did not dare to speak, I did

not dare to move. I just stood as if I were immobilized and gazed at him.

“So, you are the Gift,” he finally said. “Why don’t you come closer?”

I shuddered at my own awkwardness and my utter lack of proper behavior, and I scolded myself for spoiling my encounter with the man I had dreamed about so often and for such a long time. Of course there was no possibility that he would remember that remote incident when we had met, but I had thought about telling him about it as a way of introducing myself to him, and now I realized that I had forfeited any opportunity to do so. With effort I shook off my paralysis, and walked up to him, and knelt down before him, and said “Forgive me, my Master, for my misconduct.”

“You are the Gift,” he said again, with more emphasis than before. “I am not your master, we both serve the Queendom and the Queen.”

I checked my tongue that wanted to contradict him, wanted to say that surely on the Journey I would be under his command, and instead I just said, awkwardly, “I will rely on you to help me so I can do it to the Queen’s and the Queendom’s best benefit.”

“Do not worry,” he replied, and he made it sound more like an order than a consolation. “When needed, you will have my help, as the Artist will, but each of us have their own tasks to fulfill, and you as the Gift must simply be true to yourself, and to your assignment.”

“Thank you,” I said. I was still kneeling before him, for he had not told me to get up, and I did not know whether this was because he wanted me to kneel, or whether to the contrary he wanted to make a point about not being my master, and expected me to stand up on my own account. My confusion made my head spin, and all I was really aware of was that my head was so close to his crotch, and the feeling of

being close to him was so overwhelming that in a voice which was more husky than I had wished it to be I said to him, "As I am the Gift, will you honor me by letting me receive you now?"

"Stand up," he said, "and take off your clothes."

I was wearing the clothes I had been given for the ride to the Princetown, the ride that had taken me immediately to the palace and into this room. The gown slipped from my shoulders easily, and I think I was naked before he had finished speaking.

He let me stand like this, while he let his eyes travel from my face down to my feet and up again, not failing to notice the arousal that my nipples and my vaginal lips displayed as clearly as my glazed-over eyes and my half open mouth must have done.

"There can be no sexual contact between the Gift and the Envoy before the final ceremony," he said.

Miraculously, I did not faint, nor cry, nor turn around and run away. I just kept standing, and said nothing.

"I am sorry," he said, and after another look at my body he added "truly, I am."

"So I have four months to look forward to this," I said.

"Four months and two weeks, if we keep the schedule," he replied, and for a moment my thoughts turned to all that would happen then. What his thoughts were, I do not know, his face did not betray them.

"Come," he finally said, "we have to meet the Prince." He turned toward the paned door, and I followed him, and when we stepped through it I saw that it led upon a ledge, some six feet wide, that ran along the whole side of the main palace building. It had no balustrade, and from its edge we looked down some thirty feet upon an inner courtyard, which had been opened to the public, and in which a large

crowd of people had now gathered, looking up at us. When they saw us, they cheered.

“They have come to see you,” Sir Edmond said, and I understood that I should greet them. As I am not prone to feelings of vertigo, I walked up close to the edge, and presented myself to them in my nakedness. They shouted and waved at me, and I delighted in their joyful and friendly attention, and waved back, surprised at how I felt at ease in this situation, in front of so many people, I who until two days ago had led such a quiet and secluded life, and who had never felt to be particularly outgoing or self-confident. On a sudden idea I touched my crotch with my hand, and then put it to my lips, and blew them a kiss, and they really liked that, and some of them, men and women, returned this gesture, laughing, or passed it on to someone next to them, and some of them were fondling each other, and they all cheered and looked at me and at each other with happy faces. Sir Edmond kept to the background, and I suddenly feared that I was impermissibly and shamelessly putting myself before him.

“You’re doing fine, they have come to see you, and they love you,” he said, sensing my sudden uncertainty.

“I wish I could go down, to be among them,” I said.

“There’s no time for that,” Sir Edmond replied, noticing that I had said it sincerely. “We have to go on.”

We now turned a corner, and from there we looked down upon a smaller courtyard, that was empty except for a stone arch in its middle, some fifteen feet wide and about as high, its weathered and roughly hewn stones showing that it must be older than the palace walls by many centuries, a relic from a bygone age. Inside the arch, a naked woman was hanging by her wrists. Even from the perspective of looking down upon her I could see that her arms were stretched

unnaturally long; a closer look showed me that her shoulders had been dislocated. Other than that, her upper body seemed unharmed, but from the waist down she was covered in wounds and dried blood. She didn't move, but her head was raised, and her eyes were wide open, as was her mouth, her face a frozen image of pain and suffering.

"She's been hanging here for three days, she has asked for an adjournment of her execution to see the Gift," Sir Edmond said.

I had thought she must be dead or unconscious, but hearing us, or sensing our presence, her eyes moved, she looked up, her eyes focused on me, and some life returned to her face. Her lips moved, but if she said something I didn't hear it, the soft spring breeze blowing her words away. I could hardly give her a cheerful wave, so I knelt down on one knee and bowed my head to her, and when I looked up again I saw that the shadow of a smile softened her expression of pain.

"I had not fully realized how much this means to the people," I said as we walked on, but more to myself than to Sir Edmond, and I did not get a reply.

After turning yet another corner a large open door came into view, and the din of many voices could be heard.

"This is the Crown Hall," Sir Edmond said, "where the Prince is waiting for us, and a select group of dignitaries and representatives. Here you will meet the Artist too."

"Is there anything I have to know to behave correctly?" I asked.

"Just be the Gift," he answered.

~

The voices fell silent as we stepped into the Crown Hall through the terrace door. With the bright afternoon sky behind us they saw only our silhouettes, but they knew who we were; Sir Edmond had left

their company less than an hour ago, after having been told about my arrival, to receive me in his room.

“Prince, Ladies, Gentlemen, Artist, this is the Gift,” he introduced me formally.

There were some forty people in the Hall, about two thirds of them men. Two lightly armed guards stood next to our door, and two more stood at the door on the opposite wall, which probably lead into a corridor, but now was closed. After Sir Edmond’s introduction the din resumed with full force — people sitting or lying on comfortable-looking furniture greeted us cheerily and animatedly talked among themselves; about Sir Edmond and me, it seemed, but since they were all talking simultaneously I could understand only little of what they said. By the sound of it it was all friendly, and I heard words like “she looks nice enough indeed,” or, “a fine lass they have chosen,” or, “her tits are much too small, but look how firm her nipples are.”

++From pictures I had seen, and from the air of authority around him, I recognized the Prince. He was silent, but he looked at me kindly and invitingly; the throne on which he sat was not much different from most of the other chairs. Next to the Prince I saw a woman of whom I immediately thought that she must be the Artist. While the Prince looked older than I had expected, and, in comparison to Sir Edmond, almost frail, the Artist was younger than I had thought she would be, not much older than myself. She looked strong — as a sculptress, she had to be — and her body, of which much could be seen under her thin garment, was fuller than mine, with much larger breasts and fuller hips. Despite her strength she was entirely feminine, and while her face told of experience of life, it still conveyed youthful liveliness. Her full, long dark hair she wore open, a blue ribbon on her forehead keeping it out of her face. She was an attractive woman, and it dis-

mayed me to see in her eyes, when she looked at me, an unconcealed expression of scorn.

“My Prince,” I said, when I had reached them.

“Come,” he said, and took my hand. “This is Abigail, the Artist,” he added, “you will meet her later. But now,” and he let go of my hand and put his fingers between my thighs, “let us celebrate the beginning of the Journey.” Then he took my hand again and led me to a large divan that stood close to a wall, and there he gave me the honor of receiving him first in my vagina and then in my mouth, where he spilled his sperm.

While I was still cleaning the Prince with my lips and tongue, another man entered me anally, and from then on for what must have been several hours I was used without pause by all the people in the room, including the four guards; they were all here on the Prince’s invitation, and, through me, they paid their honors to the Queendom and to the Queen, and to the Gift’s mission of aiding her, by means of the Journey, in her endeavor to protect her people and preserve peace and prosperity throughout her realm.

I was glad to notice that I was able to serve them all to their gratification, with a few exceptions, who seemed to engage with me more from duty than from their own desires, but even though it was not given to me to arouse and much less to satisfy them, I caressed them with my hands and my lips, and they lightly touched me, to serve the custom. The Prince kindly explained to me later that it had not been my fault — there were a few men among his guests who only sought pleasure with male companions, and a few women who felt likewise, and there were some, men and women, who would have found satisfaction only in ways the Prince didn’t deem appropriate for the occasion. But it was alright, the Prince assured me, they had known

what and what not to expect, and he was pleased that I had honored him, as their host, by serving them all to my best efforts.

When I said *all*, this was not strictly correct: Sir Edmond stayed away from me, and so did the Artist, but they did not stay away from each other. I had little opportunity to look around, as I tried to give the men and women who used me the attention that they deserved, but I did get glimpses of my two fellow Journeymen to be — his head between her thighs, her mouth upon his penis, his hands gripping her breasts forcefully, her fingers entangled in his hair, pressing his head against her crotch ... and one time, when they changed positions, I saw her looking at me, and I saw the satisfaction in her eyes at causing me pain, but I quickly looked away and buried my face again in the crotch of the woman whom I was serving.

When everyone else in the room had used me, and thus had given the good wishes of her native Land to the Gift to impart them to the Queendom and finally to the Queen, refreshments were served, and upon the suggestion of the Prince I in turn served the servants who had brought them, two nice girls and a boy who were younger than I was, who were happily surprised to receive this unforeseen attention, and whom I brought to their orgasms easily. Meanwhile everyone cleaned themselves at one of several washstands that had been brought in and put their clothes in order, and drank and ate, and watched me and the servants perform to their amusement, and when they were done I too cleaned myself and had some drink and food, the only difference being that I was not given clothing.

“You will spend the night with me and my concubines,” the Prince then told me, “but now the Artist will lead Sir Edmond and you to her studio which she has in the palace, so that you will have seen some of her works, before you depart together tomorrow morning.”

Before I could thank him he turned away, and I was left with Sir Edmond and Abigail.

“Artist,” I said to her, addressing her for the first time.

“Whore,” she said, and after what seemed a long time of silence to me in which I felt her artist’s eyes all over my body, scrutinizing every detail, she added, “well, let’s go.”

~

Abigail’s studio was on the top floor of a square tower, a bright mid-sized room, into which a hatch-door in the floor was the only entry. Three of the walls consisted mainly of large windows, their glass panes surely worth a fortune, providing a great view over the town and the surrounding countryside, with the sea just discernible at the northern horizon. The fourth wall, which was solid, was hung with drawings — no colors, they were all done in black and white; some in pencil, some in charcoal, and some in pen. A number of stone sculptures stood on shelves and tables which lined the walls. A small bed, a chest, two easels and a workbench stood in the middle of the room.

Some of the sculptures were figurines, but most of them were just body fragments or heads about half their natural sizes. I realized at this moment, without knowing how I knew (and, of course, I have never asked her whether it was indeed true) — but I understood that Abigail had never been trusted with a huge block of marble before, had never been commissioned with a full-sized, larger-than-life statue yet. Mine was going to be the first. The first *and* the second, I corrected myself, as there would be two of them, one to be added to the famous line of statues at the Queen’s palace, and one to stand here, at the castle of the Princetown of my home Land. Two statues of me would stand,

for all times to come, where my Journey will have ended, and where it will have begun.

I had not thought about it before, but the statues would surely not be transported — the one that would stay in the Beautiful City she would do there, so she would have to stay after the ceremony — *would she stay with Sir Edmond?* I involuntarily asked myself — and the second statue she would have to do here, after her return, which would be in a year from now, after the next winter. Would the statues make her famous? Would she then be called to the Queen's court, as many great artists have been? Would she return to the Beautiful City, to live with Sir Edmond happily ever after? What unnecessary thoughts!

I took a closer look at her works. Most of the drawings and sculptures showed women, though there also were some men, and almost all of them showed scenes of torture and agony. Though I had seen few such scenes myself, I understood the evident accuracy with which she showed the torn, broken and warped bodies, I noticed how, without the use of color, she convincingly succeeded to depict and mold the ripped and bleeding flesh, how precisely she rendered the effects of the most common and the most unusual instruments of pain, and how she made the most horrible agonies so plainly visible on the faces of the sufferers.

“Did you see this all yourself?” I asked her.

“I even suggested some of it,” she answered, giving me a look as if she hoped to see me disconcerted.

One of the larger objects was a woman's head, in full size this one, reclined so that her face pointed upward, her sketchily executed hair falling down at the sides. A crow was sitting on her forehead, its beak deep into her right eye. Her other eye was wide open. I gazed at her face till I felt this eye looking straight into mine.

“This is beautiful,” I said.

“And it’s always fun to watch,” Abigail replied.

“I have not seen it happen,” I said.

“This tart that you saw dangling in the Courtyard of Pain, if it wasn’t for that big net I’m sure she’d already have given us this pleasure.”

“I didn’t see a net,” I replied.

“Then they must have removed it shortly before you came, and with all the crows we have in this town, by now I’m afraid we’ve already missed the fun. Damn her.”

Yes, I remembered now that I had heard crows, during the hours in the Crown Hall.

“I am sorry,” I said.

“Well, at least I saw them break her shoulders and string her up, and she didn’t make too good an impression anyway. For all I care, she can die happily now that she’s actually seen you.”

“It is my duty to make people happy,” I said, feeling the need to defend myself.

“Yeah, sure,” Abigail replied, and again looked my naked body up and down. “I’m quite sure you will.” I felt embarrassed under her gaze, but I also felt my nipples grow hard, and I felt a sudden shudder run down my spine.

Sir Edmond had not taken part in the conversation but at first had studied the works of art, and then had gone to one of the windows and looked out. He turned now, when there was a knock at the hatch door, and opened it. A servant girl entered, to take me to the Prince’s chamber.

“We leave early tomorrow,” Sir Edmond said, “your clothing and hygiene stuff will already be packed. If the Prince doesn’t give you

clothes you'll have to ride naked tomorrow, but the weather is fine. I can give you a scarf that you can put on your head against the sun, if you need it."

I thanked him, and I wished both him and Abigail a good night, and again there was this pang of pain when I asked myself whether they would spend that night together. It was a stupid and unworthy pain, and I knew I had to get rid of it. Or, at least, get used to it — I realized I would probably have ample opportunity for *that*.

~

About the night with the Prince and three of his women, whom he called his concubines, I have little to tell. The concubines were older than me, one of them considerably so, and they were nice and friendly to me. The Prince had drunk and eaten much and was tired, and obviously he was not a man to recover his sexual strength rapidly after having spent himself, so he mostly contented himself with watching us, as we performed for him in the huge royal bed that we shared.

Even after he had fallen asleep, snoring loudly, we continued for a while to play among ourselves, and I used the opportunity to learn from them — they were most willing to teach, and I think they quite enjoyed it that, for a change, they were the ones who could ask for their wishes, fantasies and fancies to be taken care of. It was all done in a good spirit, and I was an eager pupil, enjoying it too, and then we also talked a bit, and I told them about the Journey, and they told me about life in the palace, and finally we all slept, the Prince in our middle, safely surrounded by four soft naked female bodies.

In his sleep he often stirred, and groped for our breasts, crotches and asses, and we did our best to make ourselves easily accessible to his wandering hands, and in the early hours of the morning his penis

got hard again, and, I think without fully waking him, we took turns to gently stroke and suck him, until he finally spilled his sperm upon the face of one of the girls, which we three others then conscientiously licked clean, resuming our playing among ourselves, but careful to be silent and not to disturb the sleep into which he had fallen again. It was a night of amiable joy, a night in which I forgot about Sir Edmond and Abigail, a night I still fondly remember.

The Prince woke early, and rang a bell upon which signal two servants brought large bowls with water and towels, and we washed and dried him, and then he watched us with visible pleasure as we washed ourselves and each other.

The concubines were to stay with him for breakfast, which would be brought to his room, while for me it was time to depart. Very cordially he said that he hoped the Journey would be enjoyable for me, and that he was sure I would do pride to the Land of Slain and its Prince. And then, before I could express my gratitude for his kind words, he even handed me a present.

It was a coin he gave me, about an inch in diameter and rather thin, but at the first glance I could see that it was from finest silver, and it had the Queen's signet on one side, and on the other side it had a man's portrait, and when I looked closer I recognized that it was that of Sir Edmond.

"He hasn't shown one of those to you?" the Prince asked, but it was more a statement than a question. "It is a Queen's coin," he continued, "valid throughout all the Queendom. Admittedly not one of the highest denominations, but still it is a great honor and distinction for a person to be depicted on one of the Queen's coins."

"It is a great honor for me that you deem me worthy of this gift,"

I said, and knelt down beside the bed in which he rested popped up against several large pillows, and kissed his hand.

“You’re a good girl,” he said, and bent forward to give me a kiss upon my forehead. “If I had known you earlier, your place might have been here.” How different my life would have been then! But I do not know, of course, or rather doubt, if he had really been serious.

The concubines, freshly washed, joined him in his bed again, and servants entered the room, bringing jars with cider, pots with steaming tea, and trays richly filled with different types of bread, sliced ham, various kinds of cheese and fruits — life at the palace went on, as I was leaving, with one last bow. I held the coin firmly in my left hand, feeling Sir Edmond’s portrait pressing against my palm, and I vowed to do what I could to keep it with me until the final ecstatic moment when I at last would feel his real face, his whole body, press passionately against mine. Yes, I did what I could ... still I lost the coin, as you will hear, long before we reached our destination.

We departed early, after a quick breakfast that we ate in the courtyard where our horses were saddled, a much simpler breakfast than the one that got served in the Prince’s bedroom. After we had finished our escort arrived, four armed guards, two men and two women. Clothing had been provided for me, it turned out, but it was packed deep inside some saddle bags, so I was still naked and would remain so for the day, which inspired the two male guards to use me right there — they made me bend over a bench and, one after the other, used me from behind, one into my vagina and the other one anally.

“So that you can sit on the saddle better,” they laughed, and then one of them gave me a thick and soft piece of cloth to wrap around the saddle’s leather, to make it more comfortable for my naked ass and thighs.

We mounted our horses, and the seven of us, plus two packing horses that were led by the guards, set out for a long day's ride — the first day of a long Journey. We rode around a corner, passing from this courtyard to another one, that looked dusty and abandoned, and there, before we finally reached the road, we came by a small wrought iron gate, and Abigail said, "Stop for a moment!" but she said it only to me, and the others rode ahead.

"See?" she said.

I looked through the bars of the gate, and saw that behind it was the Courtyard of Pain, and that the tortured girl was still hanging there, and indeed, where her eyes had been two blood-crusted red holes now gaped in her distorted face.

The place was deserted, and it could not be viewed from outside except from where we sat on our horses; unless someone looked out through one of the few windows on this side of the palace, we were the only ones to see her. She was swaying gently in the morning breeze, the twitching of a leg showing that she was still alive. Swarms of flies covered her, feasting on her wounds, or buzzed around her, ignoring her faint movements.

I thought of the beauty of that sculptured head in Abigail's studio.

"This is a sad and lonely death she has to suffer," I said.

"She's brought it upon herself," Abigail replied.

"What has she done?" I asked.

"How am I to know?" Abigail said. "I've hardly known her. Sinned too much, or been too virtuous. Loved once too often, or once too few, or loved or obeyed or refused to obey the wrong woman or man. Been too humble, or too self-confident. Or she has even committed a crime, maybe." She shrugged. "One way or the other, she's brought it upon herself. What else?"

The road that we followed was well kept and led through an open green hilly countryside. It was a thoroughly pleasant ride. The weather was sunny and warm; whenever we got thirsty we found springs with fresh cool water, whenever we got tired we found places with soft grass where we could rest for a while in the shade of large trees, listening to the singing of the birds, and enjoying the view over the hills or down into some fertile valleys. Whenever we got hungry we found a farm where we were offered bread and ham and cheese and often also wine or apple wine in exchange for a few copper coins, and whenever night fell we either just lay down in a protected spot, wrapping ourselves into our blankets, while the two men and two women of our escort took turns in keeping watch, or we came to a village with an inn where we were given a warm supper and a clean room, while our escort could sleep in the barn or the stables.

It was Abigail who was particularly happy when we slept in a room with a bed and a roof over our heads. When we slept in the open, she made no sexual advances to Sir Edmond, feeling inhibited either by the watchful eyes of the escort or by some superstitious fears of the unbounded night that surrounded us; Sir Edmond himself then only rarely took the initiative to relieve himself into her mouth or her vagina, and these were rather quick and silent affairs.

It was different, though, when we were alone in a room. Whether it were Abigail's true sexual desires that moved her, or her desire to be close to Sir Edmond, or her desire to humiliate and hurt me, I have neither a reason nor the right to contemplate.

The moment when the door to our room was closed for the night she threw off her clothes, took up a provocatively inviting position on

the bed or on the floor or on a table or leaning against a wall, and started to fondle herself, sometimes openly aiming at stirring up Sir Edmond's emotions, sometimes seemingly unaware even of his presence and with her mind far away, or pretending to be far away, engulfed in some secret fantasies of her own. Later she would whisper those secrets into Sir Edmond's ears, later, when he was as naked as she was, when her hands or her lips had made his breathing heavy and his penis erect, when she teased him by playfully keeping him from entering her, to heighten his desire and to prolong their game, when she pressed his face against her crotch and then against her own face, when she urged him to apply more force with the fingers that gripped her breasts, when she assured him that she didn't mind some pain inflicted by his hands to her soft flesh and firm red nipples, when finally her own body responded to the arousal she had evoked in him — then her mouth whispered into his ears, but her eyes kept returning to me, mockingly, contemptuously, triumphantly — not only seeing the present, but looking into the future, into *my* future, of which there was no doubt what it would be.

And he, what did *his* eyes show when he furtively looked at me as he sometimes did during their sexual acts when he felt unwatched by her, when, for instance, her mouth closed around his penis to rekindle his desire and when, as she succeeded, he held her head with both hands in a firm and deliberately painful grip, forcing himself deeper and deeper into her throat? I could never really read his features that rarely showed any emotions, and even when they did, left me doubting whether there were not other, truer, but unguessable emotions hidden beneath. Sometimes in those moments I thought that I saw promise in his eyes, that I saw desire and love for me that he was not allowed to express and even less to act upon, sometimes I saw sadness, sometimes

hope, sometimes I thought I saw an appeal, sometimes it was reclusiveness, sometimes I thought I saw only embarrassment, and sometimes even disgust. I closed my own eyes then, and turned away, and wept.

I could only close my eyes, though, not my ears, and Abigail, when she noticed, as she always did, my discomfort, became louder, moaning and shouting her arousal and her orgasms, filling the room with them, silencing my own dreams, leaving me lying crouched up on the floor, holding Sir Edmond's coin in both hands, pressing its sharp edge into my clit until the piercing pain overwhelmed my body and mind, drowned out all other sensations, accompanied me into the sleep in which I eventually fell, exhausted from the day's exertions.

I always slept in a corner on the floor. When the bed was large enough, Sir Edmond and Abigail both slept in it. When the bed was too small for two to comfortably sleep in it, Sir Edmond took it, and Abigail lay on a carpet or some folded blankets at its side. When there was another bed in the room, one in which a third person could have slept, I still slept on the floor.

The first time we stayed at a room with a large bed and a small one, when Abigail had laid down in the large one, nude and legs spread wide and fingering herself and moaning softly and looking at Sir Edmond with wide open eyes, I had asked if I was to sleep in the other bed, and before Sir Edmond could answer Abigail, without looking at me, had said, "No."

I could see how it excited her, how her face flushed, how her vaginal lips opened up, and I could see how it excited Sir Edmond to see her so aroused, and he threw himself upon the bed and buried his face in her crotch, and from her screams I knew he was not only using his tongue on her but also his teeth, and then he turned around to let his fully erect penis receive the services of her mouth, and soon they

were frenziedly entangled, heads and hands and hair and crotches and tongues and teeth and lips, while I was clinging to the thought of how different everything would be on that last day, on the day of fulfillment, on the day when nothing would keep him apart from me anymore, and I felt his coin in my hands as I always did during those nights, and rubbed the side with his face against my clit — I could feel which side it was with my fingers — moving it gently, or not so gently, in slow circular motions, until a weak but welcome orgasm brought me closer to sleep. Except for those nights when I felt Sir Edmond's eyes upon me, and when the emotions I read in them, or into them, were not amicable ones — then it was the edge of the coin and the pain it gave, not its minted face with its faint pleasures, that blended into the pain of lying naked and alone on the hard floor.

But, do not misunderstand me, despite my pain, I was *content*. I was the Gift. I was the Gift to all the Queendom, and this included Abigail. It was for her to choose in which way to be pleased by me, and if it was by humiliating me and causing me discomfort, I was glad she found some pleasure with me at all. Besides, sleeping on the bare floor is not so hard once you get used to it, and Abigail was not without kindness to me. When we were in the mountains and the nights were cold, she told me to take a blanket and wrap myself in it. And, though she must have known about the coin, she never asked Sir Edmond to take it away from me.

And Sir Edmond, what was it to him that I was lying on the floor at night, without cover and without comfort, naked, silently crying, or silently fondling myself, or silently sleeping? He never commented on it, he never talked about it. To him, this was a matter between Abigail and me, and when we had settled it this way between us, without having asked for or needed his intervention, it was of no concern to

him. But he always knew where I was, as he looked at me, with his eyes that I could not read.

~

These things were established early, during the first few days of the Journey, and they stayed unchanged until its last days. Also unchanged was the rule that my nights were not to be disturbed by my assignment as the Gift. The armed guards that were our escort, the farmers who gave us food, the innkeepers who gave us shelter, their servants, their other guests, anyone who happened to encounter me — I was theirs from the morning to the evening, to give them pleasure in any way they wished, but not during the nights. And also during the days, of course, the schedule of the Journey had to be kept, and it was Sir Edmond's task to see to it that we were not unduly delayed, and he did so with authority, and firmness, and if necessary even with force.

It saddened me each time I saw desire that had to stay unfulfilled, each time when I, the Gift, could not hand out (or, as Abigail once said, derisively, could not cunt out) what was mine to give. I wished I could really, literally have been the Gift to *all* the Queendom, but of course this was a symbolic title only, and I was happy for all the occasions I was given to give as much as I could.

The rules were different, of course, when we stayed in a Princetown, at a Princess's or Prince's castle.

CHAPTER 3: IN ANOTHER LAND

After riding for nine days we had already left my native Land of Slain far behind, though I had not realized at what point we had crossed the border — Sir Edmond, who must have known, and whose native Land it also was, had not pointed it out to us. Whether he thought that he had left his home for good now, or whether he had plans of returning again one day, I do not know, but I know that he had come to prefer the warm climate and the colorful splendors of the southern coast to the barren and reticent beauty of the northern Land of his birth.

On the ninth day, coming out of a light forest and riding over the summit of a low grass-covered hill, far before us on the horizon we saw the walls of a large city, and this was the moment when I fully realized that we had arrived in another Land, that I was on my way, that I was never to go back home again.

Out of nowhere a thought entered my head, that there was no one's hand that I could hold, and it created a strange pang of sadness, but it soon went away.

"You cannot see this from here yet, but it is a beautiful town," Sir Edmond said. "You will not see much of it later either," he added, "as we do not have time for sightseeing." I had not supposed we would have, but I think this was more an expression of his own regret than a rebuke of an assumed expectation on my part. Abigail, having less obligations during our stays than either Sir Edmond or me, would have more opportunities to walk through the town's streets and look at its sights, given the consent of the Princess or the Prince, but as she was the Artist this was also rightfully a part of her assignment, to be free

to pick up inspiration for her work wherever she thought she might find it.

“Let us rest here,” Abigail suggested, and Sir Edmond agreed. We dismounted and unpacked our provisions. Our escort, after having tended to the horses, kept their distance; they had already made use of me at an earlier rest. At that rest Sir Edmond, though this was not his habit, had felt inclined to enjoy the prettier of the two female guards, which had provoked Abigail to seek the attentions of those who were not otherwise occupied. In the resulting disarray we had neglected our security, about which Sir Edmond afterwards showed himself highly displeased, with himself as well as with the guards, and even with Abigail and me. At that time I had not believed that any harm could really have befallen us in the peaceful countryside through which we traveled — I had to learn later, though, that harm can come quickly and unexpectedly.

But now we were sitting on the grass, perfectly safe, eating and drinking, looking at the distant town, and trying to guess how long we would need to get there.

“We’ll reach it easily before the evening falls,” Sir Edmond said.

Abigail unpacked her sketchbook and a pencil, and started to draw sketches of the view — her sketchbook was already half full, and I asked myself how she supposed it would last her for the four months that she’d still have to carry it with her, but I soon learned that of course she acquired new sketchbooks when she needed them, and sent back by courier the full ones from the Princetowns at which we stayed. For the statue that she would create at the Beautiful City she would not need those sketches, she said — she would have *me*, after all.

But my mind is wandering, as it had been then. I had to pay attention to Sir Edmond.

“It is important that you understand your obligations with the Prince,” he admonished me.

“So it is a Prince, and not a Princess, who rules this Land?” I said.

“Yes, but this does not matter.” Sir Edmond sounded irritated by my interjection.

“Of course not, I am sorry,” I apologized, blushing.

“Now, as long as we are on the road, you are the Queen’s gift to the Queendom, so in principle anyone you meet has the right to use you. Since you are also the Queendom’s Gift to the Queen, this usage may be painful, but must not be damaging to you, of course.”

Strangely, his words, spoken in such a matter-of-fact tone of voice, aroused me, and I tried to slightly shift my sitting position so that the heel of my foot pressed against my crotch.

“Stop that, this is not for your entertainment,” Sir Edmond said, and I blushed more deeply. What was wrong with me that I couldn’t just *listen*?

“When we now get to the Princetown, though,” Sir Edmond continued his explanations, “you are the Queen’s Gift to the Prince — or, in other Lands, to the Princess,” he added, to keep me from interrupting again. “This relationship takes precedence, so that your obligations are to the Prince only. Naturally you have to please him, in *any* way he wishes to be pleased, but also you are *his* tool to please those upon whom he wants to bestow his generosity, or for whatever other purpose he may decide to use you. Do you understand this?”

“I think this means two things,” I said, “that I am not to serve anyone without the Prince’s consent, at least implied, and that the Prince or those under his orders are not subject to the restriction of not being entitled to harm me?”

“The Prince is accountable to the Queen, but to the Queen only.

In her absence, no one can judge over him, interfere with his actions, or question his decisions. There was an infamous incident once, when a Princess, to entertain her guests and to demonstrate her power to them, handed the Gift a carving knife and told her to cut off her own breasts. The Gift made a few cuts so that she bled, but refused to cut further, saying that she and all her body parts belonged to the Queen.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“The Princess killed the Artist and the Envoy, slowly and publicly in front of her castle, but the Gift disappeared, without even the honor of having her fate be known.”

“And the Queen?” I asked.

“She sent a letter apologizing for the Gift’s behavior, and she sent it with a messenger who brought her own knife to perform, after having handed the letter, the task upon herself which the Gift had refused. The letter also said that for compromising the royal property’s physical integrity the Princess would be executed, should she ever be found outside her own Land, and for killing the Queen’s Envoy, she would be fined ten pounds of gold. The Artist, by the way, wasn’t mentioned in that letter.”

“And how did the Princess react?”

“She had the Queen’s messenger nursed until she recovered from her wounds, then had ten pounds of pebble-sized gold pieces stuffed into her uterus through her vagina, had her sealed shut by pouring in some liquid gold for good measure, and sent her riding back, telling her not to forget her knife which she’d need to deliver her cargo.”

“And the Queen?” I asked again.

“Called all the poor and the crippled and the orphans to a great feast at that famous sea terrace in front of her castle, the one that you will get to know, had the half-dead girl nailed to a raised cross for

everyone to see, and had her belly cut open and the gold taken out and had it molten into royal coins right there, and then had them handed out to the needy — only about one third of the gold, actually, but it was still an impressively generous gesture, one of those things that everybody loved and adored her for.”

“And what happened then between the Princess and the Queen?”

“That was it, more or less. The Princess still rules her Land, though she must be pretty old by now. But neither the Queen nor her daughter, who is the Queen now, have ever scheduled another Journey to go through that Land again.”

“I understand,” I said.

“You don’t have to worry,” he added, “nothing like this will happen on our Journey.”

He had misread the expression that must have shown on my face for an instant, before I could suppress it. I had not worried for myself — what did I have to worry about, after all? It had been the recognition of *his* concern when he had told about the Envoy who had been killed, this short glimpse of fear otherwise well hidden behind his strong inscrutable attractive war hero diplomat face, that had disconcerted me.

I shuddered at the thought that he might have realized that I had seen this, or even suspected it, and he felt my unrest and luckily misread it again, and laid his arm around my shoulder to comfort me, in one of the very few gestures of intimacy that we ever had. I felt tears in my eyes, without fully understanding where they had come from, and looked at him gratefully, and had to swallow before I could speak, and barely audibly say, “I know.”

Just then Abigail turned around and saw us, and shot me a glance of pure disgust.

“I am sorry, Artist,” I said, in command of my voice again, after

Sir Edmond had withdrawn his arm and stood up, "I had felt a sudden fear from hearing a cruel tale."

"Well, you have every reason to feel fear from tales of cruelty," Abigail said and laughed, licking her lips as she looked me slowly up and down without any attempt at hiding her thoughts.

"Yes, Artist," I said, and it seemed to appease her, for she gave me no further attention but turned to Sir Edmond and said, "Wouldn't it be time to go on?" which is what we then did.

~

There is one important note that I have to make at this point, before going on with my tale:

You will have noticed that so far I have told you candidly and in detail all the things that have happened, as well as my memory allows, omitting only the unimportant parts which certainly would be more boring than entertaining or instructive to even the most interested listener. I feel that in the light of all the subsequent events I can now do so without compromising the discretion that the Gift naturally has to observe, towards everyone but the Queen who has sent her on her mission. But, though assuming for myself now the right to talk freely about what I have seen and heard and done and been done to on the Journey, in one way I will not satisfy what may be your genuine desire to know, or just may be idle curiosity: I will not tell you the names of the Lands the Journey led through, and the names of their Princesses and Princes, or, with one exception, the true names of any other persons that I have encountered. I will therefore also not give descriptions of landscapes and towns detailed enough to make it possible to positively identify them.

Of course, to anyone familiar with the Queendom's politics and

geography it may be easy to make guesses as to what path the Journey may have followed, and to feel quite confident about their conjectures regarding the true identity of this Land or that Princess, but those conjectures can never be more than just that. Believe me that nothing in my account is unambiguous, and that the places of the described events, except the starting and the end point of the Journey, may not in fact be the ones that you in your mind may be confident to have made them out to be.

But back to my tale now!

Some three hours after that rest, after a pleasant ride down the gently sloping grazing land, and then through the plane on a well-kept road that went along orchards and fields of grain, we finally reached the Princetown we had seen from above. As Sir Edmond had announced, we headed straight to the palace, and rode through the outer gates. In the courtyard we were received by a group of guards who helped Sir Edmond, Abigail and me to dismount, after which our escort and the horses were led through another gate to a different yard. Sir Edmond and Abigail were then shown through a large door that seemed to be the entrance to the main building, while I was told to wait, until after a while a servant approached me and beckoned me to follow him. We went to a side door, and up a spiral staircase, and then along a dimly lit narrow corridor with an uneven floor, until we came to a small door on which the servant knocked.

From behind the door a male voice said, “Bring her in,” and the servant said, “The Prince is expecting you,” which were the first and only words he spoke to me; then he opened the door, shoved me in with a firm pressure to my rear, and closed the door behind me.

The room, which seemed to be the Prince’s bedroom, was about as dark as the corridor had been — in this old part of the palace the walls

were thick and the windows were few and small, and here they seemed to be facing north, but there was light enough to see.

The Prince lay on his back on a huge four poster bed, his upper body propped up against a heap of pillows, facing the door through which I had come in. He was dressed in a dark red coat made of a thick and precious-looking fabric, which was spread open in front, revealing his half-erect penis. The Prince was not young anymore — still Sir Edmond's junior by a few years, from the look of his face, but his body was less well-exercised, his belly was bulging, and his skin was flabby and pale. I caught myself at the improper thought of how much I would prefer Sir Edmond to lie there and wait for me, and quickly expelled it from my mind.

"I am the Gift," I said. "It is a great honor to meet you, and to be at your service."

I opened my robe and let it fall to the floor. He looked at my naked body, and I was glad to see that he did not seem to be disappointed. "Come," he said.

I walked over to the bed, hesitated briefly, and, when he did not tell me to stop, climbed upon it, kneeling next to him, and bent down to take his penis into my mouth, carefully caressing its head with my tongue until I felt it growing hard. He lay there without moving, and without touching me, but when I looked up I saw that he watched me with a pleased expression.

"Sit down on me now," he said after a while, and I straddled him, taking his penis into my vagina. I had guessed he wanted me to sit facing him, and I had guessed rightly. "Put your hands behind your back," he said, "and do not move." I would have welcomed movement, but he himself lay as still as he ordered me to be, except that he raised

his arms and cupped my breasts with his hands. I sensed that he felt the pressure of my erect nipples against his palms.

He squeezed my breasts slightly. "They will cut them off, won't they?" he said.

"I have not been told," I answered, "but I suppose they will."

"I regret that I cannot be there to see it," he said.

"I am sorry about that, my Prince," I said, and meant it.

"I hope they will burn and skin them, before cutting them off," he continued, and I felt his grip getting tighter.

"If it pleases you then I too hope that they will do so, my Prince," I said. "The Artist will make drawings of the ceremony," I added, "you may ask the Envoy if he can arrange for one of her pictures to be sent to you."

After that, he did not speak, but I saw his chest heave with his faster breathing, and felt his hard penis inside me. He clamped my nipples between index fingers and thumbs, and squeezed them forcefully, and then he started to thrust upwards with strong movements, as if throwing me into the air with his pelvis, while holding me down by my nipples which he held in a firm grip, thus stretching my breasts painfully with each thrust, while I did my best to stay upright and not to bend forwards to relieve the strain. After not very many thrusts, his sperm flowed into my body.

He then let go of my breasts, and gave me an appreciating nod. "You have been well chosen," he said.

I thanked him, and he told me to leave the bed. He pulled on a rope that obviously was connected to a bell with which he could summon a servant.

"You will now serve the members of my guard," he said. "As you

will leave tomorrow morning, see to it that you please as many of them as you can during the night.”

“I will try my best to be the Gift to them, as I am the Gift to all the Queendom, my Prince,” I said.

“Some of them are female,” he added, not responding to my words.

“Of course, my Prince,” I replied, and then the door was opened from the outside and I saw the same servant who had brought me here standing in the corridor, waiting for me. I picked up my robe from the floor, but did not put it on — now that the Prince had used me, there was no need for me to be dressed before the eyes of his subjects, and anyway the guard’s quarters were close by.

“They have orders not to hurt you,” the servant said as we walked down another spiral staircase to the basement quarters, “but they can be rough.”

“I will not complain,” I said.

“Who would you complain to?” he replied, and then, taking me by surprise, he hit me forcefully in my stomach with his fist — the impact made me retch and gasp for air, and I had difficulty not to stumble and fall on the narrow stairs.

“Good,” he said, and hit me a second time, with equal force, and pushed me to my knees; then he opened his breeches and entered my mouth. Fortunately it took him long enough to spill his sperm so that I had half regained my breath by then, and could swallow it without being in danger of choking.

Afterwards he picked up my robe that I had let fall and flung it to me, and then he extended a hand, the one with which he had struck me, and helped me up.

“Thank you,” I said, and this was for the robe and for helping

me up only; I did not have to thank anyone for hurting me, unless it might feel right to me that I did.

~

Compared to him, most of the guards were gentle. I spent the night in what must have been a wardroom, a large room with many tables and chairs, and mostly they had me lying on one of the tables, on which they had put a blanket to make me comfortable, and they exchanged the blanket once or twice when it had gotten too filthy.

They hardly talked to me, but they drank a lot, and talked and laughed a lot among each other; it was a cheerful atmosphere, even when there were occasional brawls among them. I did not understand much of their talk, due to them all speaking together, and the slang they spoke, and due to the acoustics of the room that had a vaulted ceiling so that all sounds were reverberating, and due to my being busy with having penises inside me from all sides, and hands and mouths all over my body, and quite a number of female crotches and breasts vying for my lips and tongue.

The guards numbered several hundred, and long as the night was, not all of them could make proper use of me, so that many did not wait for an orifice to be available but relieved themselves upon my legs, belly or breasts, and even in my hair and into my ears — I certainly understood very little of their conversation after that! But when they fought for a better position, or to get near me at all, it was done in a sportive mood and without malice, they seemed to take it like a sort of game. And, I guess, after the amount of wine they had drunk, most of them the next day would hardly even remember whether they had gotten their fair share of me or not, and as the women among them

were quite eager to console those who might have not, it was surely an enjoyable night for all of them.

They generously shared their wine with me, too, though I did my best not to drink too much of it, which was facilitated by the fact that it tasted rather awful — fortunately, they did not pour it into me by force. And when the night finally ended, and another servant came to fetch me and accompany me to Sir Edmond's and Abigail's room, those who had not fallen down from fatigue or in a drunken stupor waved and cheered and shouted farewell greetings and threw kisses or made obscene gestures, and, hearing and seeing them as through a thick haze I waved back at them, and almost felt a twinge of regret that we already had to part.

So, this had been my first experience with being the Gift to a larger group, and I was glad that my secret apprehensions and fears of not being up to what might be expected from me had proven unfounded, and that I had kept those apprehensions to myself. I also knew that not all such events would always turn out so well, but this night had finally given me the confidence that I would not shamefully fail, that, as well as it was given to me that I could, I would do honor to the Queen, to the Queendom, and to my Land.

Sir Edmond received me with the information that we would continue the Journey without further delay, as his meeting with the Prince had been productive and quickly proven satisfactory to both sides, and the further good relations between the Queendom and this Land had thus been ensured. Abigail gave me a look trying to imply that she had learned more detailed information, which I was not to be made privy of, but I knew that this was hardly true; I was happy though that she refrained from commenting, with words or looks, on the state that I was in.

Free of serious troubles as the night had been it still had taken its toll on me, leaving me exhausted and, as I started to realize, in considerable pain in several parts of my body, and I knew that my sight and probably my smell must be awful — so awful, in fact, that the servant who had brought me here had not even touched me. I was fortunate in that a lavishly outfitted bathroom adjoined the room, and Sir Edmond granted me half an hour to clean and refresh myself and apply an ointment to my face to restore it to a more healthy color.

Sir Edmond and Abigail had already had breakfast, so I just quickly drank some of the fruit juices that had been brought to us and ate two slices of dry white bread, but even with more time to spare I could hardly have eaten more, my body tired out and my stomach still full with last night's mixture of wine and sperm.

When we mounted our horses my whole body ached, and worst were those parts that touched the saddle — some of the guards had been quite rough, after all. I tried awkwardly to reduce the pain by supporting myself partially on the stirrups, but then my thighs hurt, and anyway I was too tired to keep this up.

Abigail watched me for a while, after which she said, "You look ridiculous, a sad disgrace to our party."

"I am sorry to be displeasing," I answered, "but I have not slept during the night, and I am in pain."

"You are young, you do not need sleep," Abigail replied, "and about the pain, you better get used to it."

"Yes, Artist," I said. I had always needed my good night's sleep, but I knew that I would have to get by with much less of it now, and even better than I knew this, I knew that she was right about the pain.

CHAPTER 4: NEEDLES AND STRAPS

Despite the pain between my legs, which subsided during the next few days though of course it was to be renewed on many occasions, and the more permanent pain which I could not keep myself from feeling whenever I had to watch Abigail taking her sexual pleasures with Sir Edmond, I felt a deep joy and satisfaction about the Journey, as it led me farther away from my home each day, and let me see sights I would not have dared to dream I'd ever be able to see in my life — wondrous landscapes and palaces and towns — places that hardly anyone in my village or even in my Land had ever even heard about, and much less ever been to.

I will not tell you about each Land and Princetown that we visited; it would take too much of your time to hear it all, while it would add little to your pleasure or to your understanding. Our path led us through vast forests, across wide open plains, and along the banks of broad but placid rivers, and, for one stretch, even *upon* a river, traveling by boat. We then crossed a range of modest mountains, following rocky trails that for several days kept us above the treeline, with some tricky sections where the snow had not yet completely melted away, but, though progress sometimes was arduous, we never encountered any severe obstacles or dangers.

And, whenever the need or the opportunity arose, we all three, the Envoy, the Artist and the Gift, did our duties.

We had come down from the mountains again, and now rode through a lovely landscape, a narrow valley framed by soft wooded hills. A stream flowed among meadows studded with flowers, and an

abundance of birdsong as I had never heard before filled the air. It was still rather early in the morning — our plan had been to get here on the evening of the previous day, but we had not quite made it and had spent the night in a cave, from which we had set out at first light.

We enjoyed the tranquil ride and the pleasant morning breeze, until the valley widened, and finally opened onto a large plane, with further mountains looming dimly in the far background. A few miles away a low offshoot of the hills to the left stretched into the valley, forcing the stream, which had now gotten broader, to flow around it in a gentle bend. This ridge ended in a low peak, upon which, towering above the plane and the river, and overlooking the fertile land and its villages and farms, we saw a walled town with a castle — we had reached our next destination.

“Is it a Princess or a Prince who rules this Land?” I asked Sir Edmond while we approached the walls.

“Both,” Sir Edmond answered.

I half expected to be met by one of those persons I had heard about who have breasts and a penis, or even a vagina and a penis, or who are men when undressed but strive by their attire and the way they paint and perfume themselves and wear their hair to appear like women, but when I was led into the room where I was expected, I saw that none of this was the case — there were a Princess *and* a Prince who greeted me, and, as they were nude, there could be no doubt as to their genders.

“My sister,” the Prince said, and “my brother,” said the Princess, and then they both expressed their joy at having the honor to receive a visit by the Gift.

“But it is *my* honor,” I blushed.

“Well, we all are honored by doing our best for the Queendom and

the Queen,” the Prince replied. The family resemblance was obvious, in their faces with the prominent noses, red lips and green eyes, and in their fair-skinned bodies, which were tall, gracious and athletic; both had curly blonde hair, though while she wore hers cut short, his was falling down over his shoulders.

“You will want me to undress?” I asked them, and they cordially replied that it would surely be a pleasure to see my breasts and the rest of my body. “I hope that it will be,” I said, slipping out of my gown.

“We have invited a few selected guests for lunch,” the Princess said, giving me a scrutinizing, and, to my relief, appreciating look. “They will stay for the afternoon, and we have promised them that they will have a chance to meet you. I would suggest that we keep our talks about you and the Journey until then, as they will be interested to participate, and for now will enjoy your presence privately, if you do not mind?”

“How could I mind, my Princess?” I asked, though I knew that her question could have been rhetorical only.

The room was big and held a number of upholstered chairs and settees, as well as several small tables. There was only one small couch, but the floor was covered with a thick and soft layer of rich carpets, the touch of whose precious fabrics felt nice on my bare skin.

The two were joyful and passionate in their love-making, especially the Princess — it was fun to watch her how easily and playfully she achieved one orgasm after the other, how she delighted in them, and how they never diminished her zest for more. In her passion she enjoyed to bite, at first concentrating upon the Prince, not sparing his penis and testicles, and for a while he took it in good stride, but when it got too much for him he laughingly directed her towards me. She loved it when I held her head, pressing it against my flesh as she sank

her teeth into it quite forcefully, leaving marks on my breasts, my side and my thighs that showed for several weeks to come, even drawing a little blood from my nipples and my labia, but even in the heat of her arousal she was careful and controlled enough not to do me any serious harm.

Finally even the Princess was satiated, or maybe simply exhausted, and we came to rest, the Prince having spent himself long before on our bodies, where what of his sperm that had not gotten licked up by either his sister or me had now dried.

A servant girl entered and brought towels, two for each of us; one hot and wet, and the other one dry. The contrast between her and Princely pair was striking — she was small, soft, with round hips and full breasts, big dark eyes, and straight black hair that fell down almost to her waist. Leaving the Prince and me to clean ourselves, she proceeded to clean the Princess from head to toes with tender care and loving attention, to which her Mistress succumbed with visible delight.

When her long hair that covered her breasts parted, I saw that her left nipple was missing. Both she and the Princess noticed my gaze, and smiled. The Princess mock-furtively quickly licked her lips, and the girl bent down to her, and gently kissed her on her mouth. It was an affectionate and intimate gesture, much more so than would seem to be appropriate for a servant, or for her Mistress to accept from her, but there was no doubt that it was genuine, and that it was received with sincerity. For a moment, I must confess, before I bethought myself again of my own duties, I envied the two their happy, untroubled, and, I hoped for them, enduring intimacy.

When we were cleaned and dried the girl brought clothes for the Princess and the Prince who put them on, but made me understand

that I should stay naked. The girl picked up my clothes from the floor and took them with her, together with the used towels.

“They will be at your room, washed and ironed,” the Princess said; I thanked her, knowing I had no need for clothes until she or the Prince wished to provide me with them. I had heard all those stories, like everyone has, where a visitor to some sinister castle is ordered to undress and has his or her clothes taken away, and then is called into the throne room only to be sentenced to being slowly skinned alive for daring to appear nude before the Master or Mistress of this place, and it may be that those things which never fail to make us shudder with secret thrills have indeed happened or, somewhere, were happening still, but I knew that here I had no such cruel jests to expect.

The Princess noticed that I was following some thoughts of my own and asked me what they were, and when I told her she replied that I must not think them to be completely beyond cruelty. I answered that I would not dare to insult them by thinking so, but that I truly did not see them delighting in wantonly practiced deceit, and upon this she looked pleased.

“We *do* have people skinned, you know, if it has to be,” she said after a while. “I even remember a girl who looked a bit like you.”

“I hope she died honorably?” I asked.

“She gave her best,” the Prince affirmed.

~

There was a knock at the door, which I noticed as the servant girl had come in without knocking, and the door slowly opened an inch.

“Come in, dears,” the Princess said, and two girls entered the room, I guessed that one was seven or eight years old, the other one maybe

eleven or twelve. Both had long blonde hair, both wore charming white satin dresses, and both looked at me with big expectant eyes.

“Hi,” said the younger one.

“Are you the Gift?” the older one asked.

“Yes, she is the Gift,” the Princess replied instead of me, and turning to me she said, “These are our daughters, Snow White” — she pointed to the younger girl — “and Rose Red.” The girls giggled. “Please excuse their bad behavior, but for days they have been eager to meet you, and we have promised them they would, if they did well with their lessons.”

“We have lessons with our teachers every morning,” Snow White said.

“And I am very glad that you did well, so that we can meet now,” I said smiling.

“They aren’t difficult,” Rose Red replied.

“When I am older, I want to be the Gift, too,” Snow White said.

“Then you will die!” Rose Red replied.

“Is it true, they will kill you when you arrive at the Queen’s palace?” Snow White asked me.

“First I will meet the Queen, but yes, then I will have to die,” I said.

“But why?” she asked.

“So that I can prove how much the Queen is loved,” I explained. “And this love to her makes all the people in the Queendom live together in peace, so it is very important that there is proof for it.”

“They will torture her,” Rose Red said.

“Until you are dead?”

“Yes, my dear, until I am dead.”

“Can I be the Gift and not be killed and tortured at the end?” Snow White asked.

“No, that’s not possible, I’m afraid,” I said. “But there are many different ways to serve the Queendom and the Queen, and I am sure that you will find another one. Besides, you do not decide to be the Gift, there are others who decide this.”

“But you could have said no?” she asked.

“Yes, I could have said no,” I agreed.

“When I will be asked, I will not say no either,” she said firmly.

“I would,” Rose Red said. “I’ll rather be Princess one day, and fight for the Queen, than be tortured for her.”

“I will fight for her too, I’ll be a warrioress,” Snow White said.

“You’ll be a great warrioress,” I agreed, “it would be a shame to torture you to death instead.”

There was a short pause. “May we put needles into you?” Snow White broke the silence.

“You have to ask your parents, my dear,” I told her.

“May we? *Please?*” she asked, looking from one to the other.

“Not into her face,” the Princess said.

“Thank you! Thank you!” Snow White jumped up and down with joy, and her older sister took a tin box out of a pouch of her gown, and then she carried it over to a small table where they both began to take out the needles and divide them into two piles, careful to make them equal in the needles’ numbers and sizes.

“Not all of them, that’s too many, put half of them back,” the Princess said. The girls looked disappointed but did as they were told without argument, though careful to put back only the smaller ones.

“Where does it hurt you most?” Snow White asked.

“Under the toe- and finger nails,” I said.

“And in her clit,” Rose Red added.

“Yes,” I said, “this will hurt me very much, too.”

“I want to put them into her clit,” Snow White said.

“It was *my* idea,” Rose Red raised her voice.

“Girls, don’t quarrel,” I tried to conciliate them, “there’s enough of me for both of you.”

“You take her left fingers and toes, and I take her right fingers and toes,” Rose Red said, “and I take her clit first, and you can have it then.”

“And her tits,” Snow White added after a short pause.

“Only her left tit, the right one is mine,” came the predictable reply.

“Will this hurt you too?” the younger girl asked.

“Yes, but not as much.”

“I don’t have tits yet,” Rose Red said.

“But you will,” I assured her.

“Yes,” she said, “and they will be bigger than yours, as big as my mommy’s.”

“She has beautiful tits,” I agreed.

“Will you cry when we hurt you?” Snow White asked me.

“I’ll try not to,” I said.

“But if we really hurt you badly, you will?”

“Yes, then I will,” I promised.

“I hope you will cry,” she said.

“Only if you hurt me really badly,” I smiled.

“Are you looking forward to our game?” Rose Red asked, picking up one of the larger needles, and lightly pressing its point against the palm of her other hand.

“No,” I said, “I’m not. I do not like pain.”

“Are you afraid?”

“A bit, yes,” I admitted.

“Good,” she said, “now lie down on the floor.”

I did cry, sooner than I had thought I would, from the pain under my toe nails. As I was laying on my back, they could easily get at my toes and most of my body, though they soon lost interest in those parts where, resisting the desire to cheat, I truthfully told them that the needles didn't hurt so much — they eagerly asked after each one. The pain in my breasts I hardly felt, but the pain in my clit was very bad, and they always went back to my toes — they were delighted by the tears in my eyes and my sharp intakes of breath.

“Will you give me your hand, please?” Rose Red said after a while, and “me too,” her sister chimed in, and then they sat down left and right from me, and I stretched out my hands to them, and I closed my eyes and felt their little hands grip my fingers, and then they both settled for my ring fingers to start with, which on my hands are longer than my index fingers, and then fiery bolts of pain shot from my hands through my arms to my brain and down my body, making me moan loudly and demanding all my strength to keep my hands still in theirs, and I heard them giggle merrily, and was happy for them and for myself.

“Have you met another Gift before?” I asked them during one of the short pauses they made.

Snow White shook her head, and her sister said, “She was too young then. But I have seen her, she had big tits, and tattoos on them, but she was not at all as nice as you are.”

“Thank you,” I said, “but I am sure her tattoos must have looked great.”

“A lion and a naked lady, in color,” Rose Red said, with awe in her voice.

“When they torture you before the Queen, will you think of us?” Snow White asked, pulling out a needle from under my thumb nail.

To open my mouth to say “yes” the very moment she put the needle back in again was a mistake, as my moan turned into a loud scream. It startled her, and a bit anxiously she asked “Is everything all right?”

“Yes, it is, and yes, I will think of you,” I said in between moans.

“Fine,” she said, and then they both took out a needle each and re-inserted it at the same time, making me clench my teeth as hard as I could.

“Which of us hurts you more?” they wanted to know, and I assured them they that were both very good at it, and that I had never felt such pain before.

“You do not ask us to stop?” the older one asked, and I shook my head. They inserted two needles into my clit simultaneously.

“I think that’s enough now,” the Princess said.

“But she doesn’t want us to stop, she has said.”

“No, she has said she didn’t *ask* you to stop, that’s something quite different,” the Princess said. “It is for us to say when it is enough, and we say it now.”

“Just one more needle each of us, please!”

“All right, but these are the last ones,” the Prince said, “and then you have to go, it is really time for your lunch now.”

They each stuck a needle under one of my finger nails, slowly, bringing fresh tears to my eyes.

“We have to go now,” Rose Red said.

“Don’t forget us,” Snow White said. “You can keep the needles, if you want to,” she added.

“No, she will take them out and leave them here,” the Princess said.

It was she who took them out, though, one by one, after the girls had left the room, while the Prince watched.

“They are good girls,” she said.

“They are sweet little angels,” I agreed. “Tell them I will not forget them, please. You must be very proud of them.”

“We are,” they both said, and I could see they were.

When I tried to stand up the pain in my feet was so intense that I stumbled and fell down, grateful for the softness of the carpets. When the Prince indicated the couch for me to lie down upon it, I had to crawl there on my elbows and knees, raising my hands and feet so that they did not touch the floor when I moved — how I finally got onto the couch, I do not know.

“You are beautiful in your pain,” the Princess said. “Take a rest while we have lunch. We will excuse you to our guests, and we will have some wine and fruit brought to you.”

“But will your guests not be offended when I am not at the table?” I asked.

“We will explain that you are indisposed,” she said, “and we will invite them to join us here after the meal.”

“I thank you,” I said. “By then I am sure that I will have recovered enough to be able to please them.”

“You will have to,” she answered.

For the second time, I blushed. “Forgive me, Princess, for my thoughtless and unfitting words.”

“Do not mind, you are forgiven,” she replied, and the barely detectable edge in her voice left me ashamed for my blunder.

~

I lay there for what seemed to me a long time, drifting in and out of pain and in and out of sleep, relishing to lie on a soft and upholstered piece of furniture, knowing that the next time I’d have a comfortable

bed to lie on might not be before I'd be in the Queen's palace, for a few short days before my death.

I had no blanket to cover myself, but it was pleasantly warm, and I did not miss it. After some time the door opened and a good-looking naked young male servant entered, carrying a tray with a large cup of white wine, and a bowl of fruits — I marveled at the fruits, some of which I did not know at all, and others I would not have expected at this time of the year. They must have been brought in from the South, I thought in awe, or maybe even from across the Southern Sea.

The boy, or young man rather, as he seemed not to be much younger than I was, did not speak a word, but he indicated that he knew my hands would hurt, and he held the cup for me to drink so that I did not need to use them, and with a small knife that had also been on the tray he cut the fruits into small pieces and fed them to me one by one, and they were as juicy and tasted as fresh and sweet as they looked. During all this he sat on the couch next to me without ever touching me, and only his erect penis indicated his desire. When I was done with drinking and eating, I rewarded him with my mouth, careful to have him enjoy this for a satisfactory length of time, until he could not hold back any longer and I in turn was rewarded by his pleasure.

After this I slept again until my hosts came back from their lunch, which seemed to have lasted for several hours, bringing with them the guests they had invited for the occasion.

"This is our sleeping beauty," I heard them say as means of introducing me, and I woke up from my doze blushing, making this my third blush since I had entered this room.

There were nine guests, so that including the Princess, the Prince and myself we were twelve, seven men and five women, except for me

all splendidly dressed, and they nodded kindly at me as I raised myself and stood before them, and the Princess introduced them to me one after the other. They were all some eminent citizens of the Land, three scholars from the University, a priestess, an army commander, a publisher of books, a music composer, a merchant, and a physician, if I understood and remember correctly.

I stammered how delighted and honored I was to be deemed worth making their acquaintance, and they all were not only friendly to me, but seemed genuinely interested in conversation, asking me about my home — most of them had never been to the North — and about the Journey, but without trying to make me talk about things that might be confidential and meant for the Queen's ears only. When I had told them about the places I had seen so far, which were not many, as by now we had traveled only about one fourth of our route, those who had been to the South told me about the Lands between here and the southern coast, and they told me about the splendors of the Beautiful City, and the Queen's palace, and about the kindness and the wisdom of the Queen herself. Then we talked about the institution of the Journey, and about its importance for the Queendom, and they not only told me their thoughts but they also wanted to hear mine, and when they asked me further, they heard me say how I feared the pain that awaited me at the end, a feeling that I had never admitted to anyone before and hardly even to myself. I felt shame for this weakness, and I was glad that they understood that I also told the truth when I said how grateful I was to be *given*, and to be allowed to give myself, to all the Queendom and to the Queen.

All during our conversation wine and water and fruits and sandwiches were brought in, and empty trays and glasses and plates removed, but now the servants were dressed, and the two whom I had

encountered earlier were not among them. As also the Princess, the Prince and their guests were clothed, my nudity was enhanced by my being the only naked person in the room, and I took care always to sit so that they could look at my breasts and between my legs freely.

“To properly receive the Gift requires more than talk,” the Princess finally said.

I have already mentioned the rich carpets on the floor; equally splendid carpets hung on the walls. Behind one of those wall carpets, it was now revealed, was not a solid wall, though, but an opening, like the frame of a large door. Lifting that carpet-curtain and walking through that opening, as I was told to do, I found myself in an adjoining chamber in which the only furniture was a large bed draped with silken cloth and covered with soft silken pillows. On one corner lay a bundle of thin leather straps, about two feet long.

When the thick fabric fell again over the opening behind me, I was alone in the small room, hearing only muffled sounds from the conversation that went on outside. There were no other doors, but in one wall there was a small window of darkly stained glass that obviously led to another room or to a corridor, for through it came the slightly flickering light of candles, providing the only illumination once the curtain was closed. I sat down on the bed, enjoying its softness, knowing that it would not take long before the first of the Princess’s and Prince’s guests joined me.

They visited me one by one, to get served and pleased by me, and thus to partake in person in that blessed undertaking, the Journey. Most of them took their time, and most of them, whether female or male, were content to make use of my body in ways that caused me no pain or discomfort. Some used the leather straps to bind my wrists behind my back or to my ankles, some used them to whip my ass,

breasts, thighs or crotch, and one of them tightened a strap around my neck until I blacked out, but it was all done in a kind and respectful mood. In between each visitor a servant girl, again a different one, brought me a towel to clean myself, and replaced the silken bed-cover with a fresh one.

At some point I lost count, and, when the last visitor had left me, I was surprised when the servant girl held open the carpet-curtain, and I found the large room deserted. She asked me to follow her, and brought me to the room that had been given to Sir Edmond, Abigail and me. The color of the sky, which I could see through the window, told me that it was early evening.

As I had known before, I was not invited to attend the diplomatic dinner that was given for Sir Edmond, but once more I was brought food and drink, which I enjoyed. After that, I spent the evening and night alone. I had rather expected that I would be called upon to give pleasure to more of the Princetown's inhabitants, but this was for the Princess and the Prince to decide, and they had decided that I would not. I neither saw Abigail nor Sir Edmond until the morning — Sir Edmond later said the talks had lasted late into the night, and he had been invited to stay with the Princess and the Prince. Of course it was not for me to ask him whether this had included sex with one or both of them, and he never talked about his private matters, but I have to admit that I felt a bit of improper curiosity. Where and how Abigail spent the night I do not know, but in her absence I lay not in the corner where my place would have been, but next to the bed in which Sir Edmond would have lain, though I did remove the small rug in front of it and lay on the bare floor.

As I was alone and sleep did not come for a while, I slowly masturbated, and let my mind wander back to my home, and along the many

courses my life had not taken, some of them realistic and others mere fantasies, and along the course it *had* taken now, and I followed it further down the road to how I would meet the Queen, and to how Sir Edmond would finally enjoy me and I him, to how I would feel his penis in me, and his knife, and to the agonies that would follow, and with my orgasm I felt my fear fade away and peace and contentedness and satisfaction spread through my body and my mind.

Several times during the night I woke up, and masturbated myself to sleep again, and since I was alone I did it how I had done while living alone in my house, taking my time, caressing my whole body, arms, shoulders, breasts, belly, hips, thighs, working myself slowly up to a deep arousal and forcing myself to endure it until it felt too good to be endured, and then relieving myself with a few final touches of my fingers that sent me shuddering and moaning through clenched teeth.

In the morning I slept deeply, until Sir Edmond arrived; I was fortunate that Abigail was not first, as she would have been justifiably angry at me for lying beside his bed, but Sir Edmond seemed either not to notice, or not to care. Abigail arrived shortly after him, and soon afterwards we were served an ample breakfast, and left without having seen the Princess and the Prince again.

CHAPTER 5: A PRINCE'S WEDDING

It is not the purpose of the Journey to provide pleasure to the Gift, and not always was I received as kindly and open-heartedly as I have just described. Some of our visits were unpleasant to me, the worst one occurring much later, in the mountains, at the Princetown of a sorrowful and embittered Princess. When I was introduced to her she slapped my face and said she did not want to be under the same roof with the Queen's whore, and that she could not make someone else suffer this disgrace either, so she ordered me to spent the rest of the day and the night on the streets.

It was cold and raining, and as she ordered me to undress I prepared myself for a rough and toilsome time of being the Gift to this town's inhabitants.

"I will try to give my best to serve your subjects as well as I can," I said.

She slapped me again, hard, and said, "It is not important what you try, whore."

I did not understand at first, but I slowly understood when a servant came with a dark brown leather contraption that looked like a skull with an open mouth, but without eye sockets. I undressed and sat down on a stool, and she put the hood over my head and fastened it at the back, where it had a slit with metal eyelets.

"This is one of our methods of execution," she said, "but don't worry, some victims last up to a week, and you'll only have to make it to tomorrow."

When she had closed the hood with five small padlocks, my whole

head was encased, with one exception: my mouth — this was held open by metal clasps that were attached to the hood's inside. Ah yes, and there were two small holes under my nostrils, so that I could still breathe while my mouth would be occupied otherwise. I could not see, I was in total darkness, I could not speak, and I could hardly hear, as the hood was thickly padded where my ears were. The last words I heard, before the hood closed around me, was the girl casually saying, "Be glad that this isn't one of those with thorns inside," and from the way she said it I had the feeling that she would have preferred if it had been.

After my head was secured inside the hood, my wrists were put into shackles and tied behind my back. For a moment I wondered how this, unpleasant as it was, was supposed to kill delinquents within a week unless they were denied water to drink, but then I remembered that the Princess had ordered me out on the streets, and I understood that it was not the hood and the shackles I had to fear, but what they allowed people to do to me.

And they did it.

It was Abigail who saved my life. Even if it must have been upon Sir Edmond's request that she acted, it was *her*, at her own personal risk, who found two thugs, and paid money to them, and promised them a lot more of it if I'd be unharmed by tomorrow.

Well, unharmed by *their* standards, that was, of course, and they neither could nor wanted to act too conspicuously. But Abigail could not have stayed on the streets herself, in the cold and the rain, because in the unlit alleys of the night she would easily have ended up being the victim of all kinds of violence herself, or, if detected by the guards, she would have induced the wrath of the Princess, to a bad end for all of us — even so, she put herself into considerable danger, claiming

her Artist's liberty to collect impressions for her work so that she could leave the palace after a while and secretly search for me and organize some kind of protection.

During my ordeal I never knew or suspected that I had two guardian angels, whom by the way I never got to see to thank them afterwards. I was simply lying in the gutter in the heavy rain with the dirty water running into my open mouth which I could not close, desperately trying not to swallow too much of it or of the flotsam it carried. Half freezing to death, not knowing anything about what was happening to me, all I was aware of the outside world were feet kicking into my belly, ribs and crotch, penises entering my vagina, ass and mouth, and hands groping me and dragging me around and throwing me to the ground in some miserable ditch that inevitably felt even worse than the one I had lain in just before.

Some of this dragging must have been for my benefit, and some of the penises must have been those of my protectors or their friends, but to all this I was oblivious, until after an eternity that had lasted into the next morning I found myself raised to my feet, and pushed forward, and raised again when I stumbled and fell, until I was pushed backwards but did not fall, as there again was a stool under me, and my arms were untied and the padlocks opened and my hood removed from my head. It took a while until my eyes adapted to the light.

"You have been lucky," the Princess said, and Sir Edmond, standing next to her and looking tired and worn-out, said, "We have come to an agreement that is favorable to the Queendom."

It was over, and thanks to Abigail I had survived without much permanent harm, though I did get severely ill afterwards, from the cold and from the dirt that had run into me.

But from where I am now in my tale this is still a long way in the

future, so let me now resume from where I digressed — after having left the town with the cordial Princely couple, their delightful young children and their pleasant eminent guests.

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For several days we rode almost without interruptions, except for the necessary hours of sleep during the nights, passing through sparsely inhabited regions and across further mountains, though this time not so high that we encountered bare rock or snow. When hamlets and villages became more frequent we knew that we were getting close to the next Princetown on our itinerary, even though the hilly and wooded terrain still hid it from our sight. At sunset we came to an inn, and Sir Edmond decided that we would stay for the night, rather than trying to ride on through the darkness or sleep in the open, as we had done the days before.

While we enjoyed the comfort of sitting at a wooden table and eating a simple but agreeable dinner of mutton stew and bread, we learned from the innkeeper that we had arrived just in time for the young Prince's wedding which would take place the very next day — whether Sir Edmond had known about the event and its date I do not know, but he seemed pleased, and so, though for different reasons I suppose, was Abigail.

“We are all so happy for the Prince that he has finally found the right girl,” the innkeeper said, and everybody, the innkeeper's wife, their daughter who waited on the tables, and the few local patrons voiced or nodded their consent. “Her name is Gaia, she's a common peon's daughter from a miserable tiny village in the middle of some remote sordid swamplands, but tales of her loveliness seem to have been told all over the country.”

“I don’t know how lovely she is, but he’s searched a long time for her,” the daughter said.

“It won’t be easy for her, you know,” her mother replied.

“Of course I know,” her daughter said, not bothering to suppress the anger in her voice. “I applied, did you forget?” She was a pretty enough girl, tall and slim, her breasts firm and far larger than mine — she had opened the top buttons of her jacket under which she wore no blouse, so she gave us a good view of them — but her otherwise drab looks, her unkempt dull hair and her careworn face did not make her seem fit to be a companion for a Prince.

“I *want* to forget,” her mother said. “How stupid that was of you! Let’s not talk about it anymore.”

“Well, he’s found the right one now,” the innkeeper said, in a way that made it clear that the subject was closed.

After we had finished our meal Sir Edmond, who was not immune to the allurements of those breasts that the girl had been eager to display, put a few extra coins on the table and retired with her for a while, leaving Abigail and me to listen to the innkeeper’s wife, who kept telling us how happy everybody was for the Prince, how splendid the wedding ceremony would be tomorrow evening, and how they envied us for surely being privileged to see it from a good place, important people as we were, on a mission for the Queen herself, and how they’d love to go there and watch it themselves, but simple folks like them would never obtain an invitation, and neither could they afford the price the marketeers would charge for admission, so they just hoped for the Prince that all would go well, and that the girl would do well, and that folks on their way back from the wedding would be in a good mood and spend some money here on food and drink and maybe on their daughter’s company.

By the time Sir Edmond returned we had heard a lot about how handsome and popular the Prince was, and how everybody had hoped and prayed that he'd find the right girl so that the wedding he longed for could finally take place, and how people were coming to see the wedding from all parts of the Land, and even from beyond. My head was starting to spin from all this talk.

Sir Edmond and Abigail then retired to our room, while I stayed behind, took off my clothes, and was honored to have my offer to serve as the Gift accepted with applause. Most of it was done with me lying on my back on a big table in the taproom's center, where first the innkeeper, then his wife and his daughter, and finally the patrons enjoyed me, or contented themselves to cheer the others on, according to what their different stages of age or drunkenness allowed them. When afterwards I went up to our room I found Sir Edmond and Abigail already asleep. I lay down on the floor quietly, listening to their even breathing, and tried to make sense of some of the things that the innkeeper's wife had said concerning the wedding, which had seemed confusing to me. Before I could hold a clear thought, though, I drifted into a sleep full of violent dreams of which I later remembered nothing at all.

~

We got up and left soon after sunrise, and it was still rather early in the morning when we arrived at the Princetown and the Prince's castle. The Prince and his bride had not yet risen, we were told — they would meet the Envoy and the Artist later, but the Gift was invited to join them in the Prince's bedroom.

The servant who led me there bade me to undress and took my clothes, explaining to me that no one was supposed to come into the

Prince's presence clothed while he still was in bed; then, saying that I was expected, he opened the door without knocking, standing so that he himself did not look into the room and was not visible from within. The door closed behind me after I entered.

The Prince and the girl who had to be Gaia were making love on a large bed, he lying on his back, his upper body propped up on a set of pillows, she straddling him, moving up and down in a gentle steady rhythm. They were a strikingly handsome couple — he broad-shouldered, muscular, tall, and tanned, with black wavy hair, dark eyes gleaming with the intensity of the sexual pleasure he was feeling, and she a very slender petite girl with fair skin, a soft face with large blue eyes, firm small breasts with pink nipples protruding from small dark areolas, and long straight golden hair falling down her back freely.

For a few minutes I stood there watching, not knowing whether I was supposed to approach, until the Prince, only now visibly acknowledging my presence, gave me a wave with his hand prompting me to draw near. Grabbing Gaia with both hands by her thighs, he lifted her up and removed her from himself, bidding me to take her place upon his erect penis. I did, and he held me by the waist as he had held her, supporting and directing my movements, and after a short time he expressed his satisfaction, and I felt his sperm spurting into me.

Gaia had set at the side of the bed, watching us silently, but when I dismounted and then went about my task of cleaning him with my mouth she said, "Let me do it, please," in a low and shy voice. I do not know whom of us she had addressed, but of course it was for him to decide; he grunted consent, and I made way for her.

She set to work eagerly, and I soon noticed that she was doing more than just cleaning him, she tried to arouse his desire anew, but after enjoying the caresses of her lips, tongue and teeth for a while, and

just when her efforts seemed to show some first tentative results, he abruptly withdrew himself, turned to the side and stood up from the bed.

“I have to think of the wedding night,” he said.

“Yes, my beloved Prince,” she said. “Forgive me, I know how important this night is, and I wish as much as you do that you will fully enjoy it!”

“Yes, I will,” he said, which I found a somewhat strange thing for him to say — it sounded so reserved, and why had he not said *we*?

“She will not make it easy for me, will she?” Gaia asked.

“No, I think not,” he replied. I had no idea what they were talking about.

“I have to meet the Envoy now,” he went on, “and then make preparations for the feast. I will see you both at the ceremony.” He lightly bowed to us, and left the room.

The girl had tears in her eyes. “I am so scared,” she said. “I am so scared!” She was shivering, even though it was quite warm in the room. I took her in my arms, and kissed her lightly.

“What are you so scared of?” I asked her.

“The wedding, of course.” She seemed to be surprised at my question. “Will my love prove to be strong enough to let me bear it gracefully? I am so happy that he has chosen me, among all the girls who had offered themselves. He would not have taken one against her will, you know. I love him so, but am I worthy of his choice? Will I be strong enough not to disgrace him, not to bring shame upon him? Please tell me that I will!” I held her tighter, and for a moment she clung to me, then she gently freed herself from my embrace, as if ashamed of her emotions.

“Hush my dear,” I said, and stroked her hair. “Please do not cry!”

But I do not understand. What is it that you fear? You love the Prince, do you not? And you are going to marry him tonight? And everything is planned and ready? And he loves you too, doesn't he?"

"Oh no, he doesn't, thanks be to the gods, it would be so awful if he did!"

There was a pause in which she read the incomprehension that was written on my face.

"You do not know?" she said, her blue eyes having lost their sparkle, clouded by sorrow. "You really do not know?"

"No," I said, "I do not know, and I do not understand. Please tell me!"

And then she did.

~

The wedding ceremony was set for the evening. The town lay at the foot of a hill at the end of a low ridge that extended to the North; this hill was about five hundred feet high, with gentle wooded slopes, except for a rocky precipice that dropped off towards the town. At the top of this precipice stood an ancient temple, so ancient that no one knew anymore by which people it had been built, and how, and when, and for what deity. The temple was rectangular, its main axis pointing towards the precipice, the rear narrow side almost bordering the precipice's edge. It was huge, at least a hundred feet long and forty feet wide. It was open; it had no interior, only a paved floor, and a vaulted roof that spanned it, supported by a row of six massive monolithic columns on each side. At the middle of the narrow side that bordered the precipice, from where you had a great view of the town below, the plain that stretched beyond it, and the distant mountain ridges to the

South, there was a large dark block of granite. The altar. Here the wedding would take place.

Surrounding the temple at its three other sides, the top of the hill formed a wide shallow grass-covered bowl, like a natural arena, providing room for several thousand spectators. Those who were not privileged to watch the ceremony from up here would stay in the town, attend the festivities that would be held there, glimpse up towards the temple, listen for the fanfares that would announce the conclusion of the wedding ceremony, watch the fireworks that were to be set off from up here, and then wait for their Prince and their new Princess to come down from the wedding place and drive through the town in their royal carriage, on their way to their palace, to their wedding night.

The ceremony would not begin before the sun began to set, and it would last into the night, its final parts illuminated by hundreds of torches, each carried by a torch-bearer, and those torches would also illuminate the way back down the hill, through the wood, through the darkness that by then would have fallen.

All this was still many hours in the future. It was soon after midday when Gaia and I ascended the hill and approached the temple, taking the same path that she and the Prince would take in the evening. A few guards followed us, but they kept their distance. Except for them, and a few more who patrolled the hill, we were alone — the area was closed to the public for the day, while preparations for the ceremony had not yet begun.

“I just want to touch the altar,” she said. After she had told me of the wedding, and I had comforted her as well as I could, she had asked me to stay with her for some more time, and as no one had told me of any other duties I had to perform, I said that I gladly would. It had

been her idea to walk up to the temple — a pleasant two hours walk, in the fine weather, from the palace and back.

While we walked, we talked — about love, about her love for the Prince, about my love for Sir Edmond, and my love for the Queendom, about needs, about necessities, about decisions, about life, about consequences, about death, about fear. She felt close to me, and she drew comfort from this closeness, and pride, which she needed, and I took care not to let her see that I was deeply sad for her.

She touched the altar shyly, with one hand, then she bent down and kissed it. For a short while we looked down upon the town, which looked small but beautiful in the bright sunshine, then we walked back again, mostly in silence now.

“I have to fight off this awful thought,” she said.

“Which thought?” I asked, after a while.

“That it is too late to turn back now,” she continued. “It is such a *wrong* thought. I love him, and he *needs* me, doesn’t he? I would not *want* to turn back, even if I could! Just like you — you do not want to turn back either, do you?”

“No,” I said, “I do not.”

We had reached the palace now, and when we entered it I was told that I was expected.

“I will be there,” I said to her, and hugged her, tightly, feeling her breasts pressing against mine, this intimate feeling that only two women can share, and then I kissed her, and though she responded, and might have wanted more, I had a different duty to fulfill now, and so I let her go, and turned around to follow the guard who had been sent to fetch me. When I looked back, from the end of the corridor before it turned a right angle, she was still standing there, at the bottom of the stairs, looking after me, and doing her best to smile bravely.

I was led into a large hall, sparsely furnished, but its floor covered with thick carpets. There were a few dozen people who had come to meet the Gift, and I served them, as this was the purpose of my being here, of my Journey, of my life. I do not remember, or did not care, who these men and women were, nor do I remember much of what I did, or what was done with me. I do remember that I heard one of the women say to one of the men, whether admiringly or condescendingly I do not know, that I was showing a remarkable fervor in the rendition of my services. I also remember that I was eager to use my mouth as much as possible for performing those services, so that I would not be expected to use it for talking. Everything else is lost in a haze, until Abigail appeared in the now empty hall, and looked down upon me as I was lying on the floor, covered in bruises and bite marks and sweat and saliva and sperm. “For heaven’s sake,” she said, “even for a whore you look downright disgusting. Go clean yourself, or we’ll be late for the wedding.”

“Thank you, Artist,” I replied, grateful to see her, grateful that she had come to fetch me in time.

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For the second time I was inside the temple now. We had been given seats of honor, among the dignitaries of the Land and high-ranking representatives of neighboring Lands, on two long wooden benches that formed an aisle between them, through which the Prince and his bride would step to the altar. Abigail sat next to me, at my right, one place closer to the altar; next to her sat Sir Edmond. I had told her what I had learned about the ceremony, and she had asked for the permission to bring her sketchbook with her. She played with a pencil that she held between her fingers, and I could feel her excitement.

I looked past Abigail at the altar, and at the Priestess who stood behind it, upright, silently, soberly. I took in the colors that she displayed: her long purple skirt, the pale skin of her face, arms and bare upper body, the green of her eyes, the bright pink of her lips and her erect nipples, the coppery red of her curled dark-blond hair that fell softly over her shoulders. Her hands rested on the altar. She wore no makeup, no jewelry, no insignia of her office, no visible symbols of her status, except for her purple skirt, her bare breasts, and her regal pose. These were all she needed.

I looked at the brazier on the left side of the altar, halfway to the column at the temple's rear left corner, the last column at the opposite side. Now that the sun had begun to set, its warm evening light no longer rendered the flames of the burning coals invisible.

The time of the ceremony drew nearer.

The temple itself was empty except for the Priestess and those who sat on the two benches, facing each other, but the space around the temple was densely packed with spectators, or guests, or whatever the proper term for them was. They were remarkably silent.

Torch-bearers now appeared, their torches already lit. They took their positions inside the temple, at its back along the edge of the precipice, and along the path where the Prince and his bride would approach, from which they drove back the crowd far enough to secure a comfortably wide space for the couple to walk through.

We waited. The Priestess, the torch-bearers, the guests of honor on the benches, the crowd ... In the dusk, the temple looked even huger and more formidable than it had done in bright daylight.

And then they came. There was no roar from the crowd, no cheers, but an excited whispering that announced that they had finally arrived:

the bridal couple, followed by a ceremonial escort of a dozen armed guards in festive attire.

The Prince looked splendid, dressed in a stately uniform, walking with firm steps, though showing regard for his smaller and delicate bride, whose hand he held firmly. Gaia was wearing a simple but superbly elegant white dress, and a girdle of white and red flowers in her hair — nothing else, not even shoes. Her eyes were fixed upon the Priestess, she did not look at the crowd to her left and right, nor at the guests of honor.

She knew what would happen. Of course she knew it, she had told it to me herself. Everybody knew it.

It was a ritual. It had to happen that way. The Prince's wedding, in this Land, required it. The honor of the future Princess required it.

Other than the girl at his side who was staring straight ahead, the Prince turned his head left and right as they walked, acknowledging the bystanders' bows with a smile or a friendly gesture of his hands, nodding at faces he knew or did not know, and now they were only a few steps away from the temple.

I knew who she was. Of course I knew, there was no mistaking it, even if the ritual demanded that she appeared just to be one of the bystanders. Her gorgeous looks, her magnificent gown, her proud bearings, her confidence told who she was. I had seen her standing there since shortly after we had been seated. Her, and the regal and richly dressed man and woman at her side. These were the Prince and Princess of the neighboring Land, and she was their eldest daughter. Her face, of a classic and serene beauty, looked calm, and only a faint smile lit up her eyes now.

She smiled at the Prince as he now halted, in front of her, as she had known he would do.

She smiled as the Prince let go of the hand he had been holding, turned towards her, knelt down before her, and spoke to her. “My Lady,” he said the words, “the sight of your fair beauty has overwhelmed me, it has ignited the flame of love in my soul. My heart is yours, my Land is yours, I am yours, and neither my heart nor my Land nor myself could ever belong to anyone else. I implore you, my Lady, to gracefully accept my unrestricted devotion, and, with the consent of your dear parents for which I deeply hope, to let me take you as my wedded Princess and wife!”

“Do you love me truly, my Prince?” she asked. Her voice was soft and clear.

“I do,” he said.

“But you have come with another woman, to wed her?”

“Next to you, my Princess,” he replied, “no other woman can be of any importance to me. Look, I take the wreath from her head and put it on yours!”

“But she still wears her wedding dress?”

“She will not wear it any longer, my Princess, now that I have found my one true love in you!”

In a swift motion Gaia pulled the dress over her head, folded it up, lay it down next to her on the ground, and now stood naked, still facing the altar, her arms at her side, her eyes cast down.

“She is pretty. If you prove to me that you do not desire *her* any more, her whom you had chosen over all the other girls of your Land, than I may take it as proof that you truly love none but me.”

“My Princess, how can I prove this to you?”

He knew how, of course.

Two guards led Gaia to that last column of the left row, and she stepped upon its base and stood with her back against the stone, and

they passed a chain under her armpits and mounted it to a hook at the column's back. It was tight, a simple way to secure her firmly, and to keep her from sagging, when her legs would soon fail to support her.

The Prince and his new bride had been following her. His new bride, his true bride, the future Princess of the Land.

Those who sat on the bench opposite to ours had to turn their heads, and the crowd outside the temple shuffled to get as good a view, unimpeded by the temple's columns, as they could.

"Those well-shaped breasts, that had been all yours, that you have touched, caressed and kissed — you still feel attracted to them, do you not?"

"No, my Princess, like any other woman's breasts they only had held the power to entice me when my eyes had not yet been blessed with having fallen upon you, and I will prove this to you as you deserve, my unrivaled love!" From the brazier he took the huge pair of pincers that had been prepared for him, their wooden grips making them safe for him to handle, while their serrated iron jaws, wide open, were red hot from the fire.

Only a high-pitched wailing sound escaped Gaia's clenched teeth, just audible over the collective sigh from the crowd, as the pincers bit into her left breast, close to her chest, crushed it, tore at it, ripped it out, and then did the same to the other one. There was little blood, the hot iron cauterizing the wounds.

"Neatly done," Abigail said. "I wonder on how many girls he has practiced." I was not sure whether she was serious about it, or whether she meant it as a joke, but it evoked an image in my mind of an endless row of girls, walking up to the man with the red hot pincers, silently baring their breasts to him, patiently waiting to have them ripped off, one by one, and silently moving on, while the next one approached,

and from somewhere a voice announced a number, a score, a mark, never lower than 50, and never higher than 80, and I knew that 100 would mean perfect, and 90 was the required minimum, but he never reached it, and so the row of silent girls could never stop, slowly stepping forward to receive their mutilations ...

With some effort I shook off that eerie vision, trying to concentrate on something else. I admired the way in which Abigail sketched, rapidly, completely trusting her hand, her eyes fixed on the scene she was taking in, never seeming to look at the paper of the sketchbook in her lap.

Meanwhile, the ritual proceeded.

“Those slender hands, those delicate fingers — you still long for their skillfull tender private touches and the pleasures they provided, do you not?”

Her breasts had been there for him to take, as her upper body was held tightly by that single chain under her armpits, but her arms were free to move, so, unless he would need to engage in some undignified scuffle, she had to cooperate. And she did — she held out her hands to him, as he took the newly heated pincers from the fire, and she held them steady as he nipped off her fingers, two by two, and then the thumbs, first from her left hand, then from her right one. He did not tear at them, he pressed the handles of the pincers with force, and the glowing irons cut through the thin bones of her fingers smoothly.

She looked away, turning her head and her eyes to her left, towards the huge expanse of the darkening sky that covered the town and the plain, and only when he was done did she raise her mutilated hands and looked at them closely, and then, in a ghastly gesture, she grabbed with those fingerless stumps at her chest, at the wounds where her breasts had been, a gesture with which she would have cupped those

breasts had she still had them, and had her hands still been intact. It was a daunting sight, and at a sign from the Prince one of the guards took her arms, almost gently, and she did not resist as he bound her wrists behind her back, removing her hands from her own sight and from ours, removing the temptation for her to use them in such a pitiful and untoward way. Forced by the bound hands between the column and her back her pelvis bulged out, as if in preparation of what was to come next.

I tried to read her expression, tried to perceive what she was thinking and feeling and hoping for now, but all which her face showed me was the physical pain that she suffered, and through which I could not see.

I looked away, at the Priestess who was standing silently at her place behind the altar, and then back, as the future Princess addressed the Prince once more:

“But the soft cave and crevices of her smoothly shaven sex, which you have savored above all others — you would not want to abandon this sweet source of your satisfaction, to which your body must still feel drawn, would you?”

“My Princess, now that an unforeseen fortunate fate has brought me to you, only with you and in you is where my body and my mind will ever seek and find their satisfaction, as I will prove to you beyond any doubt!”

He applied three bites of the red-hot pincers to tear up Gaia’s vulva, the first two ripping out her labia left and right, the third one, going for her clit, digging deep into the already gaping wound. Again she did not scream, but she wailed, thin and eerily. Her legs jerked, and then they collapsed, leaving her sagging from the chain that prevented her from falling.

Abigail, her face flushed, breathing through parted lips, was sketching ardently.

“What a pair!” she said, not interrupting her work, as she noticed that I looked at her.

It was up to the Princess how far she would take this grim ritual, how much more Gaia would have to suffer as proof of the Prince’s love for his proper and predestined bride. Gaia, my fair sister. From where had these words entered my mind?

The Princess was not yet content.

Of course, when would she ever again hold such power over another person, another woman, a rival? When would she ever again be able to demonstrate this power so freely and openly and publicly? She had to make the most of it, to assert her own position.

“Those candid bright blue eyes that surely have evoked your love for her when you first met their innocent clear gaze, those eyes that have looked at you in pleasure and with outspoken promises and pleas, surely you would never forswear them for the sake of a new bride’s peace of mind?”

The heavy pincers were a crude instrument for this operation, and the Prince wielded them clumsily, taking out not only Gaia’s eyes, but chunks of her cheeks as well. When he worked on her second eye her head started to shake convulsively, sending her long golden hair flying until it got entangled with the red-hot iron and caught fire, burning in a quick burst of flame.

“He doesn’t seem to have practiced *that*,” Abigail said, fascinated.

A gurgling and retching sound came from the girl who now hung limply from her chain, and I wondered what else the Princess might have in store for her, when the Princess turned and took the Prince’s hand, and at this moment horns and drums drowned out all other

sounds, the musicians emerging from the crowd at both sides of the temple, while the princely couple walked over to the altar until they stood next to each other where the Priestess had stood, who had now taken one step to the back to make room for them. Then the Priestess stepped forward again, parting the couple, with the Prince at her right side, and the Princess at her left. Then she put her arms upon their heads, and gently held them while the two bowed down and simultaneously kissed her breasts, the Priestess guiding their heads so that they did not get in each other's way, and then the music stopped, and the Prince and the Princess rose again, and the Priestess took his right hand and put it into the Princess's left, and then they all three put their heads together and kissed, and then the Priestess declared the Princess to be the Prince's wedded wife, and the fanfares sounded, and the fireworks went off, high into the now almost dark sky, though from inside the temple most of it was hidden from our view. And now the crowd cheered, and we who had been seated got up and applauded, and the newlywed couple climbed upon the altar, so that they could be seen by all, and stood there hand in hand, and bowed and waved and smiled.

The crowd dispersed quickly now, walking down the hill, back to the town, along the path that was lit by a long line of torch-bearers, the flames of their torches visible like distant fireflies where they were not hidden inside the forest. Soon, except for a group of guards and torch-bearers, only those who had been given seats inside the temple and the Princess's parents remained. And, of course, the Princess and the Prince themselves, kindly receiving our congratulations and well-wishes.

"You neglected to speak about her heart, my Princess," I said. Why did I say it? Did I really hope that I could make her ask the Prince to

rip the girl's still beating loving heart out of her chest, now that the ceremony was over, and thus end her suffering?

"What do I care about the harlot's heart?" She looked at the Prince who was standing a few feet away from us, in conversation with Abigail. "I know my man, it is not girls' *hearts* that he is after," she said, loud enough for him to hear, and he looked at her, and she smiled at him fondly.

A group of guards had meanwhile unchained Gaia from the column, dragged her out of the temple, and laid her on the ground. Despite her dreadful mutilations and her agony, or maybe because of them, her helpless naked body aroused desire in them, and they made use of her, hurting her further as it suited their pleasures. Even now she did not scream; until the end she was as strong as she had hoped she would be. Whether she still lived when they threw her down the precipice I do not know.

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The walk down through the wood illuminated by flickering torches and then through the brightly lit streets of the town filled with cheering and celebrating people, and our arrival at the palace, I remember only dimly. It had been a long and exhausting day for me, I had neither eaten nor drunk since our early and hasty breakfast, and I felt faint. I must have used some excuse to go to our room prematurely, because I remember being alone there, unable to sleep, sitting at a desk, looking through Abigail's sketchbook which she must have handed to me to take it with me.

Later, when first Sir Edmond and then Abigail were there too, before they went to bed and I lay down in a corner, I pointed to a

sketch that showed Gaia after her fourth mutilation, her scorched and hairless head, her torn and eyeless face.

“Abigail, please, should they do something of that kind to me, then do not make my statue like this,” I said.

“You will not be there to see it,” she replied coolly.

“Please, promise me not to do it,” I begged.

“I am not bound by any promises I might make to you,” she replied. She was right, of course. For a moment I had the foolish idea of asking Sir Edmond to intervene, for any promises to him would surely be valid, but of course I didn’t.

“Something else,” she said, “how could you *dare* to affront the Princess with such an insinuating remark? You embarrassed us all, and the Queen. You are the *Gift*, as you know, not a *judge*. Remember this from now on.”

She was right, of course, again. Still, in my dazed state of mind, I spoke up to her.

“I am deeply sorry for having embarrassed you,” I said. “But, you know, I am not only the Queen’s Gift to all the Queendom, I am also the Queendom’s Gift to the Queen. And as such it will be my duty to report to her what I have seen on the Journey, and for being able to do this properly I may have to look around, and also to ask questions, with all respect, of course.”

It was a feeble excuse for having tried to interfere, selfishly, on Gaia’s behalf, and I knew it. And I also knew that it was not for me to decide what the Gift’s duties might be, and much less what might be her rights.

“So, the whore has pretensions,” Abigail said.

“You must hate me, Artist.” I could hear how weary my voice was.

“Why would I hate you?” Abigail replied. “You are not important

enough to be hated, an artless stupid peasant girl from a remote backward village who enjoys a lot of undeserved attention to her worn out vagina, but who will be dead before the summer has ended. I do not hate you, I simply do not like you.”

I looked at Sir Edmond, but he seemed not to be listening, or at least not to be interested in our exchange; this was something we had to deal with ourselves.

“If this is your attitude to me,” I said, without thinking, “and I know that it is based on so much more experience with life and people than I have so that I cannot dispute it, so if this is true, how can you hope that the two statues you are going to make of me, and all the drawings and paintings, will turn out to be true and significant works of art, honoring the Queendom, and the Queen, by depicting my sacrifice? How can you stay true to your art, and still show my death as a dignified and meaningful act, if you do not think that I’m a person of even a little bit of dignity or meaning?”

I was surprised at my outburst, and I knew I had no right to speak to the Artist like that, and of course she knew it too, but to my surprise she still gave me an answer.

“It is the dignity of the Queendom and the Queen that will appear in my work, and it is the honoring of tradition that will enable me to create my art. This art will be what will remain. I’m just the tool, and you are just the dispensable piece of self-conceited flesh that will be displayed and torn up to die naked and in agony in front of the Queen and a crowd of laughing spectators.”

“This is not the whole truth,” Sir Edmond intervened, only now indicating that he had followed our exchange. I waited whether he’d say something more, but he didn’t.

“Maybe it isn’t,” Abigail said, “but it is close enough.”

Of course it was.

And it was for me to accept it.

It was simple and easy to accept, anyway.

While Sir Edmond and Abigail enjoyed each other in their bed, I lay down on the floor in my corner of the room, curled up, using one arm as a pillow, and the other one firmly clasped between my thighs. Some time during the night, waking up from a dream that was still with me vividly then but of which I have since remembered nothing, I began to masturbate, biting my lips as not to make a sound for I did not want to disturb the sleepers. My orgasm, when it came after what seemed a long time, was shallow and left me unsatisfied, as did the next one, and the one after it, and it was exhaustion, not fulfilment, what finally made me drift into sleep again.

In the morning, still feeling tired, I awoke before the others, and as there was nothing else for me to do I once more sat down at the desk and looked at Abigail's sketches. Why did the Prince look so *sad* in them? He had not been sad the day before, had he?

And then I saw it. Abigail's sketch made me see what I had not seen when it had been before my own eyes.

"Yes, he had loved her," Abigail said, whom I had not heard getting up, and who now stood behind me, looking over my shoulder. "Had you really not noticed?"

And then, to Abigail's great surprise, and my own too, I stood up and turned around to her and kissed her on the cheek, and said, "I am happy that it is you who will do my statues, and I know that your art will do me justice, the way you see me, which ever way this will be."

And Abigail, looking up and down my naked body thoughtfully, shrugged and said, "I will try to give my best."

CHAPTER 6: THE DANCE OF THE VIRGIN

I had heard some tales about the Lands of the South while I had grown up, living in the Land of Slain, and some more tales I had so far heard during the Journey — from Sir Edmond, from Abigail (though she had never been there herself), and from people whom we had encountered, people who bragged about their many travels, or people who recounted a single happy sojourn there from long ago. People talked during meals we had at inns, or at Princes' or Princesses' tables, they talked while I served them, while they were using my body, while they tried to give me pleasure or while they gave me pain, they talked to me or they talked to each other over my head, but always I tried to take in their words, tried to hear, to understand, and to remember.

In all those tales, exaggerated, inaccurate or contradictory as they were, the South had always been depicted as a place of splendor — its climate sunny and warm, knowing no winter, its meadows and fields lush and green, its hills rolling down softly from the mountains to the palm-tree lined beaches at the crystal blue sea, its cities wealthy and clean, and its people prosperous, generous, open-minded and at ease.

And, naively, I had assumed that the farther south we came, the closer the places and people would resemble these descriptions, but this was clearly not the case.

Though we already must have been closer to the southern coast than we were distant from my northern home, we now were riding across high planes with barren, rocky soils, where even in the height of summer we were often shivering from the cold winds. The people, hardworking, sober and stern, spoke little, and smiled even less.

We saw only few women, and even fewer of them desired my sexual services, and the men who used me did not seek erotic refinement or ask for any subtle skills, but without speaking grabbed my body with strong hands and pushed me into the positions they favored for quickly depositing their sperm into or upon me.

There was no wanton violence nor open malice in the people of this Land through which we now traveled eastward. We witnessed no fights, but also saw no lighthearted gaiety or drunken celebrations; their lives were austere and the laws and customs they obeyed were simple and solemn.

When they hurt me, which they often did, it was only because adverse conditions and hard labor had taught them to treat the soil, their tools and their workpieces roughly — and like the soil, the tools and the workpieces I did not complain but complied, as they expected me to, and thus I gave them what comfort and satisfaction for them was mine to give.

Sir Edmond, one time when he saw that I was in pain, said he feared I might get seriously hurt, but Abigail laughed and said, “Don’t worry, the whore can take it,” and I thanked Sir Edmond for his concern, and Abigail for acknowledging that there was no need for it.

We had been riding through this Land for almost a week, with a forbidding-looking mountain range that was its southern border to our right, when, close to that rocky barrier, we finally saw before us the walls and towers of a town, which Sir Edmond confirmed to be the Princetown — its fortifications, houses, churches and palace being built of the dull dark stone of the mountains that formed its background. In its uniform grayness, the town was almost invisible on the barren soil and under the dark cloud-covered sky that even now at noon shut out the light and the warmth of the sun.

“What a drab place,” Abigail said, and shuddered visibly.

“A venerable ancient town,” Sir Edmond replied, “and strategically situated. You cannot see it from here, but what seems to be one more short and narrow recess over there in that endless craggy wall of mountains is in fact the gateway to one of the few passages to the South, for hundreds of miles, that can be traveled with horses and even carts during the summer.”

“So it must be a rich town?” Abigail said.

“It must be,” Sir Edmond agreed, “though it keeps its wealth well hidden. But the rules of hospitality are observed by the Prince, and we will dine superbly and sleep in comfort, I know.”

As comfortable as sleeping on the floor can be, an unexpected recalcitrant thought crossed my mind unbidden and made me blush with shame, almost as if I had spoken it. Fortunately Abigail’s attention was focused upon the town, or the mountains behind it, and Sir Edmond gave no sign he might have noticed.

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When we reached the town, we heard the bells strike one. Our escort, seeing that a guard was waiting for us at the gate, neither dismounted nor entered the town, but after giving us a short farewell salutation turned around to ride back to their own Land. The guard led us to the palace, telling us that we were late, but not too late yet — the Prince had been expecting us, and was waiting for us.

“Hurry,” he said, when we had entered the outer court of the palace. We dismounted, and while our horses with our baggage were led away we were rushed through a door and up stairs and through corridors to a small room that seemed to be a cloakroom.

“There’s no time for you to seek out your quarters now,” the guard said. “Undress!”

I was surprised to hear this directed not only at me, but at Sir Edmond and Abigail, too.

“It is custom,” Sir Edmond said, “to eat nude here, and in near darkness, and in total silence.” Why he had not told us earlier, I do not know.

We undressed, and upon leaving the cloakroom Sir Edmond turned right, but the guard, who had stayed dressed, raised his hand to stop him.

“You will dine not in the usual dining room,” he said, “but in a room reserved for special occasions,” and he led us in another direction. As I was to learn soon, this special occasion was not our visit, as I had first thought, but another event that happened to take place on the same day.

The room into which we were led was strange, unlike any other I had seen in a palace, or anywhere else, so far. It had a high ceiling and was fairly large, some sixty feet long and twenty feet wide; a rectangle with semicircular extensions, like apses, at both ends. The floor was made of polished stone tiles, and the walls were of unpolished bare stones, of the dark stone that prevailed in this town. Floor and walls were not covered by carpets or curtains. The room had only one door and no windows. Except for the door, the only openings were two rows of small holes on both curved walls, near the floor and near the ceiling, which seemed to provide sufficient ventilation, as the air did not feel stale. All this took me a while to take in, as the room was only very sparsely illuminated by sixteen candles, mounted to candle holders distributed evenly along the walls, about eight feet from the ground.

Even sparser than the illumination was the furniture. There was

a circular wooden dinner table on one side of the room, not exactly concentric with the half circle of the apse but shifted one or two feet towards the center of the room, and around the table stood twelve chairs, of which five remained empty, as only one woman and two men were accompanying the Prince. Who they were I do not know, as we were never introduced — Sir Edmond, I assume, would have been told, but there was no need to tell me. The Prince himself, an elderly man, I recognized from a description Sir Edmond had given of him.

The only other piece of furniture, which I could see at the other end of the room after my eyes had adapted to the dim light, was a solid darkly gleaming cubical object, some three feet wide and high. Even from the distance and in the dark I could not fail to notice the strange fascination it held, but I could not discern what it was, and during the meal I sat with my back to it.

After we had sat down, the ten nearest of the twelve candles were extinguished, leaving only the faintest light, from the other end of the room, to fall upon the table. The few servants who had been in the room withdrew — then, after a few minutes of near absolute stillness, the door opened again, and the first course of the meal was served. The corridor, to which the door opened, lay in darkness too, and the servants, though otherwise clothed, walked with bare feet — no light, and no sounds, were to disturb us.

At some point during the meal I lost count as to how many courses there were, certainly more than a dozen, but what I can say without hesitation is that despite the strange staging they were all excellent. The food was brought in and set before us on black china plates. That which was not cold was lukewarm, not by negligence, but so that not being numbed by heat our palates could better savor the subtle flavors of the fresh vegetables, the luscious fruits, the spicy herbs, the tender

fish and meats and innards, and the delicate sauces. There was no silverware; we ate with our hands, which in the darkness had the benefit of letting us feel with our fingers the food we could hardly see, and also it prevented the silence to be disturbed by clattering tableware noises that would otherwise resound loudly in this bare-walled room.

What exactly it was that we got served we were not told, and could neither ask nor discuss among ourselves, and whether some of it, as Abigail later claimed, had been parts of human sexual organs, female and male, and the ice cream which was served for dessert made from human milk, I do not know. It may have been so, or Abigail may have been mistaken, or she may have made a jest. But what I found most remarkable during this meal was, to my surprise, that the darkness, the enforced silence and the uncertainty about the ingredients were far from being disagreeable, but to the contrary they let us savor the exquisite rare dishes without distraction and to their full extent.

It was a strangely sensual experience, and when I accidentally dropped a piece of food in the darkness and it landed on my thighs, my hand that retrieved it soon found its way back ... I think I may not have been the only one to occasionally touch herself, or himself, but if it was done it was done guardedly and in silence, as anything more would certainly not have been appropriate to the occasion. Anyway, the wet scented towels that we were handed after each course were welcome for cleaning our hands and faces, and whatever else may have needed to be cleaned.

I not only lost count of the number of courses, I also lost all sense of time. I have no idea how long this meal may have taken, all I know is that it was deeply delightful, and when it finally ended the end felt to come at exactly the right time, leaving us satiated and content, but not gluttoned or exhausted.

When the Prince rose, this was the sign that the meal had ended, and we all followed his suit — after the long hours of sitting, it was good to stand and stretch our bodies for a change. As we were all nude, I expected some sexual activities to follow, but in this I was mistaken. And this was not the only way in which this visit differed from the other ones: I realized that my own role here was different, that no special heed was paid to the Gift. Undoubtedly Sir Edmond had important talks with the Prince, but like Abigail I was simply received as the Envoy's escort, without either having favors bestowed upon me or demands made from me. After all the attention I had received on the Journey so far, often but not always pleasant, I did not mind this neglect, especially as it did not seem to follow from resentment and I was not given any reason to feel unwelcome — there was something else that held more interest for the Prince and his companions than the Gift, and we, Sir Edmond, Abigail and me, were honored with the invitation to attend.

“It is a rare and special spectacle that I will have the pleasure to allow you to witness,” the Prince said. “There have been years when it did not happen at all, and also this year it happens only for the second time.” Those who had come with the Prince obviously knew what that spectacle would be, and, I suppose, so did Sir Edmond, but I did not, and neither, I think, did Abigail.

Several servants entered the room, lit a few of the candles again, carried over the chairs from where we had been sitting to the other end of the room, and arranged them in a circle around the cubical object, in a distance of about five feet. Upon the Prince's indication we followed him there, and sat down again. From close up I could see now

that my estimate about that object's size, some three feet, had been accurate; I could also see that it was made of a very rare material — at first I could hardly believe it, but from the smoothness of its surface, from the sharpness of its edges, from its mysterious shining opacity and from the reflections of the candle flames, it looked like a solid block of dark glass. I also noticed on its top side five small circular holes, four close to the corners and one right at the center.

When we were seated, two tall servants, walking on tiptoes, extinguished now the candles at this end of the room, leaving only two of them burning at the other end — as before, with the dinner, we now sat in near total darkness.

“This is, and always has been, the Convent's sacred Altar of Consequence,” the Prince said to us, pleased by our noticeable interest — even in the dark he could see, as I could, that Abigail only with an effort repressed her impulse to get up and touch it. “Yes, it *is* glass,” he continued. “It is unique, and its value is unmeasured. But this was not the reason why my father's mother's father had it brought here from the Convent, to their dismay. The reason was, that by immutable tradition it is upon this stone that the Convent's fallen Virgins have to perform their ordeal. No one, who is not a member, can ever be allowed to enter the Convent, and this even applies to the Prince or Princess, and their courtiers. But,” and he smiled, “with the Altar now within the palace, the ordeal has to be performed before our eyes, and I can assure you, it will be very much worth seeing.”

Only we three visitors had to be assured, obviously, as the two men and the woman were too much in the grip of anticipation to even listen to the Prince's words.

“A few more minutes, then they will come,” the Prince said.

“They?” Sir Edmond asked, his deep calm voice betraying a hint of excitement only to someone who knew him as well as I did by now.

“The fallen Virgin, and a Virgin Sister who escorts her, to witness her ordeal, and to accompany it on the lute.”

“What is she guilty of?” Abigail asked.

“We will never know,” the Prince answered. “The Convent’s affairs are strictly their own matter. She may have killed another Virgin out of jealousy, she may have masturbated without permission, she may have fallen asleep during a midnight prayer, she may have failed to satisfy an eminent worshiper, or the Convent’s Eldest Virgin may have received a divine message about an annameable sin in her sleep. We will not be told, and maybe she has not been told either. It does not matter, anyway. She has fallen out of grace, and she has to suffer the consequences.”

“And *suffer* is the appropriate word,” the woman who was one of the other three diners said, without turning her head.

“Will she die?” Abigail wanted to know, not trying to hide the excitement in her voice — but why should she hide it? All the others were clearly excited too, by the prospect of the strange and savage spectacle that would soon unfold before our eyes.

“She will not die on the Altar,” the Prince said, and in the dim light I did not see, but only imagined, Abigail’s slight disappointment.

“If she performs well, and is lucky, she will die soon after. If not, she will live until the winter. She may silently beg for water and food, and from some she will get them, out of compassion or out of cruelty to prolongue her sufferings, but she may not wear clothes, and she may not enter a house or any kind of shelter, so the winter’s cold will end her misery.”

“You said she may beg silently?” I asked.

“She is not allowed to speak, ever again,” the Prince said.

“One more question, if I may,” I asked the Prince, “how do we correctly address her?”

“It is good that you ask,” he answered, and made sure we all three paid attention to his words. “Under no circumstances may you address her, or her companion, at all. This is a ceremony of the Convent, there can be no contact with the outer world. Physically, they *have* to perform it here, because the Altar has been brought here, but spiritually it happens within the Convent, they do not leave it. We must not violate this fundamental truth. Only after the ceremony has ended, the fallen Virgin has excluded herself from the Convent and thus appears in the outer world, though even then she will remain subject to the Convent’s rules.

“We can,” he continued after a while, “act freely in any other regard, as they, not being present in spirit, are not affected by anything we do or say — as long as what we do is not directed at them, but is done as if we were secretly watching them from the distance of our own world, through an invisible spy-hole of which they will never be aware.

“It is custom, though,” he further added, “to keep seated and to talk sparsely during the fallen Virgin’s ordeal.”

“What will her ordeal be?”

“Just wait and see,” the Prince replied.

~

There were some moments of silence, and then the door opened, and two women entered. One was wearing a hooded cape made out of a coarse gray fabric, that covered her entire body from her head to her feet. In one hand she was carrying a string instrument, a lute as the Prince had said, and without paying any attention either to the other

people in the room nor to her companion, she sat down on an isolated stool near the wall, some twenty feet away from us, and began to play, softly, a monotonous but striking melody with a slow and fascinating rhythm.

The other woman, the fallen Virgin, was naked; she was carrying a lit candle in her right hand, and four unlit candles in her left; the candles were plain, white, thin, and about one foot long. The Virgin was almost as thin as her candles, on her torso, arms and legs the bones were showing beneath her skin. Her head was shaven, her eyes were round and dark.

She moved slowly, careful not to extinguish the flame which she kept close to her chest to protect it from a possible draught. Her eyes were fixed at the candle, until she had inserted its lower end into the hole at the Altar's center; next she put the four unlit candles into the holes at the corners. This done, she climbed upon the Altar. Her movements were attuned to the soft music that came from the hooded Virgin's instrument.

"Each of those candles will burn for a quarter of an hour," the Prince now explained to me. "Before the one in the middle has burned down, she has to take it out, light one of the other ones, and put the newly lit candle into the center."

"But what is her ordeal?"

"Have you not understood?" the Prince asked. "The dance of the candles — she has to burn herself. By moving her body over the candle flame, she has to burn as much of her skin as she can, hoping the burns will be severe and extensive enough to kill her quickly. And she has to do it gracefully, that's why it is called a dance."

"What happens if the flame goes out?" I asked.

"She would be shamefully disgraced, and she would have to be sent

back to the Convent. What fate would await her there we do not know, but I have seen it happen once, and I have never seen such misery and despair on a person's face as on that poor girl's."

I looked at the naked Virgin, who was kneeling behind the candle, its flame not touching her pale skin yet. Slowly, she changed her position — her lower legs were resting on the surface of the Altar, her buttocks touched her heels. Her knees were spread, and the candle was between them; her upper body was slightly bent forward, her palms rested upon her calves. As the only other candles lit were at the far end of the room, the one between her legs, shining on her thighs, crotch, belly, breasts, arms and face, was the major source of light. She was almost facing me, so that I could see her fully.

Her breasts were even smaller than mine, her nipples were small and dark. Watching her body and her face closer, I noticed that there was not a single hair upon her body, not even eyebrows or lashes. Her eyes were wide open, and the flame of the candle made her dark pupils sparkle, until they resembled the Altar's glass. She seemed to look into a far distance, but she did not give the impression of being in a trance. A deep sadness showed in her emaciated face.

For a while her lips moved, as in a silent prayer, but no sound came from them.

Then she raised her left hand, and slowly placed its palm over the flame, and the first whiff of burned skin started to scent the air. She spread out the fingers, and, very slowly again, one by one drew them lengthwise through the flame; then she turned the hand around, and repeated the procedure with its back.

Her face fully showed the agonizing pain she felt, not mitigated by trance nor any anesthetic potions she might have taken. She did not emit a sound, though, I only heard the sharp intakes of breath by the

other witnesses as her ordeal started, and my own. Touched and aroused by her fragile tormented beauty, I made no effort to keep my hands from touching myself.

Behind the pain that would soon get so much worse, I still noticed this deep sadness in her features.

“Why is she looking so sad?” I asked. Her left hand was now resting upon her calf again, and she had started to expose her right hand to the flame. “She is doing well, isn’t she? — is she not looking forward to her redemption?”

The Prince shook his head. “There can be no redemption,” he said. “She has fallen from grace. Nothing she does, none of her sufferings, can do her any good. During her ordeal, she is still a fallen Virgin. Afterwards, she will not be even that. There is no hope for her.”

She was now standing up, holding first the sole, then the toes of her left foot into the flame. Again, as with her hands, she repeated this procedure with the other foot. When she knelt down again, to submit her lower arms to the flame, she had turned so that she now presented her front to Sir Edmond and Abigail. The light of the candle now falling upon their faces, I could see the rapture in Abigail’s eyes, and the fascinated absorption in Sir Edmond’s.

Very methodically, slowly and in tune to the ongoing background music from her companion’s lute, the Virgin continued her dance, offering arms and legs to the flame, belly and back and shoulders and armpits and buttocks and crotch and breasts. When her left nipple burned, the pain brought silent tears to her eyes, and she startled when one, dropping down from her chin, fell into the flame, threatening to extinguish it. There were more tears later, but she took care where they fell. When it was time to burn her vulva, she spread the lips apart with her hands, to let the flame touch the inner parts.

She often turned, so I often saw her face again, and always the sadness was there. I could not help thinking how different my own ordeal would be — as much pain as she now suffered was waiting for me, certainly, but also a joyful sense of accomplishment, of fulfillment! I knew I could never inflict such pain upon myself, and I could never suffer it in silence, but I would not have to. Not a gloomy and dire punishment for an unknown sin would be my fate, but a public, bright and cheerful celebration of the Queen's glory and the Queendom's future wealth and peace!

Despite these thoughts, the spectacle we were witnessing held me captivated, and like all the others I followed the girl's every movement, watched the ongoing flickering play of scorching flame upon fair skin, contemplating the contrast between the near perfect execution of the dance, and the hopelessness of the girl who was doomed to perform it and die from it.

Her timing was as impeccable as her dance had been. When the fifth and last candle was lit, making me aware that already a full hour had passed, not much more than her head and her face had been spared, and she now started to work upon them. I could not fail to admire her for still having the strength to perform those acrobatic contortions, holding the top and then the back of her skull into the flame, after the equally difficult burning of her shoulders and back, all the while balancing on the small surface of the Altar, not allowed to touch the floor with her feet or hands for even a single moment of support.

Her face was last. Her tongue, her lips, her nose, her cheeks, her ears ... Finally, her eyes. The left one, after burning the eyelid, she held into the flame sideways. The right one she lowered upon the candle from above, wide open, holding it steadily into the flame, unblinking,

until it burst. The flame died with a ghastly sizzle. The music stopped. The girl collapsed, fell off the Altar, and lay motionless upon the floor, a low whining wail coming from somewhere deep inside her. The dance was over.

I saw that the Virgin who had played the lute got up and left the room, without a glance back. Two servants entered to light the candles on the walls — for the first time since before the meal had begun, the room was now fully, if still dimly, lit.

The two men and the woman, who had been with the Prince, got up; the men picked up the girl from the floor, grabbed her by her arms and legs, carried her across the room and laid her upon the table on which we had dined; the woman followed them. What they did I could not see, but the fallen Virgin, who had forced herself into silence for so long, burst out into uncontrollable screams now — in the large oval room with the bare walls the sounds of her agony resounded with a ringing echo. We still heard her screams after we had left the room and closed the door behind us.

“She has done well,” the Prince said as he saw concern in my face, “do not worry for her. They are not allowed to kill her to end her suffering, but she will die soon.”

And then, rather to my surprise, he did not ask for my services, but signaled to one of the servants to lead us away — us, being me and, to her disappointment, Abigail, who clearly would have preferred to remain and have a chance to hear, or maybe even see, the Virgin dying. Only Sir Edmond stayed with the Prince, and I asked myself, knowing that of course I would never receive an answer, whether this was for further diplomatic talk, or whether the Prince had sexual intentions regarding Sir Edmond from which he, for personal or political reasons, had chosen not to withdraw.

Abigail and I were led along a corridor that led to a stretch of open ambulatories — I have to admit that I was quite grateful for the fresh air to fill my lungs with. Then another corridor, and finally we were led into a large and quite luxuriously though sparsely furnished chamber, the guest room which had been prepared for us. Luxuriously furnished, since the furniture was made out of finest wood with polished brass fittings, and the carpets on the floor and on the walls and the blankets that covered the bed were of precious and rare fabrics and design; sparsely furnished, though, since besides the large bed there were only a few shelves, a wardrobe, and a sideboard; chairs or a table there were not, but, of course, we would not need them.

Here, we were told, we were supposed to wait until the evening, when there would be another meal, but only an informal one. I felt the impulse to ask whether I would then be allowed to give myself to the Prince, or the court, or members of the population, as it would be proper for the Gift, but this was for the Prince to decide and not for me to be curious about, so naturally I stayed silent.

The room had a single window, which only opened onto a small courtyard, but it provided sufficient illumination. Looking around, we saw that our bags were standing in a corner of the room, and that the clothes we had taken off before dinner had been carefully placed upon the wardrobe. There were several bowls with fruits upon the sideboard, and plates with cakes, and, next to three artfully engraved pewter cups, a colorfully ornamented maiolica jug filled with red wine. A small door in the wall opposite the bed led into a recess that was fitted as a toilet, thus completing the taking care of our basic needs.

It was still not very late in the afternoon, and we had eaten plenty

during the meal, so we largely ignored the cakes, took only a few pieces of fruit, but filled the cups and drank the wine, and refilled them, and drank again.

I say “we,” for indeed Abigail was in a rare friendly mood towards me, and when I sat down upon the floor, which was comfortable enough as it was covered wall-to-wall by a thick carpet, she invited me up to sit next to her upon the bed. Abigail had found a tray upon which she had placed one of the fruit bowls, our cups and the jug, and this tray now rested on the bed between us.

There was nothing we really wanted to talk about, so we just drank the wine, each of us lost in her own thoughts, and it was not long until we found that the jug had become empty. Abigail had noticed a rope on her side of the bed that came out of a small hole in the wall, and she pulled it, with such force that I almost feared she might tear it off. It held, though, and while we did not hear a bell or any other sound, soon the door opened and a handsome young servant entered, dressed in simple gray trousers and a matching gray coat. Upon seeing two naked women lying on the bed, who made no attempts whatever to conceal their nakedness, he charmingly blushed and stuttered as he asked us what kinds of services we requested.

Abigail, though I could see that she also had some other kinds of services on her mind, merely asked for more wine, and the boy left rapidly, to return with a newly filled jug. The instant he had put the jar on the sideboard he left so quickly that Abigail missed the opportunity to either ask him to stay, or to lay her hands upon him, and on seeing her baffled expression I had to laugh — she, in an exceptionally good mood, joined my laughter, and we returned to the wine, and soon found ourselves with an empty jug again.

The wine must have been stronger than we had thought it was, and

we both were beyond the point where reason would have told us to stop drinking, or to drink water instead. Abigail again pulled the rope, the boy again appeared, and again was told to bring another jug. Abigail got up from the bed and, with only a slight difficulty brought on by intoxication, walked over to the corner behind the door — obviously she intended, upon the boy's return, this time to prevent him from leaving as fast as he had done before. I giggled.

And then, for some reason, Abigail looked into her bag, which together with our other luggage had been deposited in this corner, and suddenly let out an angry scream.

The boy returned a few moments later, to see only one naked girl on the bed, and to find the other one standing close behind him. He seemed frightened, and I giggled at the sight of the dazed look upon his face, not yet knowing that indeed there were worse things for him to fear than to be wantonly used as a sex toy by two shamelessly drunken girls.

“Put down that jar,” Abigail said, with perceptible care not to blur the words, but with an unmistakably menacing tone in her voice, and the boy complied hastily.

“You are the one assigned to be our servant,” she said, blocking the door. Abigail, standing firmly on slightly parted legs, her strong sculptress's arms propped on her hips, her full breasts thrust forward, struck quite a formidable figure.

“Yes, Lady,” he replied, retreating one step.

“And you have been the one to bring our luggage here,” she went on.

“Yes, Lady,” he said again.

“You are dead,” Abigail said.

All color drained from his face. “I am s — sos — sorry,” he stut-tered. “I did — didn’t think I — you — oh forgive —”

“Oh yes, you are dead,” Abigail said again, and her face lit up with excitement. “Stealing from an appointee who travels under the protection of the Queen, and then *assaulting* —”

“I did — didn’t — *not* —” the boy was as confused now as he was frightened. “I didn’t ass —”

Abigail, formidable and drunk, was so fast that I could hardly follow her movements. I heard the cracking sound with which the boy’s right arm broke, then there was a loud thump as his body hit the floor, and then Abigail was upon him. Before he could scream, Abigail’s palm pressed against his mouth, and two fingers pointed at his eyes. “Silent, now!” she hissed, and he tried to nod his acquiescence.

“Stand up,” she commanded, still hissing, “and undress!”

“Lady, forgive me, but I must not —”

Abigail was not one to forgive. A sudden urge to have another sip of wine made me turn towards the jug, from which I drank without bothering to fill one of the cups. Some of the red liquid trickled down my chin, onto my breasts, down my belly, and ended up on my thighs. I wiped it off with my hands and licked my fingers clean.

When I looked up again I saw that the boy was standing once more, naked now, and his gray trousers and coat were lying on the floor.

“Theft, assault, and gross sexual indecency,” Abigail said. “Now, *how* will you die?”

All color had left the poor boy’s face, and his voice was so croaky that I hardly understood him when he said, “I will be impaled.”

“Oh, that is *wonderful!*” Abigail said. “Now, give me some pleasure.”

The boy may have wished to give Abigail what she wanted, but from pain, shame and fear his penis hung down shriveled and limp.

“Try!” Abigail shouted, and he made a few strokes with his good arm, but with no visible results.

“Useless,” Abigail said, and, looking at me, “maybe *you* can do something?” and she pushed the boy onto the bed.

He lay on his back and did not move as I worked upon him with fingers and mouth, and after a few minutes I felt that I was achieving some success. I moved to the side and got off the bed, and Abigail jumped onto it, straddled the boy’s feeble erection, and began to move up and down energetically, joyfully humming what sounded like “*im-pale, im-pale,*” when suddenly the boy let out a loud cry, and the movement stopped. Abigail’s face turned red with fury; she got off him, and, with a power and swiftness that surprised even me, threw him out of the bed. Crashing to the floor on his broken arm, he cried out again. In one motion, Abigail jumped after him and forcefully kicked him in his testicles — his cries turned into sounds of retching.

“Worthless scum,” Abigail spat out. “Go over to the corner, and stand there with your back to me, so that I can see the ass where the stake will go in!” Her face was a mask of disgust and frustration.

“You shouldn’t have knelt on his broken arm,” I said.

I heard her draw in her breath, and expecting her reproach I started to utter words of apology, when she burst out with roaring laughter. After a moment I joined in, and we laughed until we needed to fight for air, and after having won that fight we started to laugh again until it hurt, and then laughed until we forgot about the pain, and then laughed until our laughter was exhausted. Oh, we were seriously drunk indeed!

“Gift,” Abigail said, “give me what I need!” and I said “Artist, it

is a great honor to me,” and I got into the bed with her, and she took my hand and pressed it between her legs, and then we made love, and I used all the skills I had to give her the pleasures she deserved and desired, and finally she fell asleep with her head resting on my shoulder, as if we were lovers.

~

I do not know how much time had passed until Sir Edmond came into our room, but it was already dark. He carried a lamp that he put on the sideboard, and I signaled him to be silent, for not to wake Abigail. Carefully, I extricated my arm from under her head, and moved out of the bed.

“What is this?” Sir Edmond asked in a low voice, pointing at the boy who still stood facing the wall, naked, with his back to us.

“He has stolen from the Artist,” I said, “and then he has attacked her. He had not realized how strong she is.”

It pained me to say those words, but I had to say them, I could not let Abigail get into trouble. Had I told Sir Edmond the full truth, it would then have been him who would have had to come up with a similar lie, and I could not let him suffer this burden; I had to bear it myself.

“He will be impaled for what he did,” I added. “Abigail will want to watch, I think.”

Sir Edmond nodded.

“You will be at the Convent,” he said.

“At the Virgin’s Convent?” I asked.

“No, there is a Friars’ Convent, too,” Sir Edmond said. “They begin their day long before dawn. You will be called for.”

“Thank you,” I said. I had already feared that in this Princetown

I would not be allowed to give pleasure to any of its people, to do my duty as the Gift, to honor the Queen.

“You will stay there until the early afternoon, when we leave. We will pick you up there on the way out. Now get some sleep.”

“Thank you,” I said again. The carpets that covered the floor left no space between them, so I rolled one of them up, and lay down upon the boards. After I had closed my eyes, I heard Sir Edmond leave the room with the ill-fated boy, but I already slept before he returned.

When I was woken up by a servant girl before dawn, I felt sick and my head hurt, but the walk through the silent town, dark but for the light of the crescent moon, made me feel better, even though I had been given only a thin coat to wear, and the cold night air and the cold stones under my bare feet made me shiver. After some twenty minutes we reached a town gate and were let through by two sleepy guards; after that, our path led across barren land for another quarter of an hour.

The Convent was a huge dark square stone building, about forty feet high. At the side from where we approached it, there were neither windows nor doors in its strong wall.

“The Friar’s convent?” I asked the girl, whispering.

“The Convent,” she replied. “There only is one.”

I did not see any windows in the other walls either, as we walked around it until we came to a small door in the wall facing away from the town.

The door was closed, and the girl told me just to stay here and wait; then she took off the coat from my shoulders, and left me standing naked outside the Convent’s walls, while she hurried back to the palace.

I looked up at the clear sky, and thought of Abigail, and Sir

Edmond, and the fallen Virgin who by now would already have died, and the young thief who would probably die during the day.

I never asked Abigail what it was that he had stolen, nor whether she had retrieved it, and she never talked about it. She did tell me, though, as we rode away from the town the next day, that for the assault upon her he had indeed been impaled that morning. “It was *great*,” she said. “When you thought he couldn’t scream any louder, they proved that he could, by slowly crushing his testicles, and then by skinning him even more slowly, while he wiggled at that stake that went right through him! Oh my god, how exciting this was, and it lasted for *hours*!”

I am not sure if any of this was true, though; she may have only said it to annoy me. Had the Journey continued to go as smoothly as it had done so far, I might have asked Sir Edmond about the boy’s fate, but it did not.

But right now I was standing naked and shivering in the cold night before a locked door, waiting for it to open, not knowing what would await me within those windowless walls.

But whatever it would be, it would be good, and I knew that I was lucky beyond imagination, for I was the Gift, and all I had to do was to *give* myself, and everything would be as it should.

CHAPTER 7: THE CAVE

When we rode on in the morning, we did not take the road to the South, but continued eastward, the mountain chain still looming to our right. The ground was rising, and while the land soon became less barren than it had been before, it was as forbidding in its own way — no meadows, fields or orchards, but only bushes and shrubs, and almost no signs of human population as far as the eye could see. And then, after the sun had reached the highest point in its circle across the sky, we entered woodland, a forest of densely growing thin and stringy trees, with a compact mass of thorny underwood sprawling between them. This forest, which seemed devoid of any glades, did not let the eye penetrate further than a few dozen yards, except back and forth along the path, and the mountains disappeared completely from our view.

The path, which was wide enough for horse-carts to travel, but barely seemed wide enough for two of them to pass each other without difficulty, was well-kept, though we encountered very little traffic. It had to be well-kept, I thought, for else the thorny brushwood would overgrow it quickly, and render it impassible.

It was almost dark when we finally found a small clearing, obviously made for this purpose, where we camped and rested for the night. The next day, as we rode on, the path climbed higher, at times quite steeply, and its surface was less smooth now, posing no problems to our horses, but certainly making it harder for carts.

We traveled along a steep slope now, the ground precipitously rising to our right and falling to our left. In the formerly unbroken walls of

trees and thicket on both sides of the path there now occasionally appeared gaps, where rocks, debris and fallen trees, flushed down the mountain at snowmelt or by heavy thunderstorms, had cut deep swaths into the vegetation.

And it was one of those swaths that brought our ride to a halt.

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As usual, we had an escort of four warriors, provided by the Prince whose guests we had been. Two were riding behind us, both of them men, and two were riding in front, a man, who was their commander, and a woman. They suddenly stopped, and looked down to their left — when we caught up, we saw that some hundred feet below us, at the bottom of a swath, lay the upturned wreckage of a horse cart. It was clear that it had fallen down from where we were standing, and had crashed against the huge boulder that, not too long ago, had tumbled down from high above us, mowing down trees and thicket until its energy had been consumed. There was no trace of the horse, but a few yards away from the remains of the cart lay the body of a man — the way his neck was bent left no question that he was dead. Judging from his plain garments, he had been a farmer, or a small trader.

The naked upper body of a heavy and large-breasted woman lying on her back protruded from under the wreck, her hips and her legs caught under its weight, one of her arms twisted in a weird angle. Her head was bald. “His servant,” the female soldier said, stating the obvious.

After a moment of silence, when we thought about whether or not to investigate this scene, the male soldier suddenly said, “She’s alive!”

and indeed we now saw that she was moving her unbroken arm — whether unconsciously, or to give us a signal, I cannot say.

In one fast movement, not waiting for orders, both dismounted and started to run down the steep slope, arriving at the cart and the woman shortly after our two rear guards caught up with us.

They yelled something from below which I did not understand, and the the two rear guards dismounted and climbed down after them. Sir Edmond frowned, but hesitated to intervene.

For a moment I had expected, or hoped, that our escorts were going to help the woman, but, of course, what could they, or we, really have done to help her? Anyway, helping was not what they had on their minds.

While the two rear guards were still on their way down, the two vanguards had already grabbed the woman by her shoulders and dragged her out from under the wreckage. She was fully awake now and gave a loud scream of pain, and when her legs came free we saw that not only had they been smashed from the fall, but also that the upturned cart's ragged side wall had cut deeply into her thighs, and dragging her out had ripped large chunks from her flesh.

The male vanguard had taken off his pants with amazing speed and started to rape the screaming woman, either indifferent to her bleeding and pain or aroused by it, while his female companion knelt down on the ground beside her, in a strange gesture holding the hand of her unbroken arm as if to comfort her, but probably rather to restrain her.

"We could rest here," Abigail said, "this place is as good as any that we are likely to encounter." Indeed we had not rested for several hours, and to Abigail it seemed a good opportunity to let the spectacle below unfold unhurriedly and to watch it in leisure; I guess she thought of climbing down herself, to see it all from close up, to study the emotions

showing in the actors' faces, and the details of the woman's broken, bleeding and abused body.

Again Sir Edmond did not reply, and Abigail started to dismount, when he suddenly said, "Wait!" and grabbed her arm to stay her. Surprised, she settled back into her saddle, and Sir Edmond let his hand rest upon hers in a gesture that seemed to me less restraining than intimate, and I turned my head away in sudden shameful pain.

For this reason, I did not see what Sir Edmond must have seen, which made him shout "*Get back up!*" sharply and loud enough to make himself heard down below above the woman's continuing screams. "*Now!*" he shouted, even louder. Was our escort actually under Sir Edmond's command? I wondered incongruously — I didn't know, and had never thought about it before.

There were strange new sounds now, and I looked down again. The soldier who had been raping the woman lay on top of her, immobile, several arrows protruding from his back. The woman's screams had turned into gurgling sounds; some of the arrows, penetrating their first victim and pinning the two bodies together, must have entered her lungs.

The female soldier was jumping up when an arrow hit her through the neck, she fell upon the other two bodies where she lay twitching in an animated triptych of death and blood.

An instant later the two remaining soldiers fell, who had now drawn their useless swords but had left their bows with their horses and were completely defenseless against the arrows that the invisible attackers shot at them from both sides out of the cover of the thick green walls that had turned into an inescapable death trap.

Before they were dead, Sir Edmond had already yelled, "Off, *fast!*" and turned around and set the spurs to his horse, and so did Abigail

and I, and, lashed on by the danger, we raced off as fast as we could — unfortunately, though, in different directions.

I think it was still a consequence of my having turned away from seeing Sir Edmond's hand on Abigail's — I was facing in the direction we had been riding, towards our goal, and this was the direction in which I took my flight, while Sir Edmond had chosen to turn back, and Abigail, of course, had followed him. Our separation was only my own fault, in sudden panic I had not paid attention to Sir Edmond as I should have done.

I did not even realize it, at first. When I heard hoofbeat behind me, I thought Sir Edmond and Abigail were following me, and I was going to slow down to let them catch up, but then I turned my head and saw two fierce looking men not more than a few dozen paces behind me, and I saw that they were riding two of our escort's horses — two more riders were following in some distance. I urged my horse on, and managed to gain some lead because I was so much lighter than they were, but I knew that I had no chance of winning this chase, and so I finally stopped. I had just time to dismount and kneel down in a gesture of surrender, before my four pursuers caught up.

"You have given us quite a chase," one of them said.

"I am sorry, good sir," I replied.

They laughed.

"I think we have earned a reward," another one said, and they laughed again.

"Yes, good sir," I said, and as there was no doubt about what kind of reward they meant, I undressed. I folded my clothes carefully and hung them over a branch, trying not to provoke them with improper deliberation, and soon stood before them naked.

They watched me with relaxed anticipation, ignoring my odd deal-

ings with my clothes — what did I think? That I'd ever wear them again? They looked calmly forward to their pleasure, they knew it was coming, there was no hurry for them. They stood in a square, ten feet apart from each other — the road was level here, and wide enough to provide the space they needed for the game they were going to play.

In my mind, I gave them names — the Bearded one, the Tall one, the Ugly one, and the Lame one — I had the impression that the latter one was slightly limping.

“Come,” the Tall one said, and I walked towards him — when I was close enough to him, he stopped me by holding his hands against my breasts. He teased my nipples until they were erect, then he pinched them forcefully, smiling at my efforts not to succumb to the pain; when he finally dug in his thumb nails, I could not suppress an agonized moan, and he let go laughing.

“So you're not immune to pain after all,” he said.

“No, sir, I am not,” I answered.

“That's good to hear,” he said, and then he put his hands behind my back and held me, but with outstretched arms, still keeping some distance between us. “Now spread your legs,” he said. I knew what was coming, as I obeyed. I tried to brace myself while he let me wait, but then his knee crashed into my crotch with such a sudden force that the impact and the pain brought tears to my eyes and made me lose control of my bladder. I heard them roar with laughter, while, to my deep shame, I noticed that I had wet the Tall one's pants — he laughed as loud as the others, but he also slapped my face, hard, in punishment.

They then played the game of pushing me from one to the other, beating me severely all the time — through some miracle, while my whole body hurt and I got bruised all over, I suffered no open wounds

and no broken bones, only grazed knees, elbows and palms from frequent falls, and a little bleeding from my lips and nose. When they had tired of this game they threw me to the ground and used me, one after the other, while the other three were holding down my arms and legs, even though I knew better than to resist.

It was bad. This time, I was not the Gift, I was not giving, they were *taking* from me. There are those who are sexually aroused by being made to feel pain, or by being overwhelmed, but I have never been one of them. The initial kick into my crotch had not remained the only one, my vulva was in severe pain, my vagina was dry, they drove their penises in with agonizing force, they supported their weights upon my aching chest and my beaten breasts, deliberately pressing and squeezing them, while sharp pebbles dug into my back ... I cried a lot. When they put their penises into my mouth I did my best with tongue, lips and teeth to please them and make them spill their sperm there, hoping to keep them from my sore sex, but only with the Lame one, who was last, did I succeed — and he, then, rammed his fist into my vagina in anger so fiercely that I yelled out in agony, to their renewed laughter.

When they were done, I lay there exhausted, and they stood around me and pissed on my face. I closed my eyes, but I knew what they wanted, and opened my mouth for them. Maybe this submission to their unspoken wish placated them, maybe it saved my life. I do not know — I had expected them to kill me then, but they did not.

Lying on the ground, slowly recovering a bare minimum of strength, I still waited for death as much as I hoped for being just left behind. Maybe I made a mistake then by talking, or, just as possible, maybe this was what decided them to let me live.

“Good sirs,” I asked them, slowly and painfully sitting up, “can you please tell me about the fate of my companions?”

They laughed, but the Bearded one had the kindness to answer me. “What do we care about them?” he said. “We only cared about the horses.”

“And the saddle bags,” the Lamé one added.

So they had not ambushed us for who we were, I understood. They were simply a band of horse-thieves, and I had hopes that Sir Edmond and Abigail might have escaped them. But what would they do with me now?

“She’s much too skinny,” the Tall one said, “but she’s cute, with that ‘good sir’ talk, the Count may have fun with her.”

“Yes,” the Ugly one said, “he, or his wife.”

“The Count is married?” I said — I do not know what made me ask this undue question, but they did not seem to be offended.

“Just a slut like you whom we’ve picked up a while ago,” the Ugly one said, “to replace the one he had before.”

“She surely needed replacing,” the Lamé one said, and they all laughed again.

“Well, this one won’t replace the one he has now, but let’s still take her to the cave,” the Tall one said. They didn’t let me ride, but they blindfolded me with a piece of dirty cloth one of them had in his pocket, and then they tied me to one of the horses, making me lie on its back, my head resting on its neck, my arms and legs spread out and bound under its body. It was a position that wasn’t too uncomfortable at first, but after several hours of riding my stretched legs and arms and my whole body cramped and hurt badly, and the pain increased with each passing minute; with little success I tried to distract myself by

thinking about what a view my open legs must provide to those riding behind me.

This was not the only thing I thought about, of course, while riding naked, sightless, spread-eagled and in incessant pain. The fact that they had blindfolded me gave me some hope — that they did not want me to know where their cave was, I reasoned, meant that they were not determined to kill me at our arrival.

I had not seen them pick up my clothes, and indeed I never got them back. They just left them hanging over that branch where I had put them; they were strange clothes that had no value to them and they saw no need for me to be clothed at all. It made me sad, not the loss of the clothes, but that with them I had lost the coin with Sir Edmond's image on it — bound and naked on my way to an unknown destination, not knowing whether I would ever see Sir Edmond and Abigail again, let alone whether we could still reach the goal and fulfil the purpose of the Journey, with all my pain and worries, it was the loss of that coin that made me start to cry, silently.

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We rode along the road for a while, but soon we left it, and followed a steep and narrow path through the wood — though I could not see, I felt this by the slow and cautious way the horse moved, and by the sounds of the trees and the birds and the hooves on the ground, and my sense of balance told me that after first going down we then mostly went up. I had no sense of time, though, and the faint traces of light that crept through the seams of my blindfold were not enough to give me an indication of the sun's altitude — once I thought that dusk had already come, but in fact we must have been in a dark ravine, or some clouds must have hidden the sun, for it soon got brighter again. Once

the men rested, near a purling brook, and I heard them eat and drink. They did not offer me food, but one of them poured water over my face, and I could take a few sips, for which I was grateful; they did not talk to me, and they did not hurt me either.

It was not very long after this rest, or maybe it was and I had meanwhile fallen asleep, that we reached our goal, after a final stage of slow and steep ascent. I knew we had arrived, for not only did we stop, but there were voices of other men, welcoming the arrivals, exchanging jokes and friendly banters, and I heard questions about who that naked captive on the horse was, and what she was meant to be good for, and this was followed by more laughter, and now I could also discern a female voice among them.

Despite some talk and jests about me, they neither touched nor untied me — for this, it turned out, they waited for the Count, who was out, but expected to return soon; after a while, though, one of the men, out of kindness, took away my blindfold. I had to close my eyes to protect them from the sudden brightness — the evening sun, I realized, was shining straight into my face, and when I averted my eyes I soon got my sight back. Being tied tightly belly-up to a horse's back limited my field of view, but by turning my head first to one side and then to the other, I got a first look at the place I had been brought to.

We were standing on a small rocky terrace in the middle of a steep slope; above us and to our sides was dense woodland with that impenetrable thornbush undergrowth that I had seen before, and below us there were patches of trees and shrubs, but mostly there was an unscalable precipice of bare rock. Several hundred feet below us, with only the steep crumbling path leading down which we had come up, was the bottom of a narrow valley. A small river flowed through it, and on the opposite side a dark and wooded slope rose up to at least

a thousand feet above us. In the distance, the valley opened to the West, from where the sun's rays were reaching us now. The terrace, though of natural origin, had been leveled and enlarged, and fitted with a stone balustrade that made it look like a small fortress. I could not see its full extent, as I could not look behind me where my head rested on the horse's neck, but I saw that the terrace was about thirty feet wide, from the mountain's face to my left to the precipice to my right, and I guessed it to be about a hundred feet long, which I later found to be true.

When I turned my head to my left, I saw that we were standing before the mouth of a cave, and this cave was where the bandits lived. Actually there were two caves, the main one that served as their living quarters, and a smaller one, right next to it, that they used as a stable for the horses. The other horses had been led there, only mine remained tied to a post on the terrace — it was fed and given water to drink; the movements of its neck, and with them those of my head, began to make me dizzy.

After a while I close my eyes again. I had seen what there was to be seen, and there was nothing to do but wait for the Count to arrive and to decide about my fate. The sun had disappeared behind the mountain or the trees, when I finally heard three men approaching — it was the Count, in the company of the Old one and the Skinny one. From his name, I had expected the Count to have something of an aristocratic appearance, but he looked more like a good-natured peasant, if a huge, broad-shouldered and strong one.

A girl came out of the cave to greet the Count, a very pretty chubby girl, with long blonde hair that she wore in two braids left and right, and with strikingly large but firm breasts that were bare and bounced

up and down as she ran. She held her arm out to the Count, and as soon as he had dismounted, he patted her breasts and gave her a kiss.

“What is this?” he asked her, pointing at me.

“The Tall one brought her,” she said. “He said she is funny, and maybe you want to keep her.”

“Untie her,” he said to her, and she did, and as she did so she smiled at me and said, “Hi, I am Tits,” and I tried to smile back, but I was so cramped and exhausted that it didn’t work.

What was worse, I could not stand on my legs, either, and collapsed on the ground. With some effort, I raised myself into a kneeling position, and found myself kneeling directly in front of the Count — there was a lot of laughter, and the Count opened his pants and took out his penis, and I took it into my mouth and pleased him.

“She’s a nice catch indeed,” he said afterwards, “well done, Tall one. I prefer more flesh on my women,” and he pinched Tits’s side who smiled broadly at this compliment, “but you all have earned some gratification, so let’s keep her for now.”

I was lead into the cave — from the outside it didn’t look very impressive, but inside it proved to be spacious, and it had many recesses and niches, and several tunnels branched out to the sides and in the back; some you could easily walk in, others you had to climb, and some you had to crawl — I never got to see all of it. All these structures provided semblances of private rooms, and store rooms, and cupboards, and workrooms — it was almost as in a big house. In some parts of the cave the ground was covered with floorboards, and they even had some carpets, and there were wooden shelves at the walls, and they had oil lamps that gave sufficient light; some of the men, especially the Bald one and the Crooked one, were, as I later saw, if

not artful, so not unskilled carpenters and cabinet makers, and there were chairs and tables and chests and other pieces of furniture.

None of the beds was for me, of course. The Count and Tits withdrew to their own part of the cave, which was separated by a thick curtain, and the men, one after the other, used me on the floor.

Afterwards I was given water and food, for which I thanked them, and then they took me to a place at the back of the cave and bound me, and I slept.

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A few of the men used me again in the morning, without violence; they were quite friendly to me, and untied me, and gave me breakfast. Later most of the men left, including the Count, and Tits went out and after a while came back and disappeared behind the curtain, and as no one paid much attention to me I sat near the cave's mouth, and looked out, and tried not to think of Sir Edmond, and Abigail, and the Beautiful City, and the Queen, and whether I'd ever stand tied before her to receive her blessing.

In the afternoon I was alone with the Tall one and the Bearded one, and when I heard them say something about the Count, I asked them why he was called by that name.

"Because he slew our former captain, after he counted the money from the loot we had made, and saw that the Captain had been cheating us," the Bearded one said.

"That was back then when there had been loot worth counting," the Tall one added. "Before they built that damned bridge in the North, and all the merchants now take that detour, where they feel safer."

"Well, they *are* safer, if they pay the toll," the Bearded one said.

“Anyway,” the Tall one continued, “back then, we had money to spend, and we spent it in the villages, and they respected us, and they considered it an honor if we took fancy of their women, and they didn’t raise hell if one or the other of them got a little damaged in the process.”

“Yes, and now they’re after us with pitchforks whenever they see one or two of us alone. Except the Strong one, who has some friends among the villagers.”

“But *we* must to be content with a breastless skinny tart like you,” the Tall one said, and punched one of my breasts, but not so hard that it really hurt.

“She’s not so bad,” the Bearded one said.

“Take her, then,” the Tall one replied, and punched me in the belly, this time with enough force that I doubled up and fell, and retched, and could not prevent some tears from showing in my eyes.

The Bearded one was kind, and waited until I had regained my breath, before he took me.

“He isn’t a bad man, you know,” he said afterwards. “He feels bitter, because we’ve had so little success lately, which he blames on the Count, and because he’s in love with Tits, and the Count rarely lets him have her.”

Later I searched the Tall one out, and apologized for failing to please him, and said I hoped I would be at least of a little use to him. “It’s all right,” he said, “don’t think about it,” and from then on he didn’t beat me anymore, and he used me a few times, but though I tried to do my best, these encounters were short and he did not really seem to enjoy them.

He did not blame me, though, and once he even protected me and probably saved my life, when one evening the Strong one had come

back from one of his solitary excursions drunk and ill-tempered, and the Count refused to let him have Tits. He wanted me then, but the Lame one had not finished with me yet, and when I didn't push off the Lame one immediately, the Strong one got in a rage, and tore the Lame one off me and broke one of his arms, and then he picked me up and was about to throw me against the wall of the cave, head first, when the Tall one jumped up and got himself between me and the wall, just in time.

It took them a while to calm the Strong one down, and finally he drank some more wine and became quiet, and when he had satisfied himself with me he fell asleep, and the next morning he left early, without speaking a word. He never returned.

Apart from this and a few other unpleasant incidents, my life in the cave was quiet. During the nights, when all slept except for a single sentry, I was tied up in a recess with my hands secured behind my back, but they covered me with a thick blanket so that I would not be cold. During the days I was free to do whatever I wished, except that I was not allowed to leave the cave, and of course I had to serve the men sexually whenever they so desired.

I was kept naked, and it was a bit chilly inside the cave, so I tried to keep myself busy when I was not being used. I asked whether I was allowed to do some cleaning, and they said as long as I didn't bother them too much it was all right, so I swept the floor, and wiped the crudely carpentered furniture with wet rags, and polished their small hoard of jewelry and silverware, and I found a huge cauldron which I cleaned, and I asked them to make a fire under it near the entrance and then I properly washed their clothes, since they had indeed a store of soap, only they rarely used it. Water, fortunately, we had plenty, since a small but rapid stream ran at the side of one of the tunnels; dis-

appearing in a hole in the ground a few feet from where it came in through the ceiling, it even provided us with indoors toilet facilities.

I cannot say that my cleaning efforts made a great difference to the cave's overall appearance, or that the men were particularly grateful about it, but they didn't mind either, and let me do my self-assigned work which kept me busy and warm, and helped me by making me feel useful, to some degree, besides my sexual use. I also helped with the cooking, and this is how Tits and I started to talk with each other, and became friends.

The cooking was mostly done by two who were called the Young one and the Fat one, and their idea was to put water into a large pot, and add chops of meat and vegetables, whatever they happened to have at hand, and let it boil for a few hours — depending on the amount of ingredients, they called the result either soup or stew. Tits was the only one who didn't appear to be perfectly happy with the food, but it seemed that a few earlier attempts of her to suggest other ways of preparation had led to questionable results; meanwhile she had given in, or the men didn't let her meddle with the cooking anymore, but for some reason they trusted me when I said I'd be happy to do some cooking, and maybe they'd like to let me try?

The woods were full of game that the men hunted, while vegetables, eggs and bread they bought or robbed from the farmers, so our supply was ample. I had never been an enthusiastic cook, but I had cooked for my brothers and myself and knew how to do it, and upon my request the Young one actually went to a village and brought ingredients that I said I needed, like spices, herbs, and oil. I did find some never-used cooking utensils amidst a heap of rubble and cleaned them, and then I fried some things, and spitted and barbecued others, and I tried to adapt the recipes I knew from home to the different

meats and vegetables and herbs and to the limited kitchen facilities. I must admit I didn't do very well, with everything being different from what I had been used to at home, and without the fish and the seafood I knew how to prepare, and I think I had eaten better even in some of the most lowly inns we'd been to, but it was a change to their cuisine, and they appreciated it.

At first Tits watched me with curiosity from a safe distance, but then she asked the Count if she might join me, and from then on we did the cooking together, while the Young one and the Fat one enjoyed their new-found leisure.

Only one time, when on the day before the men who had been out hunting instead of some other game had brought in a wounded plump peasant girl who cried through half of the night while the men played with her until she finally died, did I refuse to do the cooking, and for two days we had stew again, of which I ate very little.

The men not only mostly appreciated what Tits and I cooked, they also appreciated watching us cooking, the slim small-breasted naked captive, and the Count's buxom wife — when near the fire, Tits took off her wool jacket, thus proving she carried her name rightly, and retained only her leather skirt. To watch us clearly increased the men's appetite, for food as well as for sex, but while they could take which food they wanted, with sex they had mostly to be content with me, for the Count let his men enjoy Tits only rarely.

From morning until mid-afternoon most of the men usually were out, and those who were in were either sleeping, for they had guarded the cave during the night, or they were guarding it now, so Tits and I, now that we had made contact, spent a lot of time together, when I was not busy with my self-imposed household tasks.

At noon the sun had warmed a spot near the entrance, and we

would sit there and talk, when none of the men called for me. We made small talk, and girls' talk, about men in general, about some of the men in particular when we were sure no one was listening, about how to keep one's skin smooth, how not to get pregnant, how to deal with those days of the month — things like that, while we avoided to talk of our pasts, or of the future.

Only on the day before the last one, though of course we did not know it then, did I ask her a personal question: "I can see why they call you Tits," I said, "but this is not your real name, is it? Do you want me to call you by your real name, when we are alone?"

"Call me Tits, as the others do," she said. "I do not mind that name — you know, it shows that they respect me at least for my body. Where I've come from, no one had respected me for anything at all, so the name I had before does not hold happy memories for me."

"I am sorry, Tits," I said.

"It's all right." She put an arm around me and drew me closer. "You know, I am happy that you are here." She touched my breasts with her other hand, gently stroking my nipples.

"Do you mind?" she asked.

For an answer I kissed her, and then I took her hand and put it between my legs, to let her feel that she was welcome.

When we made love, I was moved by the eagerness and passion with which she explored and caressed my body.

"I've never had a real girlfriend, you know," she whispered into my ear during our embraces. "There was this girl, but she wouldn't ... and when my parents found out, they beat me half dead, then they had me raped in public by all the men in the village, and then they sold me to a traveling marketeer. I was with him two years until we got ambushed, and the Count found pleasure with me, and since then I am here."

“And have you met other girls here?” I asked.

“A few,” she said. “But none that I really got friends with. And, usually, they didn’t stay long ...”

I didn’t need to ask what had become of them.

The men who had slept had woken up by now, and those guarding the cave had come in, and together they watched our love-making, stupefied into not making any attempts to interfere or to participate, while we were so absorbed in each other that we had hardly noticed them. Then, of course, they came over, and the Bearded one said, “That’s been a fine performance that you have staged, so now you may receive the deserved applause.”

The Count was out on that day, and somehow it was clear to us all that this would never be talked about, and the men undressed and received their pleasures from both me and Tits, and they were quite rough not only with me but even more so with her, punishing her, I felt, for being withheld from them so often, but they were careful not to leave marks on her that would raise questions from the Count.

“Are they not afraid the Count may find out?” I asked Tits afterwards.

“That they raped me? It happens every now and then. The Count knows about it. It keeps them happy, and he only pretends to them that he does not know.”

“Doesn’t this make you feel bad?” I asked her.

“Oh, I’ve lived through worse, you know,” she said. “Much worse. They are not bad guys, they are not mean to me, they give me to eat ... I have a place here, they don’t harm me, it’s really all right, I guess.”

I hugged her, and she gave me a kiss that was more sisterly this time than passionate. She never asked me for *my* name, by the way.

It was on the morning of the twelfth day of my stay at the cave, and one week after the Strong one had left and not returned, that I stood next to the Count near the cave's mouth, enjoying the warmth of the sun as it dispelled the dampness of the night. During the last few days I had thought I noticed a growing uneasiness in him, but as far as I could tell the men had not noticed, or at least had not shared it — Tits may have seen it, too, but if so, she had not discussed it with me. From what I had heard, it was not uncommon for the Strong one to be gone for a couple of days, and even if he had left in a bad mood no one had any reason to doubt his loyalty, but a vague feeling seemed to tell the Count that somehow, something might be wrong.

It was strange that he talked to *me* about it, but I think he did not want to worry Tits or his men with his apprehensions, or be ridiculed for them, but still he may have felt an urge to get them off his chest. And, of course, he did not really talk to me but to himself, and I just happened to stand next to him, a naked bystander not more significant than the air he might as well have spoken to. And of course he knew, whatever I heard him say, it would be of no more use to me than it would have been to the air.

He did not articulate his misgivings, though, he only implied them by talking about how unfounded they were.

"We have no reason to be afraid," he said. "The Strong one won't talk. And even if he does — they won't send an army against a bunch of petty thieves, and especially not as our hiding place is at the border of two Lands, so none of the Princes will risk to send his soldiers, for fear of enraging his neighbor."

When I did not answer — and what could I have said to this? — he

went on, “But even *if* one of them sends his troops, we have such an excellent strategic position here — no one can possibly get down to us through the thicket of the forest, and the only ascent from the valley is so steep and narrow that ten men on foot can easily fend off a hundred men on horseback.”

But the following night, Sir Edmond, General of the Queen’s armed forces, even in retirement from active military duty still out-ranking anyone but his peers and the Queen herself in any matter of armed conflict involving the Queendom’s security, came not on horseback, but on foot, and not with a hundred men, but with an army of one and a half thousand.

It had been a good opportunity, he later explained, to negotiate a pact between the two Princes, and to make them join forces to secure the border regions of the two neighboring Lands that had become something like an outlaw territory. The army that Sir Edmond led had been hastily assembled, but it included experienced fighters of both Princes’ personal elite guards, while local peasants, who had long suffered from the absence of law, had easily been recruited as pathfinders and scouts.

In the cave we didn’t know this, but we heard the sounds that had begun shortly after nightfall. The sounds came not from below, where the only trail led up from the valley, they came from all around, from the impenetrable thicket that surrounded us. It was as if the thicket itself had come to a weird nightmarish life. Eerie sounds, menacing sounds, and hour by hour they grew louder and came closer. The sounds of an army, of one and a half thousand men, hacking their way through a solid wall of wood.

Even in the back of the cave, where Tits and I sat in the darkness, we heard their slow approach — it felt as if the whole mountainside

was shaking. We hugged each other. I did not *know* what the sounds meant, but I had *hopes* — I was careful, though, not to display them. Had the Count known who was coming, and had he known they were coming for me, and had he known who I was, he could have used me as a hostage, or killed me for revenge, but he didn't know it — to him, in this situation, I had no significance at all. In their growing terror from the sounds that encroached them, in their hectic but tangled attempts of setting up defenses against the unknown that was homing in on them through a night that did not protect them anymore but conspired with an unknown terrifying enemy, neither the Count nor his men wasted any of their time upon thoughts of Tits or me.

Tits was shaking with fear, and I did my best to console her, holding her soft naked body against mine. With my calmness I eased her, and we kissed, and I let my hand slide between her legs and gently caressed her sex, and she put her hand upon mine, guiding me, so that we moved our hands together, and then she bent down and kissed my breasts, and I stroked her hair with my other hand, and I enjoyed the waves of pleasure that finally floated through her body.

I gave her pleasure, and I gave her comfort, though I knew it was false comfort that I gave — I would try to save her from the fate that was waiting for her, after the inevitable maltreatment and rapes, but I knew that there was little hope that I might succeed.

They reached us before dawn. When the onslaught of soldiers finally hit the cave, there was no fight, there was only killing, and most of this went on outside, where the Count had set up their defenses. We saw very little, a few silhouettes moving before an indistinct flickering light outside, but what we heard was enough for us to understand what happened. I would have wanted to save the bandit's lives, but there was no way I could do it, and anyway, their deaths now were

mercifully quick, while later they might have had to face much grimmer punishments.

They were all dead within a few minutes, except for Tits and the Count.

~

A group of soldiers entered the cave. I saw them only dimly, blinded by the light of the torches they carried; they quickly satisfied themselves that the cave was empty but for two cowering naked girls. Tits gave a muted scream of fear, but they kept their distance from us — Sir Edmond had given them clear orders, to my protection, and they followed them, though about all this I knew nothing. And it was not him whom I saw first, but Abigail — she came into the cave immediately after the soldiers, pushing through their ranks, and when she saw me she rushed up to me, and I almost thought that she was going to embrace me, but then she just stood in front of me and said, “Are you all right?” and reached out her hands and helped me to stand up.

I held her hands, and said, “Thank you,” and then we did embrace after all.

“How did you find me?” I asked, and she said “Come,” and led me out of the cave, saying to a soldier as we passed him, “Hurry and tell the Commander that she is safe!” Another soldier asked her about orders concerning “the other girl,” and she shrugged. She noticed that I wanted to say something, and pressed my hand and said, “Don’t,” but then she grabbed the soldier’s arm and added, “Take care that she lives.” I pressed her hand in return to thank her, but there was doubt in my mind whether this was indeed a blessing for Tits, or would turn out to have been a curse.

We reached a campfire about a hundred feet from the cave’s mouth,

and Abigail sent away the soldiers who had started it, and they joined a group at another one of the many fires that now flared in places where until yesterday there had been that impenetrable mesh of sturdy thorn bushes, seemingly to last forever. We sat down, alone and undisturbed in the middle of an army in an ongoing military operation. Abigail offered me her coat, and I took it gladly; I was not cold, but it was a welcome feeling to wear a piece of clothing again after so many days.

All around us orders were shouted, and reports given, and tales told, and love songs or battle songs chanted, in all kinds of voices, deep and shrill, hoarse and canorous, excited and calm, mostly male but some female, and the Count screamed from the tortures of his first interrogation, and from inside the cave Tits's muted cries told about the agonies of her rapes, but all this melted into the background of a mild summer night, where I sat and watched Abigail in the flickering light of the fire, and listened to her story.

"After we noticed you had hightailed in the wrong direction," she said, "we turned our horses and called after you, but you were already too far away, so we started to follow you, but then two of the thugs suddenly appeared out of the wood in front of us, and my horse balked and threw me off, and they were upon me immediately. They were only two of them, luckily, the others had already gone after you, for that was also the way back to their base. And, again luckily, those two who attacked us didn't have arrows and bows. But they had me, and they had a knife at my throat, and they told Sir Edmond they'd kill me if he so much as moved a muscle. And then they raped me. I am not like you, you know, I suffered, and I hated it."

"I suffer, too," I said, but silently, for I did not want her to hear it.

"They were the Strong one and the Crooked one, and they were

both bad, but the Strong one was worse. He made me cry, and this I could never forgive. Crying, bleeding, a knife at my throat, a cock in my mouth, a fist in my cunt, I swore an oath that I would kill him, and laugh at his death.”

She fell silent, and I knew that there would not be many people whom she would ever tell about her humiliation.

“Sir Edmond was still on his horse, his hand on his sword, and they told him now to throw his sword down, and he refused, and the Crooked one started to cut me with his knife, but Sir Edmond knew we’d be both dead if he gave in, and the Strong one had brains enough to know they’d be dead if they went on hurting me, for he could see that Sir Edmond was a fighter who could kill them both. So after some talk, and some careful maneuvers, we finally parted; they took our horses, and they left us our lives. And we walked back, all the way, to the Princetown which we had left a day and a half before, and I was in pain and could not walk fast. It took us more than three days to walk.”

She made a pause, her silence telling more about the exertion of this march than so many words could have done.

“Sir Edmond declared a state of armed attack on the Queendom, because of you.” I listened for a hidden reproach in her voice, but didn’t find it. “He could do this,” she continued, “as the Queen’s Envoy, and as the Queen’s General he then took command. Well, he can tell you more about this, if he wants to. It all had to be fast — we have to be in the Beautiful City in four weeks at the latest, you know.”

I knew. Four more weeks, and then some time in the palace, and then I would die ... So much time had already passed, since the Journey had begun!

“They interrogated some prisoners, and no one knew where the

Count's hideout was, but one told them about some villages where the Strong one often went for fun with the local girls, and they set up a trap in each one, and they captured him. When Sir Edmond told me, I hurried to where they held him, and when I arrived they said they had tried a lot, but he wouldn't talk. And when I saw him there, tied up and bleeding, I knew that I would keep my oath to kill him now, and I knew he'd talk before that. So I asked to be alone with him, and Sir Edmond said it was all right, and the fact that we are here now is proof that he talked before he died." She gazed into the fire. "He talked *long* before he died," she said after a while.

"May you never be hurt like this again," I said, and laid my hand upon hers, pressing it softly. I did it without thinking, and I knew she'd hastily withdraw her hand and give a snappy answer, but she didn't.

We sat silently for a while, and then Sir Edmond came, escorted by six guards, and I stood up to greet him, and he stretched out his arms and put his hands upon my shoulders, and said, "It is good to see you again," and I just nodded, as for a moment my voice failed me.

I was wearing Abigail's coat, but it was a short one and I had not closed it. The guards, especially the four male ones, quite openly looked between my thighs.

"You will have to wait for the Gift until the morning," Sir Edmond said to them. "She needs her sleep now."

But though I was tired sleep felt to be far away, and so I asked Sir Edmond's permission to please the guards now, and I served them next to the fire while it slowly died down, and then others came, and others after them, and I was happy to be the Gift again, the Queen's gift to her Lands, and I felt only a minor pang of pain from seeing Sir Edmond and Abigail lying together a few yards away, and then I fell asleep, with an eager young soldier on top of me and his penis still inside me, and

I slept without dreams through the few hours that were left until our decampment, when the first sunlight filtered through the trees.

~

I saw Tits only two more times.

The first time was later in the morning, when most of the soldiers had already packed up and were assuming their marching positions: two columns about to set off in opposite directions, one back to where we had come from, and the other one towards where we were going to; Sir Edmond, Abigail and the commanders of the Prince's troops riding at the front, and a more or less orderly train of men and women behind them.

It took me a while until I found Tits, near the rearguard, naked, bruised, chained and heavily guarded.

I asked the rearguard's commander for permission to be alone with her for a while, and as he complied, ordering her guards to keep a distance of twenty paces, she looked at me in disbelief.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I am the Gift," I said.

"The Gift!" she replied, with wonderment in her voice. "I have heard about this, but I always thought it was a myth?"

"No," I said, "I am real."

"And you are going to die under horrible torture?"

"In a few weeks," I confirmed.

"But why? And how can you be so calm?"

"Why? To bring peace to the Queendom," I said, not knowing how to answer her second question.

"I could not do that," Tits said, and shuddered.

"You could, if you had to," I said.

“And every four years there is a Gift who has to die?” she asked.

“Yes, every four years,” I said. “And this year, this honor was given to me.”

There was a short pause.

“You know,” Tits finally said, “once, when I was a little girl, there was a visitor in our village, and he told us about a world in which a man had let himself be tortured to death, to bring peace to all. A god he was, I think, or the son of a god. But they did it just once, there.”

“And,” I asked, “did it work?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Tits replied. “Not well enough, anyway. But, this was a story I’ve heard long ago from a stranger, I don’t know what is true about it.”

“We never do,” I said.

There was another pause.

“They will let me go, won’t they?” Tits asked in a thin voice that betrayed her fear.

“I hope so,” I said. “It will be the Prince’s decision.”

“You will help me, won’t you?” For a moment she seemed to forget that her hands were tied behind her back and tried to reach for me, but all she could do was plead with her voice and her eyes.

“There is little I can do, Tits,” I said. “I will have to *please* the Prince, not to advise him.”

“But you can *plead* to him, can’t you?”

“No, Tits, the Gift cannot plead,” I said. “*If* he asks me, and only then, I can tell him that it would give me great pleasure to know that you are safe and free. But it is not for him to care for my pleasure, it is for me to care for his.”

“But this old man who is with you, this General, you can speak to

him, I have seen you speaking to him, he will listen to you, won't he?" Her voice was beginning to sound desperate.

"Sir Edmond, you mean? Tits, he is not going to interfere with local law or politics. He is the Queen's Envoy, he has to respect the Prince's authority in his own Land."

"But can you not ..." She was cut short by two men who had approached us. Unlike most of the others, who were dressed in plain and mostly ragged clothes, those two wore uniforms that showed them to be members of the guard of the Prince towards whose town we were heading.

"Will the ladies please forgive the interruption of their conversation," one of them said, with mock politeness directed at the prisoner. "We are about to march on, and Sir Edmond assumes that you want to ride next to him and the Artist at the front." Even as he spoke, the other one, aroused by Tits's defenseless nakedness and by the unhappiness that she displayed, quickly opened his trousers, grabbed her head with both hands, pushed her down to her knees, and entered her mouth.

"Hurry," the first one said, more to Tits than to his comrade.

A few minutes later I looked back from where Sir Edmond and Abigail had waited for me, and as the road in between us had been going down and up again I could see Tits at the far end of the column, a small distant naked female figure kneeling with her hands bound behind her back, now another guard's penis in her mouth, and I felt sorry for her, and sad.

"Don't expect me to weep when she dies," Abigail said.

"No," I said, and turned towards her. She looked tired and exhausted. She was covered in dust, her face and her hands were scratched by the thorns of the thicket through which they had cut their

way, and I realized that she had labored as hard as any of the soldiers. With two fingers, I plucked out a small twig that had gotten entangled in her long black hair. She did not react to this unexpected touch. “No, I won’t,” I said.

~

The last time I saw Tits was in the torture chamber of the palace.

We had arrived at the Princetown late the next day. Soon after our arrival we were asked to join the Prince in the large assembly hall, and there we stayed until late into the night. Sir Edmond was conferring with the Prince and a group of about two dozen military and civilian advisers, Abigail was studying the many exquisite works of art with which the hall was decorated, and I had been asked to take off my clothes and sexually serve those present, with as little disturbance to the conference as possible, which meant mostly using my mouth or my hands. Those services, of course, were not for me to administer to Sir Edmond — for him one of the servant girls was called to give him pleasure, a pretty young blonde whom he visibly enjoyed, to Abigail’s equally visible vexation.

Abigail herself, like several others of the women present, said she was not aroused and politely refused any sexual services, either by me or by one of the attending servants. I silently thanked her for this reservation — it would have felt strangely awkward to me if I had to do for her here what was my duty to do for all the others, and, on the other hand, I would have felt hurt had she rejected me in favor of someone else. What weird and inappropriate emotions, I wondered in bewilderment, realizing that those twelve days in the cave must have unsettled me more than I had thought.

I was not unhappy when the man I was to serve next demanded my

full attention as he responded only reluctantly to my administrations, his penis still not more than half erect in my mouth, despite my efforts with my lips and tongue. I cautiously began to work with my teeth, and felt some results that encouraged me to proceed in this direction, and then I applied my fingernails, and finally, slowly ascertaining his true desires, I closed one hand around his testicles and increased the pressure, and now I was rewarded by his full and eager erection, and I worked on his arousal by carefully balancing pain and lust, and finally he thanked me by filling my mouth with his sperm. This, to be the Queen's Gift, fully devoted to her task and not letting herself be distracted by anything else, least of all by her own emotions, this was the purpose to which I had to dedicate my body and my mind.

But, this is not what I had wanted to tell you about — I wanted to tell you about seeing Tits for the last time, and about doing her a last favor.

We were to leave early next morning, as we already had lost so much time, and it was only with the admonition not to take more than a few minutes that Sir Edmond allowed me to ask the Prince for his permission to say goodbye to her; the Prince kindly gave it to me, and a guard led me to the torture room in which she had spent the night. After I had entered, he left and closed the door behind him.

Tits was alone, lying on her back on a large wooden bench, tied spread-eagled with leather straps on her ankles, thighs, upper arms and wrists. The room was bright, the sun was shining in through a large window. I had never seen her body this clearly, her luscious naked flesh, her pale skin, her full firm gravity-defying breasts with the large dark areolas, her softly curved vaginal mound. Every man's dream, I thought, and many a woman's, and doomed to die today.

Except for scratches, bruises and welts she seemed to be unharmed,

but her eyes were red and swollen from crying. She was desperately if hopelessly struggling with her bonds, and at first didn't even notice that I had entered.

When she finally did, she gave up her struggles, and her face brightened up; I bent down over her face and kissed her lips, in a sisterly way.

"Untie me, please!" she said, with a shaky voice that I hardly recognized.

"I am sorry, Tits, but I can't," I said.

"But these straps *hurt*, and I am so scared, please, open those clasps!"

"Tits, I *can't*!"

"But why not? They are simple clasps, I could open them myself if I had one arm free, you just pull on the straps and press down the little levers and the clasps are open, you can easily do it, *please!*"

I gently stroked her forehead, and sadly shook my head.

"But I am so afraid of what they will do to me if you do not help me! They will torture me, don't you know it, they will *kill* me!" Her voice was nearly hysterical now. "They will really kill me, won't they?"

"Yes, they will," I said. "I am so sorry."

"But it must be enough for them to kill the Count," she said, "they will execute him in public, but why would they want to kill *me*?"

"The Count is dead," I told her. "He died last evening while they tortured him, his heart failed."

She cried out, I do not know whether for his fate, or her own.

"But you can *save* me," she said. "You are the Queen's confidant! They will listen to you! You must tell them that I am innocent! You cannot let them do this to me!" She cried again.

"Tits, there is nothing I or anyone can do," I said sadly, and then

I heard the door open, and a man entered, a fat-bellied huge man with a massive bare chest, carrying a large bag of tools.

“Oh my god, oh my god, this is the torturer, get me out of here, *now!*” Tits screamed.

“Calm down, lady,” he said. “I am not the torturer, it will be a few hours until you meet him, I am only the blacksmith.”

“What are you doing to me?” Tits’s voice was verging on hysteria again.

“I have to fix the shackles to your feet,” he said, his voice steady and calm, but failing to calm her.

“Why? What ... please ...” She was talking to me now. “Oh no, *no*, what are they doing to me? What is this for? *Tell* me!”

“I do not know,” I said, but it was the blacksmith who answered her. “They’ll do to you what they had wanted to do to the Count, before he died on them. You’ll be hung by your legs, and then they’ll break your bones with a club one by one. They can’t do to you what they would have done to his balls then, but they’ll do something with your breasts and with your crotch instead. But don’t you worry, it won’t start until after noon, and it will be over before the stars come out.”

Tits was silent from shock, and I was dismayed, not so much at the cruelty of the punishment — I had known better than to have expected leniency — but at its crudeness. Poor Tits would really have deserved better. But, of course, this was neither for me nor for her to decide.

Then the blacksmith put a shackle to her left ankle, and she screamed and strained against the straps that held her and yelled that the iron was too tight and that it hurt, and the blacksmith told her not to struggle, and then metal clanged as he closed the shackle with a

blow of his hammer, and then her piercing scream drowned out all other sounds.

“Well, it *is* a bit tight, I guess, but I can’t get a larger one in time,” the blacksmith said, as he put the second shackle to her other leg.

I tried to comfort Tits by holding her head, but she was beyond being comforted now, screaming and shouting beyond reason.

“Stop it, stop it,” she cried, “I will tell the Prince how cruel you are, I will demand to be freed, I will plead to the Prince for mercy, there will be spectators, many people, I will tell them that I am innocent, the Gift can swear to it, and if the Prince does not free me I will tell them how wrongful this is, how unjust he is, I will ask them to free me, they will see that I am innocent and do not deserve to die, they will stand up and save me, they *must!*”

“Tits,” I said, looking into her eyes and gently stroking her cheeks, “Tits, please do keep your dignity!” She did not hear me.

“Do not break my other leg, you fool, I still need it, please, I can walk on one leg, the Prince will free me when he hears my pleas, the executioner will have mercy, he will let me go home, the people will *force* him to let me go, they will believe me that I am innocent!”

I looked at the blacksmith, and I saw pity in his face, and the comprehension that there was only one way to help the poor girl, to help her save her honor, since her life could not be saved. There was only one way, and he and I both knew it.

“Please,” I said.

“I cannot do it,” he replied.

“You can, upon my orders,” I said, “I represent the Queen.”

It was a lie, maybe the only outright lie I ever made on the Journey. I think he knew that it was a lie.

“Can you give it to me in writing?” he asked.

I nodded and stretched out my hand, and fortunately he had paper and a pencil in his bag, and he gave them to me. “We must keep her from divulging military secrets in public,” I said, and I saw that he understood.

I wrote and signed the paper, while he closed the shackle on her other leg, and the pain made her scream inarticulately again, until her screams turned into an exhausted sobbing. I gave him the paper, and hoped it would protect him, and hoped Sir Edmond would protect me, if I ever had to answer for this.

I kissed her one last time, then I grabbed her chin, and forced her mouth open, while the blacksmith pulled out her tongue with a pair of pliers, and I held her head, as gently as I could, as he sliced off two inches of her tongue with a thin-bladed saw.

“You will not die in shame, my friend,” I said to her. “You will not disgrace yourself today.”

When I left the room, the blacksmith was starting to take off his pants — his work and his favor done, he was now collecting what was part of his salary, and Tits had to pay it. There was nothing I could do for her anymore, and I had already been with her much longer than the few minutes which Sir Edmond had granted me.

I was glad that neither the blacksmith nor Tits saw the effort it took me to keep from crying.

Abigail saw it, of course. “What a pity,” she remarked as we rode out of town, and she left it to me to decide whether she meant Tits’s fate, or my grief, or that we didn’t stay to watch the execution.

CHAPTER 8: THE MOUNTAINS

Either to make up for the time we had lost, or due to orders from the Queen which he may have received through a messenger, or out of some considerations of his own, Sir Edmond told us that our itinerary had been changed — the true reason I do not know, as he never confided in me in such matters.

What I do know, though, is that according to our original plan we would have continued eastward, staying north of the mountains which lay between us and the Lands of the southern shores, until finally arriving at a Land on the eastern border of the Queendom. We would have crossed the mountains to the South there where they were lower and less cragged, reaching the Queendom's south-eastern corner, and from there we would have traveled westward again through the fertile, rich and sunny southern plains, so gracefully embedded between the mountains and the sea. Our destination, the Queendom's capital, the Beautiful City, we would then have entered from the East.

According to our new plan we were going to take a shorter route: straight to the South, here where the mountains were not only high but also wide, along a little-traveled trail, through areas with which, despite their apparent geographical vicinity to the capital, commerce was rare and limited.

I admit that I was a bit apprehensive of the dangers posed both by nature and, possibly, by the inhabitants of that territory. I did not, of course, say anything about it, and tried not to let my worries show, but Sir Edmond noticed them nonetheless, and, though he could have just ignored me, did his best to put my mind at ease. In the fine weather

that we had, he explained to me, the mountain passes would be free of snow and could be safely crossed, and, while it was true that emissaries of the Queen visited this region only rarely and were not always well received when they did, this was a problem of diplomacy which he would have to address, but not a cause for serious concern about our safety.

At first I was ashamed of my timidity, but then my shame together with my apprehensions melted away under Sir Edmond's friendly gaze, his calm and sonorous voice, and his knowing and sympathetic words. I thanked him, and I was grateful for the concern which he showed me. And, despite all the things that were going to happen, did we not finally reach our goal alive, as he had promised?

~

Of the calamities that awaited us we knew nothing, as we set out on our trip south, into the mountains, accompanied by an escort of four male guards. The path that we followed was twisted, narrow and steep as it led us up, soon leaving the timber line far below us, and it demanded the incessant alertness of our horses and of their riders not to stumble and tumble down the rocky slopes to our deaths.

"You are doing quite well, considering how pitifully you had clung to your horse when we set out," Abigail said to me during a rest. "You'll be a proficient rider by the time we arrive — what a waste of talent!" She laughed out loud, taunting me with the death that awaited me at the end of the Journey, but nonetheless I was happy because I felt that her praise had been sincere.

After many hours we reached the top of a ridge, from where the view was truly magnificent. My hope of getting a first glimpse of the Southern Sea was disappointed, though — what we saw was a

seemingly endless mountain landscape, a frozen storm-tossed ocean of stone, stretching left and right to the horizon. In the distance before us the view was cut off by one giant towering craggy crest, a mountain range whose peaks, white with snow even now near the end of summer, were glistening in the sunlight, beautiful before the background of the cloudless blue sky.

“Yes, these mountains we must cross, and right behind them lies the Land of More,” Sir Edmond answered my unspoken question.

The descent from the ridge into the next valley was not as steep as the ascent had been, and, of course, it did not lead down as far as we had climbed up. This softer decline, together with the warm winds that blew in from the South-West and the humidity they brought, let the vegetation spread to far higher altitudes than at the northern side, so that we soon rode on softer ground and across grassland that was charmingly dotted with mountain flowers of all colors, from white and yellow and red to lilac, violet and blue, until we reached lower regions where bushes and sparse trees became the dominant feature of the vegetation.

At a spring we held a short rest. Two of the guards wished to be served by me in a peculiar way: they let me lie down on my back, and knelt down left and right of my chest, facing each other, putting their hands on each other's shoulders — and then they told me to stimulate them both at the same time with my hands, and make the heads of their erect penises touch, above my chest. It was funny, playing with the two penises, letting them fondle and caress each other, while they were caressed by my fingers. Luck and skill combined to let me succeed in making them spill their sperm almost simultaneously, most of it dripping on my breasts, and afterwards I sat up and cleaned them

with my mouth, before they made me complete our act by wiping their sperm off my breasts with my hands and licking it off my palms.

When the other two guards approached me, Sir Edmond interfered, and told them to wait until our next rest — he wanted to make good time, to let us cover as much distance as possible while the weather was fine, and so he urged us on. I saw their disappointed faces, and smilingly told them that I was looking forward to our time of play, too, and that we would only have to wait for a few short hours. As it turned out I was wrong, and they never received the pleasure from me that they desired and deserved, the pleasure that would have been mine to give them, and that I would have given them gladly.

~

Not long after our rest, the sun still high up in the sky, without warning we suddenly found ourselves in the middle of a raging battle. Not a real battle, we later learned, only a maneuver, but from between the lines it seemed real enough, real fighting, real blood, and real deaths, and we deemed ourselves lucky to be captured, not slain.

There was no chance to resist, and we surrendered without trying to flee or to fight. Our captors separated Sir Edmond, Abigail and me from our escort, and then they blindfolded us — oh no, *not again!* I thought, but there was nothing I could do about it, and at least we were not mistreated, though we heard some of them say that in their opinion spies should be dealt with quickly, efficiently, painfully, and on the spot.

After a short ride we were made to dismount; immediately afterwards, we were led off. Still unable to see, I sensed that we were led into a building, up some stairs, along a corridor, through several doors, and finally into a room where they took off our blindfolds — “our” meaning Abigail’s and mine; Sir Edmond was not with us anymore. The

room into which we had been brought was empty, the floor dirty, the white paint on the walls was flaking off. There was only one door, through which we had come, and one window, long devoid of either shutter or pane, near the end of the room. No one kept us from walking to the window and looking out, so we surveyed our new surroundings.

We looked into a court that was enclosed by two two-storied buildings on the long sides — the building in which we were and the one opposite to us — and by two solid walls on the short sides. One of the walls had a gate that looked as if it hadn't been opened for a long time. Our room was the last one on the second floor, the gate being in the far wall, to our left as we looked out. Obviously we were in an old abandoned farmhouse. The window looked north, we could see neither the sun nor the mountains. Beyond the roof of the opposite building and the enclosing walls, which reached up to the gables, there was nothing but sky — a peaceful deep blue cloudless late summer afternoon sky.

Abigail and I were alone with a guard, a big and strong man with a fierce face; on his broad belt he carried a sword, a large knife, a bunch of keys, and several steel shackles. We could do nothing but comply as he told us to undress — with the room being void of any furniture, we had to let our clothes fall to the floor. When we were naked he took two pairs of shackles and fastened first Abigail's and then my wrists behind our backs. This done, he turned to leave the room, inside which, with the door locked, we would be securely confined.

"I protest against this treatment," Abigail said with a loud voice that clearly showed her barely suppressed anger. "Where is the Envoy?"

Where is our escort? I demand to see your commanding officer immediately!”

The guard stopped, turned around, and looked at Abigail. At first he seemed only bewildered at her unexpected rebelliousness, but then, as if suddenly becoming aware of her nakedness, his face displayed his changing emotions in almost ridiculous conspicuousness, while any presumptive orders concerning the treatment of his prisoners receded from his feeble mind, to be replaced by simple, heedless and violent sexual desire.

His intentions were clear to both of us. I saw the tensing of Abigail’s muscles and the revulsion in her eyes, and I saw the determination in his, as he started to unbutton his pants while moving towards her. There was only one thing I could do, and I had to do it quickly — I stepped between them, knelt down in front of him, looked up at his face, spread my legs, opened my mouth, and licked my lips.

To my relief, it worked. He would have preferred Abigail, with her larger breasts and her formidable femininity, but maybe he too feared the possible consequences of the violent confrontation that he saw she was ready for, or maybe he was simply attracted by my display of submissive availability — however, suddenly ignoring her, he accepted my offer. He entered my mouth, then he pushed me back so that I fell to the floor, and entered my vagina. Lying on my back, my pelvis was raised as it rested on my bound hands, which was a position that enhanced his pleasure, as, I suppose, did my pain. I seriously feared that my back or my hands might break under his full weight pressing down upon me, or my breasts might rupture from the violence with which he gripped and tore at them, but none of that happened, of course.

After a while he finally withdrew and, for his orgasm, returned to

my mouth, deliberately splashing most of his sperm onto my face. Then, without a word and without looking back at us, he got up, turned around, fastened his pants again, and walked out of the room, locking the door behind him.

“How fortunate I am to have a whore to protect me,” Abigail said. Did she regret that she hadn’t been given that opportunity to fight, with nothing but her bare feet, for nothing but her honor, *our* honor, no matter what it would have cost her? Unexpectedly, I felt a longing to press my face against her breasts, but I knew better and turned my head away, feeling the sperm on my face, which my bound hands could not wipe off, slowly drying.

~

The hours that followed dragged on uneventfully, and in silence. Some time before it got dark the door opened and a man brought in a bowl filled with water which, the room lacking any furniture, he put on the floor. With our hands behind our backs it was difficult for us to drink, requiring us to crouch on the floor and lap up the water with our tongues, but at least we did not have to suffer thirst.

“It is a good sign,” I said, “isn’t it? That they give us water shows that they have some concern for our wellbeing, so, that they do not give us food may show they do not expect us to remain their prisoners for long?”

Abigail did not deem this remark worth a reply. What she did, though, was investigate our prison closer, and indeed she made a valuable discovery: near the outer wall there was a circular lid set in the wooden floor, about one foot in diameter, and when we finally succeeded to remove it with our feet it revealed a short sloped duct that led outwards. Whether this had been meant to be a latrine or not,

we gladly used it as such, and were relieved not to have to befoul the room in which we were locked.

When it got dark, there was nothing for us to do but lie down upon the floor to sleep. Our clothes were still lying near the center of the room, and they could provide a little comfort by being used as pillows, mattresses or blankets — they were not enough for being all of this at the same time, though. Being used to lying on hard floors since the beginning of the Journey I offered my clothes to Abigail, but she refused; only when I repeated my offer, she took at least my cardigan.

I soon fell asleep and slept until I woke up from the cold that had crept in during the night. The pale light from the window showed me it was early morning, and I struggled to my feet to warm myself up by doing what exercises I could do with bound hands, when I heard muffled sounds coming from the court.

Looking out of the window, I saw that a group of guards led two people into the court, a man and a woman, both naked. I walked back to where Abigail lay and, whispering, woke her up, and together we returned to the window to watch the strange spectacle that unfolded below us.

The two were alone now, the guards had already left. Each of them held a strange weapon, a curved blade, like a sickle, with a sharp point. For a few moments they stood still, facing each other, then, suddenly, they started to fight — no, not really *fight*, for they did not resist each other's attacks. They systematically wounded each other, covered each other in blood, ripped each other to shreds, slowly, and almost silently; only occasionally, when one of them was overwhelmed by pain, we heard a short moan.

I did not understand what all this meant, but Abigail did. Carefully keeping her voice low, she told me that she knew this ritual, that she

had heard about it, though never witnessed it, that it was an ancient one, and that she had not known it was still observed in these parts of the Queendom.

“It is the punishment, but also the opportunity for vindication, for a field commander’s error in a maneuver,” she whispered.

“Who of them is the commander?” I asked, failing to believe that *two* commanders could have made mistakes that justified such punishment. “And why does the other one get punished along?”

“You do not understand,” Abigail said. “It is not those two who get punished, but their commander, by losing two of her fighters. A female commander, I think, from the weapons that they were given, if the old rules are adhered to, here. It is up to those two to demonstrate that their commander still has her troops’ unreserved loyalty. They have to do this alone and unobserved and unsupported except by each other, and only what is left of their bodies will prove the skill and bravery and endurance with which they will have inflicted and suffered pain and death — and if they are judged to have done well, the commander will have saved her honor, her life and her command. And she will have learned her lesson, for the battlefield, that her errors will cost lives.”

They did not die completely unobserved, as Abigail and I observed them, but I do not think they noticed us, and anyway, as captives and strangers, we did not count.

We did not count, but we watched, Abigail breathing hard through open lips as the man slowly slashed the woman’s ample breasts, first the right one, then the left, and she slashed his left arm and shoulder and his ass, and he her left arm now ... they did not attack each other’s weapon arms.

Their chests, their sides, their thighs, their backs, their faces —

gaping wounds, their bodies shredded and bleeding, but measuredly so, avoiding incapacity or imminent death.

Abigail stood behind me, looking over my shoulder, her breathing loud in my ear, her breasts pressing against my back, and her sex, which she could not reach with her own bound hands, straining to be touched by mine.

I did my best to please her, probing her vagina with keen fingers, circling her clit with gentle fingertips, forcefully digging sharp fingernails into the folds of her labia — ah yes, I had watched her often enough, I knew well what she liked! I wouldn't have needed this knowledge, though; her excitement from what she saw was so strong that a few simple touches would have sufficed to set off her orgasm.

In the court, the woman had now begun to slash the man's belly. He kept standing as his bowels started to flow out of the widening gap, then, slowly, he sank to his knees, and then he was lying on his back. She immersed her head into the bleeding mess and worked with her mouth until his penis was erect and stood out of his curling innards. She straddled him, and now he slashed her belly as she moved up and down, their entrails now intermingling, spreading out around them, as they kept slashing at each other, cutting their genitals now, cutting the flesh from their bones...

Abigail's next orgasm was so violent that I felt her knees get weak, and, still pressing against me, she sank down a few inches, until her mouth met my right shoulder and she clenched her teeth firmly into my flesh — surprised, I let out a moan of pain.

"If *that* already makes you whine, how will you keep your dignity at the ceremony?" she said.

My fingers resumed their position between her legs.

“Will your pleasures be as intense when you’ll watch *me* die?” I asked, stroking her gently.

“You bet!” she whispered in my ear. “Just thinking of it makes me come!”

I gently caressed her clit, and in her orgasm she bit me again, in the same place, my collarbone between her teeth, and this time I felt that she was drawing blood.

A trickle of it ran down my breast, another trickle ran down my back. When she let go, I turned around, and saw my blood on her lips and on her right breast.

How beautiful she was!

I kissed her softly on the lips, cleaning them of my blood, and then I did the same with her breast, careful not to stain her with more blood from my still lightly bleeding wound.

“That’s enough,” she said after a few moments, and turned away from me, and I slid down the wall to sit on the floor, looking into the empty room, while she looked out of the window, into the court, at the lake of blood and the still twitching dying heap of mangled male and female bones and flesh and intestines.

After a while she turned around, and sat down a few feet away from me, with her eyes closed.

“What a heinous horrible detestable demented pitiable pointless mean and meaningless waste of valuable human life,” she said, after a long pause.

“But you enjoyed it, didn’t you?” I said.

I did not really expect an answer, and for a while none came. Then Abigail slowly opened her eyes, not looking at me, but into the void of our empty room.

“Enjoying something,” she finally said, “does not make it right.”

After this, we sat in silence again, for what I think were several hours, until the door opened and Sir Edmond came in to tell us that the misunderstandings had been cleared up, and we could now move on.

From there on, it was not a pleasant ride. We did not see the four guards again who had been our escort — they had been sent back, we were told, to avoid further incidents. I could only hope that this was the truth, but even if it was, my unintentionally broken promise to the two of them felt like a bad omen to me.

The four guards who accompanied us now were aloof and stern, and under their cold and scrutinizing gazes we felt uncomfortable and hardly talked among each other. The sexual acts for which they used me during our rests were rough, joyless and brief. Also the landscape changed again from being green to barren, and then the weather changed, too. A cold wind started to blow in from the Northeast, bringing dark clouds with it that soon filled the sky, leaving no trace of the sun. The mountains before and around us disappeared in the mist, and then a hard and icy rain was fiercely pouring down upon us.

For hours we had seen almost no signs of human habitation, and, drenched and freezing, we were fortunate now to find a goatherd's small house before the nightfall. The goatherd, who lived there on her own, a petite emaciated pale-skinned girl, was less fortunate, as our escort neither asked for her permission of our stay at her house, nor of their use of her body — they simply took both by the unchallengeable virtue of their authority and force.

The single room of this house which was meant to harbor one was now crowded with eight, but it sheltered us from the rain, storm and cold, and though the girl cried a lot, suffering from our guards' per-

sistent and apparently painful attentions, we finally found some sleep — Abigail and Sir Edmond sharing the narrow bed, lying, as I had seen them so often, in each other's arms. Missing Sir Edmond's coin badly, I pressed a fingernail into my clit until the pain brought silent tears to my eyes; then I slept, too.

In the morning we had fresh goat's cheese for breakfast, which I have always loved and which is a rare treat in Slain, the northern Land of my home, but I did not enjoy it this time. The girl lay on the carpet, naked, bruised, curled up and so still that I feared she was dead. To my relief, when I looked closer I saw that she was breathing, and that her eyes were open, and I covered her with a blanket, but all the time she neither moved nor spoke a word. When we decamped, Sir Edmond, unnoticed by our guards, left some small coins on the bed to pay for our lodging and food, but this would not pay for the pain we had brought her, and it did not keep me from feeling sorry and sad, for her, and, I think, though with much less justification, also for myself.

It took us several more days of slow riding across difficult terrain in cold, wet and stormy weather until we reached the next Princetown, its massive dark walls suddenly and unexpectedly emerging right in front of us out of the gray mist, the forbidding battlements and towers abruptly looming over our heads. At the gate, we stood beneath the pointed iron spikes of the heavy twin portcullis that hovered menacingly above us, seeming ready to fall at any moment, while we waited for the guardians to permit us to proceed.

This was the town I have already told you about, where the Princess made me wear that horrible hood and made me suffer sickening abuse on the streets, that may well have killed me had not Abigail succeeded in her efforts to save me from the worst.

Had I been able in some way to see any of the satisfaction which

those who tormented me may have experienced, it might have been easier for me to bear, for the Gift has to give pleasure, and she must accept to give it in any way in which it might be requested from her to give. There was no joy, though, that I could feel, and even with my hood shutting out all sights and sounds I felt that all the cruelties which I had to endure were perpetrated with cold uncaring disregard and spite, and did not bring even temporary peace to my tormentors' troubled souls, nor warmth to their hard and freezing bodies.

Still, when we left it was not only relief which I felt, but also a strange pang of nostalgia, for I knew that this had been the last major stop, the last Princetown for us to visit on this Journey on behalf of the Queendom and the Queen, in the service of helping to advance happiness and peace, and that this Journey was now inevitably drawing near to its end. A splendid and exciting end, though! And my nostalgia gave way to the joyful anticipation of the wonders that I would see, the South, the Beautiful City, and the Queen herself!

~

Between us and our goal lay the one final mountain range, which we had seen from the distance. At the Princetown we had already been at quite a high altitude, but we had to climb much further to reach the mountain pass which we had to cross, and which would be the most elevated point of our whole route. Two days to get to the pass, one of them on horseback, but then the path would become so narrow and steep that horses could not traverse it, so for the second day we would have to walk and climb.

The weather cleared up, and we saw the mountains before us again, much closer now than when we had last seen them. Their higher regions covered in snow, seeming to reach up to the sky, they formed

a daunting and to all appearances insurmountable wall. “You cannot see the pass from here, because it is behind a peak around which the path will lead us, but we do not have to go *all* the way up,” Sir Edmond told Abigail and me, seeing the concern with which we looked at this forbidding obstacle ahead of us. It would be an arduous ascent, for sure, he went on, but nothing to worry about. After the pass there would be two more days of walking and climbing, downwards now, and then we would reach the outpost of the Queen’s Guard at the upper rim of the gentle southern slopes, where we would be given horses to ride, and from there we’d soon complete the Journey in safety and comfort.

The ground rose steadily below the hooves of our horses, and each of their steps brought us closer to that giant mountain wall looming ahead. Soon, though, it was hidden from our view once more as the weather turned bad again — this time, however, it wasn’t rain which the cold northern wind brought with it, but snow.

The snow, soon lying several inches deep, slowed us down, and it was only by the light of our escort’s lanterns that we reached our goal for the day, a small village consisting of a few derelict houses and a run-down dirty hostel in which we spent the night — behind this village, Sir Edmond told us, the road ended and the steep rise began. He and Abigail ate what was offered as dinner, while I refused it — I was feeling sick, and the smell of the food made me retch. When the men of our escort, the innkeeper and his two sons, and a few villagers who happened to be at the inn satisfied themselves with me on one of the other tables, mostly into my mouth, I had to fight hard not to throw up each time I had to swallow their sperm. Fortunately, they were not many.

“You’ll feel better tomorrow,” Abigail said as we walked up to our

room. I had seen her watch them and me closely, apparently glad to be diverted from the unappetizing food on her plate, which may have instilled in her some sympathy with my sickness and caused her kind words. I slept badly, though, in my corner of our room, and in the morning I felt not better but worse.

When we got up, not long after dawn, we discovered that our escort had already left, riding back to their Princetown with our horses in tow, forgoing their obligation to accompany us to the pass. Whether this was from their own disregard of duty, or whether they had acted upon their Princess's command, we had no way to tell, and it made little difference to us.

"It doesn't matter," Sir Edmond said, "don't worry," and the way he said it, we knew it had to be true, hadn't it? "Even if we get on slowly in the snow, and don't reach the summit before nightfall, there are cave shelters along the path to spend the night in, if we have to. Up at the pass there is a settlement, about a hundred people, prospectors and their families, an unruly sinister breed who waste their paltry lives for the few grains of gold they find, and for the futile hope of finding the big nugget one day. They never leave that place, always mistrust each other, are always ready to fight, but basically they are good and honest people, like all the Queen's subjects, and they will give us shelter and food if we pay for it."

I trusted Sir Edmond, I did not worry, but I felt miserable and weak, and what little I ate for breakfast I retched up again after a few minutes.

Before we took off, Sir Edmond bought food from the innkeeper, and three wineskins which we filled with water, some items of clothing, and, luckily they were to be had, three pairs of snow shoes — light but sturdy wooden frames, tightly strung with criss-crossing leather straps,

which, strapped to our boots, would allow us to walk safely even across deep fresh-fallen snow without sinking in.

Everything we did not absolutely need we left behind. For some reasons I listed our possessions in my mind as we set out for the mountain pass through the falling snow: the food, the water, the snowshoes, the clothes that we wore, including our new woolen gloves and woolen shawls wrapped around our heads, some gold and silver coins in Sir Edmond's purse, the sword that he carried, and Abigail's knife which she wore on her belt. This was all.

I was shivering from the cold that crept through my clothing, my skin, my flesh and right into my bones. I wanted to go back to the inn, lie down, wait until that sickness passed. I knew I couldn't do it. We couldn't do it. The path was still passable — another day or two of heavy snowfall, and our route to the Beautiful City would be cut off. Going back and taking a different route would take far too long, and would be dangerous too — and we didn't even have horses. No, we had no choice, we had to go on.

“Soon after the mountain pass there is a spot from where you can see the Southern Sea far below, a truly magnificent view, it alone will be worth all the exertions of the climb,” Sir Edmond said, to cheer us up. “By tomorrow noon we will be there, if all goes well.”

All did not go well, though.

The snow that did not stop falling and the storm that seemed to get worse by the hour became big obstacles to our progress, but the biggest obstacle was me. There was no denying that I was seriously ill now — I guess I had caught this illness from the filth which I had not been able to keep from running into me in the gutters in which I had lain, my hands bound behind my back and my mouth kept open by that abominable mask. I was in fever, and I could not hold any food;

when I forced myself to eat a few bites my body immediately disgorged them, so I soon gave up trying, not wanting to waste our provisions. This was fortunate for Sir Edmond and Abigail, as they now had what was left of my ration to get them through the second day, though, of course, we would not have needed a second day to reach the mountain pass if my weakness, in addition to the bad weather, had not slowed us down so much.

We did find a cave shelter for the night, as Sir Edmond had promised, and we found another one for the second night, and after that night I was so weak that Sir Edmond and Abigail had to drag me along. By this time I hardly was aware of where I was and what I was doing, but even if my mind had been clear my body would have collapsed had they not supported me with their strong arms.

How we managed the ascent at all, I do not know.

My memory of this time is fragmentary, hazy and confused.

Was the avalanche before or after we had reached the pass?

No, it was before, of course. We even heard the distant thunder, and wondered what it was. We also felt a rumbling of the ground, I think, in the cave where we lay. This must have been during the second night. Sir Edmond later said an earthquake must have shaken the snow loose, the new snow and the snow that had lain undisturbed on the highest slopes for years.

In the morning of the third day the storm had ceased, and there were bright blue patches in the sky, tears in the gray fabric of the clouds, and through one of those tears the sun shone down upon us, and shone upon the snow that reflected the sun's rays and glistened and blinded us, blinded us so much that when we came to the saddle we saw nothing but white, whiteness all around us — we did not see the huts and the houses of the settlement and the little church that

Sir Edmond had told us about, we only saw the snow, the snow that had fallen from the sky, the snow that had plunged down the mountainside, the snow that covered the ground and the huts and the houses and the church and the people who had been in them under fifteen feet of pure white frozen crystalline death.

It meant death for us too, or at least for me, there was no way I could go back to the village below and neither could I go on, even if there had been a path to follow, which there was not, the snow now having obliterated all traces of it, having annihilated the path as it had annihilated the settlement and its occupants.

Sir Edmond and Abigail might have stood a chance to keep moving, to try to cross the white barrier until they reached the southern slope, but I did not.

I do not know what the others thought, whether they despaired or whether they harbored some kinds of hopes, whether they wisely thought of abandoning me or were determined to stay and wait for the end, but I simply resigned myself to dying there and then, in the snow, peacefully, regretting that I would not complete the Journey, but knowing that I had given my best; and I was so tired now, and cold, and weak, and the only thing I wanted was to lie down and to sleep.

When I woke up, feeling nauseous, my head and body aching and my skin covered in sweat, I was lying on the floor of a room in which were about a dozen people, most of them men but also a few women, survivors, by some miracles, of the catastrophe that had struck them. It was a large room, rather a hall, with stone walls and a clay floor, a high ceiling, a few small windows high up, some of them thickly glazed, but in others the glass was broken. The room was empty but for the people, a large pile of firewood with an ax lying on top of it, and a fireplace in which a fire was burning. It was the old smitty, as

I later learned, located several hundred feet away from the other buildings, on elevated ground, behind a ledge that had protected it, a solid stone building whose walls had not crumbled from the avalanche's blast wave. It had been unused and vacant, but by sheer luck there had been a supply of firewood stored in it.

"If we had any food we'd resent you coming here and expect us to share it," one of the men said, "but we don't have any, so be welcome."

They had the fire, though, and an iron ladle with which they could melt snow in the fire, so there was water to drink.

And they were all in good enough health to survive some time without food, a week or even two if necessary, until with the only spade they had they'd have dug out the nearest of the houses, in which next to the bodies of the dead they would find the well-stocked larders of those who would not need them anymore. Though about a hundred of their comrades and kin had perished the day before, and each one of them had lost family and friends and had only narrowly escaped death themselves, and though they knew that there was a time of hardship and hunger ahead of them, they were not crestfallen. They all looked as if they had been through worse dangers and disasters in their lives before, and they looked at their situation with the resolved confidence of those who have been spared by fate once again, and have come to see this as indisputable proof of their own merits and strenghts. To those who had died, they did not look back.

Of all this I was hardly aware, but I felt that in spite of the visit that death had just paid them, and the odds that he might still be around, there was a certain atmosphere of calmness in the room, and I felt calm myself. I was feeble, but I did not have to climb a mountain in a snowstorm anymore, I was freezing inside, but I was lying next to a fire, I was so tired, but I was allowed to rest ...

“She is dying, oh my god, Edmond, she will *die!*”

Who said this, and to whom, and who was “she” who would die? And why would it matter? Why did the voice sound so agitated and despaired? *Edmond?* I had known an Edmond once, Sir Edmond, long ago. A child gave him a flower, I remembered. What had become of him? I wondered. What had become of the flower? What had become of the child?

“Edmond, for heaven’s sake, she is so weak, she needs nourishment, *do* something!”

“Please ... do not talk so loud,” I said, or whispered, or thought I was whispering.

“There is nothing we can do, but hope for a miracle,” a man said, and there was sadness in his subdued sonorous voice, and I felt sorry for him.

What kind of a miracle was he hoping for, and what did it mean to him?

How might a miracle arrive? Through the walls, through the chimney — but it couldn’t do that, could it, as there was that fire? — through one of the broken windows, or through the door?

What might it look like?

How long would he have to wait for it?

I was glad that all this was of no concern to me.

I drifted off into a feverish sleep.

When the miracle came, it came through the door.

I cannot have slept long when I woke up from a sudden silence. A silence, and a puff of cold air. The door was open, and through it, but partly concealed by a blurred dark shape, I saw the blueness of the sky and the whiteness of the snow. And in front of the blue and the white, framed by the door, stood what I now saw to be a naked woman,

her breasts large, her head shaven, her skin dark, and her eyes even darker. When I think about it now, I could not have seen the color of her eyes then, with her silhouetted against the light, could I? But this is how I remember it.

She stood in the door and looked into the room, as if searching for something, then our eyes met, and she came in, closed the door behind her, and walked up to me.

“You are the Gift?” she asked, and I said that I was, or someone next to me said it, and she said, “I saw you coming up the mountain and I thought you might need me,” and she knelt down beside me, and took my head into her hands, and raised it to her chest, and I felt the milk oozing out of her nipples, and I drank, first from one breast and then from the other, and then she took Abigail’s knife and said, “You need more than the milk,” and she cut her arm and made me drink her blood, and then she said, “Rest now,” and she said, “In a day or two you will be ready to eat,” and then she slowly let my head sink back, and Abigail tore off a strip from the sleeve of her gown and wrapped it around the woman’s bleeding arm, and then she asked, “Who are you?”

“I am Magdaleen,” she said. “I was the Priest’s wife. He bought me at a slave market across the sea when he was young. He died from a disease last year.”

“Unless you poisoned him, you whore,” a woman said. “What brazen impudence of yours to come here, after the mercy we have shown you by letting you live and only banishing you.”

“And taking all my possessions, and stripping me of my clothes, and beating me and shaving my hair,” the dark woman replied, simply stating it, without reproach in her voice.

“You deserved it, and worse,” a man said. “Your sins have brought

all this upon us, don't you see? Your sins, and our weakness not to kill you when we discovered them, and for that our failure we ourselves are getting punished now. Are you happy now? But defying banishment, this is too much, for *this* you will finally die."

"You as the the Priest's wife were to be his locum when he died until a new Priest was found, and beholden to chastity you were, and he was dead just a few months and you whore were with a *child*!" another man said.

"I was raped," Magdaleen replied in a slow and quiet voice. "I was raped by many, and often, and you know it, for most of the times you were among them."

"You should have taken precautions, you whore," the woman said.

"Do you think they left me the time?" Magdaleen's voice was quiet and sad.

"You are *evil*," the woman said.

"What happened to that child of your sin?" another one asked.

"It was born dead last week, I buried it."

"It doesn't matter," the first man said, a strong man, who somehow seemed to be their leader; he was the blacksmith, I later learned. "You were banished, and you returned, so you die now, as is the law. And a good thing it is that you returned, and it shows God's mercy to us, for we can well use your meat."

"How do we kill her?" a woman asked.

"Not so fast," another one answered. "Let her suffer first. A burning piece of wood up her cunt, I'd say."

"And one down her throat," the first one said.

"And one up her ass."

"And small ones into her ears and eyes."

"And then we'll lie her down on her back on the ground, and each

of us takes a large log, and we all beat her and break her bones until she's dead."

"But not on the head," the first woman said, "it would kill her too quickly."

"Not on the head," the man who was the blacksmith agreed, and they all got up and formed a half-circle, as if waiting for the Priest's wife to step in, or for someone to drag her.

Magdaleen stood and faced them, naked as she was, firm and unfazed. "I have come to die," she said, "but not for you. I have come to bring my milk and blood and meat to the Gift, for without them she would perish, and you have to respect that I am not yours until she no longer needs me and can carry on with her Journey. After that," she continued, "you may do with me according to your laws, or your god's commands, or whatever else it is that makes you want to rape and torture and kill me, for I will not care anymore."

All this I heard, and did not hear, in my fever; I saw it, but as if from far away, across a gulf of space and time, and I did not understand it, but it got inscribed onto my brain, this and what happened then, and I remembered it later and will remember it as long as I live.

"Your sins have made you mad," the man said. "You insult us further with your meaningless words. This has already lasted too long. Let us begin!"

And then Sir Edmond, who had been sitting with his back against the wall, rose and said, "By serving the Gift she serves the Queendom. You will not touch her."

And the blacksmith picked up the ax that lay on the pile of firewood, and though Sir Edmond was tall and strong, this man was half a head taller, and had broader shoulders and heavier arms, and he was much younger than Sir Edmond, and he looked down upon him with

unhidden contempt, and asked, "Whose word is it that we are supposed to heed here, old man?"

"It is the Queen's word," Sir Edmond said. "The Envoy is authorized, under the circumstances, to speak it."

"The Queen's word does not matter much in these mountains, old man." There was laughter from the others.

With the delirious state of fever dreams and visions that I was in, more dead than alive, it is difficult for me to say for sure what really happened, and what was only happening in my mind.

The thundering voice with which I heard Sir Edmond say, "Oh yes, it *does* matter, all through the Queendom," can only have roared like that within my feverish head, for, as I know him, he must have said it calmly. Likewise, the halo of light that surrounded Sir Edmond has surely only shone in my imagination, but the reflection of the flames in the fireplace upon the shining steel of his sword may have been real.

And the speed with which he raised his outstretched sword arm, made a half-turn with his upper body, rushed forward in one swift motion, the glistening blade in his hand performing a flashing and violent semi-circle, this speed and this power must have been real too, for the man's head hit the ground and rolled across the floor while his body, spurting blood from his severed neck into the air like a red fountain, was still standing upright in frozen surprise.

It was my fever dream, again, in which time then stood still, the headless man forever immobile, the faces of the onlookers staring expressionlessly, where there was no movement and no sound at all except one loud thud as the ax fell from the dead man's hand, and where only Sir Edmond moved, slowly, cleaning his sword from the blood, and sheathing it again. And then, still in complete silence, Magdaleen walked back to me, and knelt down beside me again, and

took my head into her hands again, and raised it, and I saw white drops of milk on her dark nipples, and I drank once more, and felt how it filled me with life, and then I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

~

It took me almost one week to recover. Throughout this time there was an invisible line across the room, with Sir Edmond, Abigail, Magdalen and me on one side of it, setting us apart from those on the other side, in mutual silent antagonistic disregard; they accepted that Magdalen, for the time being, was now with us. The blacksmith's huge body provided them with food, to which we, of course, had no claim; they had buried him outside in the snow to keep his meat fresh, and each day chopped off a part and divided it among them. They had their ax, and the knives that some of them wore on their belts.

The sky was cloudy again and it was still cold, but the wind had ceased and it snowed only lightly, and on the third day even the light snowfall stopped. During the nights we all were inside the room, and during the days they took turns going outside with their only spade, slowly progressing in their tedious work to dig their way through to one of their buried houses.

The only thing that we shared with them was the ladle, half a gallon in size — the invaluable tool that both we and they needed not only to melt snow into water, but also to make soup and boil meat; it served both as a cooking pot and as a cup. It could not be laid into the fire or suspended over the flames, you had to stand and hold it, but it had a wooden handle almost two feet long by which it could be held without danger of burning one's hands. It got shared without words,

without arguments, and even without resentment. The days had enough hours for all of us to use it.

For two days I lived on Magdaleen's milk and some of her blood, and Sir Edmond and Abigail too drank from her breasts, and they repaid her a little by giving her Sir Edmond's sperm to drink. My body and my mind were still ravaged by my illness, but slowly the fever receded, and my stomach and my bowels learned again to hold what nourishment they received. On these first days I was blissfully not yet aware that Magdaleen's milk and blood, though they had saved me from dying, would not suffice to keep me alive.

One image from these first days that I still see before my eyes is Sir Edmond coming in from the outside, in the morning, after having washed himself with snow — naked, glistening pearls of water in the hair on his chest, his skin gleaming with freshness, his body fully erect, and likewise his penis — and then sitting down and Magdaleen taking him into her mouth ... and I remember how I envied her that she, unlike me, was not restrained by a certainly wise but nonetheless cruel law from touching, serving and receiving him, for whom I longed.

My fever receded, and the fog upon my mind cleared up, and with this came the realization of what would happen, of what Magdaleen would do, of what she would make us do.

"It is all right," she said, "this is what I have come here for. You *know* it, don't you?"

"Yes," I had to say.

"Let us try if your body is already ready," Magdaleen said, and I nodded, and she lay down on her back with her shaven head in my lap, and I held her head in my hands while Abigail took her knife and cut a slice of meat from Magdaleen's left thigh, and Sir Edmond cauterized the wound with the sword that he had heated in the fire. Magdaleen's

eyes were wide with pain, but she didn't flinch and she made no sound, until Abigail and Sir Edmond had completed their work, when she looked at them, and smiled, and said, "Thank you."

Abigail then borrowed Sir Edmond's sword, and skewered the slice of Magdaleen's meat with it and held it over the fire to roast it, and when it was done she laid it onto a piece of firewood that served as a plate, and cut the meat into small pieces, and one by one fed them to me, and Magdaleen's head still lay in my lap, and my fingers still caressed her chin and her lips and her cheeks and her eyebrows and her forehead and the top of her skull, where I could just feel the tiny stubs of her hair as it started to grow where it had been shorn, the hair that would never cover this head again.

"Does it taste as good as it smells?" she asked, and I said, "Oh yes, it does!" And she smiled and said, "You know, if you have lied to me I will find you out, because tomorrow I'll taste it for myself," and I smiled back at her and said, "Then you will see that I have not lied at all!"

This happened in the evening, and afterwards I fell asleep, and slept through the night, and felt no sickness when I woke up in the morning, and I saw joy in Magdaleen's face — she seemed to be the one who was most happy about it.

And I knew that I had to accept what she was giving me, for I had an appointment to keep, a duty to fulfill, and my own death to die.

Abigail took off all her clothes, for not having them drenched in blood she said, but also because it seemed appropriate to her, I think. She sat down with outstretched legs, and Magdaleen sat down sideways on her lap, and stretched out her legs and spread them, and Sir Edmond put a log under Magdaleen's left thigh, and Abigail held

Magdaleen tightly to her own body, and Magdaleen's hands clung to Abigail's arms.

Sir Edmond had to swing the sword carefully so he wouldn't hurt Abigail or Magdaleen's other leg, and he needed two strikes to chop off the leg completely, close to the groin, and though he had heated the sword he had to heat it again to cauterize the wound and stop the bleeding, and there was so much blood pouring out of the stump, but Sir Edmond had already told us in advance not to worry about it, it would look bad but would not kill Magdaleen, and indeed it did not. She was very silent after one sharp cry of pain, and lay in Abigail's arms with eyes closed, breathing shallowly, but she did not die and she did not even faint.

We had plenty of food then, meat and soup and bone marrow and milk, and with the food my appetite returned and my health improved. Magdaleen ate her share too, not showing any aversion, and she insisted that Sir Edmond and Abigail do the same, as after several days of fasting they would not have the strength they needed for the two more days of marching across the snow-covered rugged mountain territory that still lay ahead of us, before we would reach the sunny soft late summer slopes of the Land of More.

These days of my recovery were quiet and almost peaceful — there was nothing for us to do but wait until I would be well enough to move on, and Sir Edmond, if he felt impatience, was kind enough not to show it.

I slept a lot, and when I was awake I often talked with Magdaleen, or listened to her talking with Sir Edmond and Abigail. From him she wanted to hear about life at the Queen's court, from Abigail about her art, and from me about the Land of Slain and all about what had happened during the Journey. And she told us wondrous tales about

her home country across the sea, its mountains and lakes and animals and plants and its people and their customs which seemed so strange to us, and how she had grown up and how she had become a slave, and how after many sufferings she had finally ended up being bought by the Priest who had brought her here, and who had been a good man, and had made her life tolerable, as long as his own had lasted.

When nothing was left of her leg to eat it was time to take her other leg, and again Abigail held her as Sir Edmond cut through her thigh and then cauterized the wound, and then Abigail's hand gently rested between Magdalen's stumps, and Magdalen's head rested upon Abigail's shoulders, their breasts touching, and I marveled at the beauty of this picture, regretting that I had none of Abigail's skills to make it last, to render it on paper or in stone.

~

The next day I felt strong enough to try to go out, and I spent two hours walking around the building, exploring, as Sir Edmond and Abigail had already done before, the path we had to follow, and watching a man and a woman taking turns in shoveling snow. They ignored me, as they all ignored us, out here as well as inside our shelter, and I did not ask them about their work, but they seemed to have made good progress and to have come close to reaching the first one of the houses under the deep snow, or at least the ruin that the avalanche had left, and to gain access to a hopefully unharmed underground larder.

After this excursion we knew that we would leave the next day.

"We could carry you with us," I said to Magdalen.

"This is sweet of you," she said, "but don't be stupid. You know you can't, I'd be a much too heavy load."

She was right, of course.

“Don’t look so sad,” she added. “I have achieved what I have come for, haven’t I? I am happy! So, we should be happy together, shouldn’t we?” And her smile was so bright and genuine that it dried my tears, and I hugged her and smiled with her.

In the middle of the night I woke up from uneasy dreams. Abigail and Magdaleen were lying next to me, spending Magdaleen’s last night in each other’s arms — Abigail stripped to the waist, Magdaleen, without legs, as naked as she had been ever since I had first seen her. A few feet away Sir Edmond was snoring lightly.

I felt more than I saw Abigail move, but then, in the faint red glow from the fireplace, I saw the blade in Abigail’s hand.

“Don’t,” I whispered, and put my hands on hers. The tip of the blade stopped a few inches away from Magdaleen’s chest, below her left breast.

“Not in her sleep,” I said, still whispering. “I don’t think that she would want it. Or have you talked about it with her?”

Silently, Abigail shook her head.

“Let’s ask her, please,” I said.

Again without a sound, Abigail let the knife slip back into its sheath, and wrapped her arms around Magdaleen’s sleeping body again.

I wanted to watch them, wanted to savor these last hours, but sleep soon overwhelmed me and closed my eyes and gave them the privacy that they deserved.

In the morning, we asked her.

“But you *remember* all the things they said they were going to do to you?” Abigail said, not comprehending Magdaleen’s “no.”

“Oh, I’m sure that they had time now to think up some even worse things to do,” Magdaleen replied. “But, I have given them a promise,

and I do not want breaking a promise to be the last thing I do in my life.”

“You would not break your promise,” Abigail said. “*I* would break it for you.”

“Still,” Magdaleen replied, “it would be *my* promise broken. They have their honor, too, you know. You have killed one of them, and they have still shown you hospitality. Don’t think they are cowards, these are people who face death every single day of their lives. They respect Sir Edmond’s sword, but they do not fear it. They could have easily killed you in your sleep and robbed you, and still they haven’t done it. I owe them, and you owe them too, to keep my part of the deal.”

“But ...”

“Do not worry, really, it won’t take long. Where I come from, we know how to keep victims alive for days if not weeks of torture, but *they*,” and here a note of contempt crept into Magdaleen’s voice, “they will just try to outdo each other in blundering excited violence — and, they have eaten the last of the blacksmith’s meat two days ago, they are hungry, they want to eat, more than they want to play. It will be bad, but it will be over quickly.”

“You ...”

“*No*. I have lived among them, I will die among them. I have given you what I could give, the rest is between me and them. There is one more favor I want to ask of you, though. Please pay them for your stay. They wouldn’t ask for it, but they really need it, you know, after all they have lost. Just leave at the door what you think is appropriate. Will you do that, please?”

It was still early in the morning. We had decided to leave as soon as we could — we had filled our waterskins with molten snow in the evening, and packed a supply of cooked meat — Magdaleen’s meat.

We would have our breakfast after a few hours of marching, already far away from here.

“One last share of milk, for each of you,” Magdaleen said, and for the last time we drank from her ample breasts, one after the other — first Sir Edmond, then Abigail, then I. Then, as there was nothing more to be said or done, we each kissed her goodbye, strapped our snow shows to our boots, and went on our way.

At the door Sir Edmond took out his pouch, opened it, and took a few small coins in his hand. Then he closed the pouch again, and, with a shrug, let it fall to the ground. There was more gold in it than anyone here had seen in their lifetime, I think.

Through the closing door, I looked back. Magdaleen was lying on her face, two men kneeling on her upper arms, left and right, bending her forearms back. I heard the cracking sound with which her elbows broke, and I heard a woman laugh.

Magdaleen’s screams were following us, through the smitty’s broken windows, echoing from the mountains, more and more distant, until we had left the mountain pass behind us.

This had been the first time, I suddenly realized, that my services as the Gift had neither been requested nor given. I neither could nor would have refused, but I had not offered myself, and I had to admit that I was glad I had not been asked. Sir Edmond, when we talked about it, said that I had neglected my duty, for these people too were subjects of the Queen and had their right to the Gift, and even though I was aware that he had said nothing about it at the time, I felt a pang of guilt. Abigail, always able to sense distress, took my hand and said, “You will be forgiven,” and though there was a trace of mockery in her voice, I felt comforted.

And then the path led around a bend, and we reached the place

Sir Edmund had told us about, the little rock platform from where, deep below us and still far away, stretching to the horizon, melting into the sky above, sparkling in the sun, magnificent and mysteriously blue, we caught our first glimpse of the Southern Sea.

CHAPTER 9: THE END

This first glimpse of the sea did not mean that we now had left the mountains behind us — to the contrary, there were still forbidding mountain ranges we had to cross, up and down steep ascents and descents made difficult and dangerous by snow drifts, snowmelt and treacherous ice. What we had with us of Magdaleen's meat was soon eaten, and when we had used up the water in the waterskins we had to eat snow to quench our thirst. When the sun went down on the first evening we had not found the cave shelter Sir Edmond had aimed for, its entrance probably being hidden under several feet of snow. Not finding a shelter for the night could easily have meant our deaths, but we felt light-hearted, we knew that luck would now be on our side, and when the moon came up, almost full, shining brightly, by its light we walked on, our strength and our confidence not failing us, until we found a cave that offered the protection we needed, and in which we lay down to sleep.

On the second day hunger, fatigue and the lack of any trail markers in this almost impassable landscape of rock and snow made our progress even more difficult, and we knew that each wrong turn or each wrong step could lead us hopelessly astray or plunge us down a deadly precipice, but if Sir Edmond ever had doubts about following the right path he did not show them, and though we talked little to save our breaths we kept up our good spirits. In the evening we found a cave where we spent the second night safely, and before noon of the third day, hungry and thirsty and cold and close to exhaustion but

unharmd and happy, we reached the outpost of the border guard of the Land of More.

We had been long awaited, and were received with honor and joy. We were taken into the huge stone building that was more luxuriously outfitted than some of the castles we had been to, where we were treated with hot tea and a hot bath and then served an ample meal with delicious wines, and after we had eaten we were led into a room with three comfortable beds in it, and I lay down on one of them, and fell asleep the moment I closed my eyes.

In the morning, after our breakfast, the Commander of the outpost politely asked me to honor him by serving him, and he smiled when I said that I was the one to be honored. After he was satisfied, I did my best to provide the men and women of the garrison with the pleasures that were the Gift's to give. A little rough play from the men left my breasts with a few bruises, and two of the women caused me some pain by thrusting their fists deep into my vagina, which they also happily did to each other and asked me to do to them, and then some others picked up the idea until I felt quite sore inside, but it was all done joyfully, and everyone had a good time, and despite the pain which I bore bravely these were happy hours for me, after all we had been through lately.

~

The ride down from the mountains I remember as the most beautiful part of the Journey. Three days we rode on the gently sloping path that, while taking us down, was also taking us east, towards our goal, towards the magnificent Beautiful City that waited for us, and those three days, slowly descending, we were blessed with the caresses of the warm gentle summer wind on our skins and with that incomparable

view of the cloudless sky and the luminous blue sea and the wondrous southern landscape that lay before and below us like an open book. When we got lower, this landscape looked more and more like a magnificent garden, and I marveled at the well-kept vast vineyards and the extensive fields of flowers — their scents telling of the precious perfumes that were made out of them — and most of all I was delighted by all those precious trees that I had never seen before — oil trees, palm trees, orange and lemon trees, fig trees ... how they flourished and bore their fruits in splendid abundance!

For the nights we stayed at posts of the Queen's Guard, which were built along the road at intervals of about ten miles from each other. They were unpretentious buildings, with white walls, small and only lightly fortified, their flat roofs bearing battlements that were more decoration than defense, but inside they were richly furnished, comfortable and well-kept, giving the impression of royal guest houses rather than of military barracks.

What a happy Land, that was able to enjoy all its wealth and beauty in peace!

"Do not be mistaken by this peacefulness," Sir Edmond said. "It is the Navy that bears the burden of protecting this Land. And down at the coast the fortresses are heavily fortified and armed."

"*Pirates?*" Abigail asked, with fascinated excitement that might have been genuine or playfully acted.

"They are the most difficult to deter," Sir Edmond affirmed, and Abigail sighed and gave a little performance of looking out eagerly over the sea that was still distant and far below, straining her eyes in a futile search of some ship that might fly crossbones and skull.

"You won't see any," Sir Edmond said, a bit gratuitously.

"What a pity," Abigail replied, and for a moment she sounded so

innocent and young, such a disappointed sweet little girl, that I hugged her and gave her a kiss, and she looked at me quite surprised, and then she returned my kiss, and now *I* looked surprised, and then we both started to laugh, and laughed loudly and happily until we were out of breath.

~

When we were shown our room at the first of those posts that we stayed in, I saw that here too there were three beds, and I understood that as the Journey was nearing its end, some things changed. Something else had changed, too — I was not called upon to give pleasure with my body.

“Why do they not ask me to serve them?” I asked Sir Edmond.

“In the Queen’s own realm, now that we have left the border post behind us, you only serve *her*,” he replied.

“What a disappointment for you,” Abigail said, but she had read the shadow that crossed my face wrongly — deliberately, I suppose. That shadow came from my thought about the *one* whom I was still not allowed to serve, for whom, though he was so close, I still had to wait.

When the night came, I did not use the bed, after all — I asked for the privilege of being allowed to sleep on the roof.

I was given several blankets, but I used them only to lie on them — I did not cover myself, I lay on my back naked, under the full moon, and, after it had gone down, under the myriads of stars, in the cool breeze that drifted in from the sea, bringing with it the sea’s scents, and those of the flowers and trees I had seen during the day, and they mingled with my own scent, as I carressed myself with both hands, my face, my shoulders, my breasts, my belly, my thighs, my sex ...

I spent all the three nights of this last part of the Journey on the roofs of the posts where we stayed, alone for the first time after all those months, and I even stayed during the thunderstorm on the third night. The lightning first appeared far away over the sea, and then rapidly drew nearer, until I was in the middle of it, engulfed by its incessant flashes and the constant roar of the thunder. Hardly able to breathe in the torrential rain that poured down upon me, with my mouth open to receive the celestial waters, I lay there, on my back, naked, relishing nature as it greeted me, or as it showed its utter disregard — and deeply enjoying the awareness that it did not matter one way or the other.

Until the trap-door opened, and Abigail's head appeared, and she cried out at the top of her voice to make herself heard through the roaring thunder, asking me if I was mad to stay outside on the roof during a storm of lightning, and telling me to come in *immediately*, and that Sir Edmond had said that this was an *order*.

Only then did I realize how wet and cold I had become, and I followed her willingly down to our room, and rubbed myself dry and warm with towels, but I did not go to sleep, and when the storm had passed I returned to the roof. My blankets were soaked, so I sat down in a corner on the smooth stone surface of the roof, leaning my back against the low wall that still held some of the day's warmth in it, and watched the pale reflections of the now distant lightning on the clouds above the sea, until I finally dozed off again.

The morning came with a clear blue sky, and I made exercises in the sun's rays to warm myself up, before I opened the trap-door and went down to ask Sir Edmond and Abigail to come up and admire the view with me. This was the last morning of our trip, we were near now to the Beautiful City, it lay less than ten miles away and maybe a

thousand feet below us, and we could see it clearly from our roof, a symphony of sparkling lights as its famous walls and houses and palaces and temples and turrets and spires of polished white and pink and green and black marble reflected the golden light of the morning sun, more beautiful than I had ever imagined it to be, from all the descriptions that I had read and heard.

Sir Edmond, who was familiar with all this beauty, said he appreciated the view, but soon went down again, leaving Abigail and me to ourselves.

We stood next to each other, me still naked, both of us lost in the view, lost in our own thoughts. From here on, I knew, we would not ride together. I would not ride anymore at all — a carriage would soon come to fetch me, and bring me straight to the Queen's palace. For whatever reason, once in the palace I was not supposed to see Sir Edmond or Abigail again. This was good-bye. The next time we would meet would be at the ceremony, where Sir Edmond would finally make love to me, and where Abigail would watch me die, to draw inspiration for her art, for that statue of me that would be *her* gift to the Queen-dom, her part of our mission, and, ultimately, would be our Journey's completion.

"You don't have to die, you know," Abigail said, breaking the silence.

"What do you mean?" I asked her.

"Tell the Queen you don't want to die. She will respect your wish, after all that you have done for the Queendom."

"But the ceremony?" — What was Abigail talking about?

"Oh, they'll take one of the girls from the palace, one of the Queen's servants, they'll find one who looks similar enough to you, and who will know the difference?"

“And the poor girl?” I asked.

“Oh, one day she’ll spill some wine on the Queen’s bedroom carpets, or bring her a breakfast egg that is too hard-boiled or too raw, and then she’ll die in torture anyway, so just don’t fret about her.”

“What a crazy idea,” I said.

“Not crazy at all,” Abigail aswered, “it has been done before, and not rarely.”

“How would you know?” I asked.

“Sir Edmond told me.”

“And why didn’t he tell *me*?”

“Because he wanted to spare you the pain of having to decide. He said you wouldn’t let some other girl die for you, but naturally you’d agonize over the decision, and dying would be so much harder for you if you knew that it wasn’t *necessary*, that it wasn’t demanded, that you could just as well have decided to live.”

“How little he knows me,” I said.

“I know,” Abigail said.

“So why did *you* tell me?”

She took some time to answer, and when she finally spoke, it was in a whisper.

“I do not want you to die,” she said.

I took her in my arms, and we stood like this for several minutes before she disentangled herself from my arms, and without looking back walked to the trap-door that still stood open, and disappeared down the stairs, softly closing the lid behind her.

She was not there when I finally went down, and got dressed, and had a cup of orange juice for breakfast, and when the Queen’s carriage arrived, and Sir Edmond politely said goodbye and wished me a good stay at the palace, and when I equally politely said goodbye to him,

but could not resist to add that I looked forward to our next meeting. He looked a bit embarrassed, the poor man — ah, what would I have given for making love to him right then and there! But I knew that it could not be, so I turned and stepped into the carriage, where a nice-looking servant girl was waiting for me, and the coachman closed the door, and we drove off.

~

Our approach to the castle was unspectacular, and to my disappointment I did not see much of the Beautiful City, as we entered the palace directly through a small door in the city wall, on the back side of the town — but then, I was not here on a sightseeing tour, was I?

The servant girl silently led me along endless corridors, up and down flights of stairs, some of them narrow and winding, others wide and opening onto large halls, until she showed me into the room that was to be mine. It was a comfortable room, with a large soft bed, two chairs, a small desk with drawers, a wardrobe, a full-sized mirror, and in one corner washbowl, shower — with taps for cold and warm water! — and toilet. There was a window that looked out on a small empty court; from the bed, I could see a small section of the sky.

This room I had to myself — its door even had a bolt on the inside, though of course I never locked it. I was in no way confined to my room; within this part of the palace I could move freely, and use all of its amenities — among them a steam bath, an indoor swimming pool, a gymnastics room, and a small library. This was the palace's guest wing; it was built to house a hundred people or more, the Queen's noble guests at conferences or festivities, but for now I seemed to be its only occupant. And as I walked through the empty halls and corridors, hearing nothing but the echo of my footsteps, I pictured them bristling

with life, filled with excited people from all ranks and all corners of the Queendom, men and women of all ages and appearances — and they were all enjoining the anticipation of a very special event which they had been invited to attend — and I smiled, for they all had come on *my* account, had come to see *me* — had come to see me *die* ...

I was not completely alone, of course, there were servant girls and boys doing their work of cleaning and maintenance; these servants seemed shy to talk to me, and, to my own surprise, I felt little inclined to start conversations with them myself. There were two girls who personally attended to me, their names were Valerie and Vivian, but also with them I talked little. I declined their offer to bathe me, shave me, and rub my skin with scented oils, seeing no reason why I should not do this myself, as I had always done — I happily tried out the precious soaps, oils and beauty creams, though, that they provided me with, and I did agree to their offer of a daily massage, and was surprised to find out how much I liked it.

Four meals a day were brought to my room, light meals consisting mostly of sea-food, vegetables and fruits, and I had water and wine to drink, and each day my room was cleaned, and I was brought fresh towels and bed linen and dressing gowns. These gowns were all of the same make, though their colors changed — made of finest soft silk, held together at the front only by a pair of ribbons tied below the uncovered breasts, and freely swinging open from the navel down whenever I moved — an appealing design, beautifully done, and all through my stay at the palace I never tired of looking at myself with childish pleasure in the many mirrors of the corridors and halls, enjoying the daily changing colors that I wore, and how the colors of my skin and hair and eyes and lips and nipples and areolas contrasted or accentuated them, and I watched how those colors looked different

in the ever changing light that fell in through the windows as the sun followed its daily course from East to West, windows that were large but set too high up in the walls to provide a view other than that of the sky, and how those colors looked different again at dusk, and at night in the flickering light of the candles.

~

On the third day, instead of having my evening meal brought to my room, I was told that the Queen wanted me to join her for dinner, and I was led along endless corridors and up many flights of stairs to the room in which all our meetings would take place — a small room high up in one of the towers of the Queen's private wing of the castle. Its three windows offered a magnificent view over the sea, over large parts of the town, and of the mountains in the distance, and the Queen was kind enough to let me have a good look and take in the incomparable beauty of her city. The room was furnished with nothing but a small table with two chairs, where the meals were served — herself and me being the only diners — and a huge comfortable bed, in which several times during my stay I had the honor of being requested by the Queen to sexually please her. Sometimes she was content with being served by me alone, sometimes she added to her delights by having male or female members of the royal household attend, but always it was a pleasure for me to see how naturally she behaved, how effortlessly she achieved her orgasms, and how genuinely she seemed to enjoy my presence.

But this was to be in the future. When I was led into that room for the first time, and the girl who had brought me had turned around and left, I found myself facing a slightly plump large-breasted middle-aged woman, reclining on a couch, her upper body propped up on some

pillows, nude but for a purple velvet shawl draped around her shoulders, looking at me expectantly. I was self-conscious and shy — I had met Princesses and Princes during the past months, and talked with them and served them — but this was the *Queen!*

How quickly she made me forget my shyness, how heartily she made me feel welcome with her warm smile, her open arms, her casually spread legs! “May I, my Queen?” I asked, and she answered by slowly spreading her legs a little further, and I stepped up to her and buried my head between her thighs and gave my best to please her, and I was soon rewarded for my efforts by the pleasures which I succeeded in giving her, and which she made no attempts to conceal. Afterwards she said kind words of welcome to me, and kindly asked me whether there was anything I needed or wished for, to make my stay at the castle more comfortable; finally, dismissing me for the day, she said she looked forward to our future meetings, as she was eager to hear all I had to tell about the Journey and the Land that I came from. I returned to my room happy, only now fully becoming aware of the apprehension with which I had anticipated this meeting, this crucial test of whether I’d be deemed adequate to the task, whether I’d *be* adequate, and I gratefully admired how gracefully she had dispelled all my fears.

In all the time that I was in her presence, whether alone or in other people’s company, whether engaged in sexual play or in conversation, or occasionally being present when she conducted governmental matters, I never witnessed any instance of her cruelty that on several occasions I had heard mentioned. During sex she sometimes wanted to be handled roughly — only by males, never by me — and when those men assumed I was to be treated likewise or slightly worse she did nothing to restrain them, but there was no meanness in this. Likewise,

when dealing with matters of justice and order she was strict, but, whatever the crimes and whoever the culprits, I never saw her impose or sanction any wanton or spiteful punishments.

To my own surprise I rarely thought of Sir Edmond or Abigail, but each time a girl brought in a tray of food or drink into the Queen's chamber I remembered how Abigail had told me, before we parted, how a girl would die in horrible torture if she had the misfortune of spilling wine before the Queen — and one day, as if my thoughts had conjured it up, this accident actually happened. The girl tripped over a cushion that lay on the carpet, the tray flew out of her hands, the jug of wine with it, discharging its content in a wide arc, and the red wine spilled on the Queen, the carpet, the couch with its silken throw, and even on the wall behind it.

She was a pretty girl, petite, firm breasts, long dark hair, and big and even darker eyes. I saw how she paled. She picked up the now almost empty jug and put it on the table, but made no futile attempt at cleaning up, she just stood still, facing the Queen, her eyes cast down.

“Report to the steward,” the Queen said, in a calm voice. “Twenty lashes. After you’ve stopped bleeding, resume your work.”

“Thank you, my Queen,” the girl said.

“And tell her not to spare your cunt,” the Queen added.

“Yes, my Queen, thank you.” The girl, still pale, bowed and left.

The Queen read something in my face that made her ask me, when we were alone, with a slight frown, “Did you deem her punishment too severe?”

“How could I judge, my Queen?” I said. “But, to tell the truth, from what I had heard I had expected worse for her.”

“Oh, you mean you thought I would have her spitted, skinned, dismembered and then slowly tortured to death!” She laughed. “Well,

I won't ask you where you've heard such sinister appraisal of my justice. I know this is what people think, because this is how they want their Queen to be. And *sometimes*," she smiled, "I have to give them proof that their trust in my cruelty is not entirely misplaced. But for this mishap, I think that twenty lashes will suffice. A few tears shed for a little wine spilled. The steward is a strong woman who knows how to make a girl cry, and who sorely regrets that she doesn't get the chance to do it more often. She's responsible for palace discipline, though, and I hope she doesn't insist on also punishing the poor wench who had carelessly dropped the cushion where the tray-bearer might stumble over it!"

When I actually asked "Why?" the Queen made a very serious face, and in a bashful voice said, "Because that was *me*, I'm afraid." Then she broke out in a hilarious laughter, and though I failed to fully understand what had been *that* funny about it I could not help but laugh with her, join in her laughter that was so joyful and youthful that it seemed to take away all the burdens of her responsibilities as well as twenty years of her age, and without thinking and without being invited I bent over and kissed her. She thanked me by taking my head into her hands and drawing it to her body, to where her skin was still red and wet from the wine, little rivulets running down from her shoulders over her breasts and belly to disappear between her thighs, and it did not take long before she succumbed to another one of her splendid orgasms.

The Queen was a keen observer, though, and not one to ever forget any issue that had not satisfactorily been cleared up, however unimportant it might seem to be.

"There *was* something that displeased you, in my dealing with that clumsy tart," she said.

While I still struggled to come up with an appropriate answer, she slapped her forehead. “Oh my,” she giggled, “I forgot you are from the *North!*” The way she said it, it sounded like a very peculiar place to be from. “Really, you were shocked by my saying the word *cunt!*”

“I apologize deeply, my Queen, for having given this impression,” I said, framing my answer carefully, “but so far I had only heard it spoken in vulgar speech, and with a demeaning intent.”

“Ah, but you’ll have to get used to it here,” she said, somehow ignoring, I thought, the fact that there would be little time left for me to get used to anything. “What other word should I have used? Sex? How disingenious. Pussy? How childish. Vulva? Clitoris? Vagina? Do any of these words truly appeal to you? Do they do justice to the *wholeness* of this organ, instead of partitioning it most unnaturally into separate components? No,” she said, and, putting her hands between my legs, pressing her fingers against my mons, spreading my labia, entering my vagina, circling my clit, “this is your *cunt*, and you should be *proud* of it!”

“Yes, my Queen,” I said, gently pressing my thighs together, capturing her hand between them.

“Say it,” she said.

“Cunt,” I said, with a little effort that must have been showing in my voice.

“Say it,” she said again.

“My cunt,” I said. “Your cunt. My Queen’s cunt,” and I bent down, to give it the loving attention with my tongue, not only in words, that it deserved.

“Cunt is a very honorable word, you know,” she said afterwards, not letting the topic rest, maybe feeling the need for further justification opposite an uneducated girl from a distant rural province. “It stems

from the same ancient root, denoting femininity, from which not only *cow*, but also *knowledge*, and even *queen* derived. So, you see,” she smiled, and her fingers started to play on my body again, “the Gift has no reason to be offended by her Queen’s foul language.”

What an extraordinary woman she was! Able to read people’s feelings and thoughts, and seeing this not as a way to gain power over them, but as an opportunity to help, and to edify, and to expand the scopes of their minds.

In the short weeks of my stay at her castle, at the limited occasions of our meetings, I learned so much from her, even though it was mostly me who spoke — after all, it was my task to talk to her, to faithfully tell her the tales of my experiences during the months of the Journey, so that they might happen to give her a few fresh insights, from a new perspective, into the affairs of the distant Lands of her Queendom.

So it was I who talked, only occasionally interrupted by one of her questions, but it was the keen attentiveness with which she listened to me, and the particular questions that she asked, that educated me about the way of her thinking, about how she strove for information, about what was important for her, and about how she determinedly worked at increasing her knowledge and adding to her wisdom, not for her own benefit, but because this was what being the Queen demanded.

I *learned*, and it diverted my thoughts from the prospects of the tortures that were waiting for me, from the day when my death would be the Gift’s final gift, would be the fulfillment of my mission.

Did I fear this day, or did I long for it, as I should have done? How far away was it? I had lost count of the date. The Queen called for me rarely now, and if she did, my visits to her were short, as of both my

tales and my body by now she had received all that she had been in need of.

These last days, which I increasingly spent alone, had a dream-like quality about them. I tried to tell myself that they were the last days of my life, that I should therefore live them with full awareness, but they just kept slowly slipping away.

What did I think about during these days? I do not really remember. My death? Not much. My former life before I had become the Gift? Not at all. I did think about the past months — now that I had told the Queen all that I had known to tell, they already seemed so distant to me. I thought about Abigail, realizing that I missed her. And I thought about Sir Edmond, of course, often. Oh, how I longed to be touched by him, to feel him, to be the object of his passion, to share my desires with him! How long had I waited for him, how painful had this waiting been, and how soon would it be over now!

How soon it would all be over now ... or, no, not *all*, only me ... and how little did that matter ... nothing, nothing at all ...

~

It was in the late afternoon that the Torturer came to my room. I had thought I would be taken to the torture chamber for this meeting.

“There is no torture chamber in the palace,” he said. He was a stranger here, like me, and we had come together here for a common purpose.

And, for this our purpose, he now made me stand before him, and he moved his firm fingers over my body, touching, grasping, with sober professional grips. He felt my bones, my muscles, my tendons, my joints. He pressed my arms, my legs, my ribs, my face and my head, he

groped my vulva and my breasts, which almost disappeared under his large hands.

“I am sorry that they are so small,” I said.

“Don’t worry,” he answered, “they will do fine.”

This was the only conversation we had during his examination. On and on his hands investigated me, returning to areas already explored, finding new places to probe, sometimes tenderly, sometimes painfully. The world consisted of nothing more than my body and his hands — and suddenly I realized that I was aroused, violently aroused, and there was no way of hiding it from him, neither from his eyes nor from his hands, but why would I have wanted to hide it? I felt deeply embarrassed, and the embarrassment added to my arousal. I stood there, watching his eyes slowly wander across every inch of my body, where his hands had been, where, so soon, his needles and knives and tongs and torches and all the other instruments of his art would be.

I saw him look at my open sex, I saw the arousal in his eyes, I saw the bulk in his pants. “Please, *please!*” I said.

I was shivering with excitement, not daring to move, not daring to touch him or to touch myself, hardly daring to breathe ...

He did not answer, he just shook his head.

“Please,” I said, once more, but I knew he wouldn’t, and then I could not control myself, could not control my hands, and there, humiliating myself before the man who would torture me to death, I masturbated, not able to stop myself before I reached an orgasm that made me cry out, made me shut my eyes, made me lose the strength in my legs and my sense of up and down, made me falter and stumble, and would have made me fall had he not caught me in his strong arms.

Gently, he led me to the bed and made me lie down.

He waited until I had recovered my senses.

“You are delicate and strong, passionate and vulnerable, you will die an extraordinary death,” he said.

“Thank you,” I said, and took his hands into mine, and kissed them, and cleaned them from the blood that had dropped on them when I had bitten my lips. “Thank you.”

“I know your body now,” he said, “but I also have to know your mind.”

“How can you get to know it?”

“By you telling me about yourself, how else?” he said.

“So you think I do have more to say then ‘please’ and ‘thank you,’ then?” I smiled.

“I know you do,” he said seriously.

“Do you promise that everything I tell you will remain confidential, even after I’ll be dead?” I asked, and he promised. So I told him, about my life, about my childhood, about my parents, my brothers and my sister, about my aspirations, about my fantasies, my hopes, my fears, my dreams, my nightmares — I told him things I had never told anyone before, and never would have told anyone else, and that I hadn’t even known that I knew them to tell. I do not know how long I talked, guided by his mindful and considerate questions, but it must have been a long time, and he never stopped listening.

“Isn’t it strange,” I finally said, “that all my thoughts and memories will die with me, in a few days, and one day they will die with you, so that in the end it will not have made any difference that I have told you all this, here and today?”

“It influences the way I see you,” he replied, “and it influences the way you see yourself, so it will influence the way we will interact, at the ceremony. It will give your death a different feeling, a different meaning, it will make it more intense, more personal, more agonizing,

more beautiful, more true, and all this will be visible. It will influence the people who will watch you die, it will influence the Queen. What had been a deeply spiritual ceremony long ago, is now seen by many as nothing more than a crude spectacle for their entertainment, but some will still be able to look deeper, and they will be moved. And it will be seen in the work of the Artist, even if she herself may not fully realize it, and this work is going to endure. No, it will not be lost!”

I thought of Sir Edmond, the first time since the Torturer had come to my room.

“He will finally make love to me, after it has been forbidden to him for so long.”

It was an entirely inconsequential thought, and only after I had said it I realized that I had spoken aloud.

He understood whom I was talking about.

“Is this what he has told you?” he asked me.

“Yes — he must not have any sexual contact with me until he uses me at the ceremony, initiating it, before you begin my torture.”

“He has lied to you,” the Torturer said. “He refused you because he feared he might come to feel too close to you, because he feared he might not be able to stand the pain of losing you, if you had been lovers.”

“So he let me suffer all this pain only to protect his own weakness?”

“Yes,” he said, and I knew it was the truth.

“Do not judge him too harshly,” he added, “it shows that he cares for you.”

“No, it does not,” I said. I felt like crying, but thankfully the tears did not come. “It only shows he was afraid he *might* care.”

He shrugged. “I’m sure it isn’t easy for him,” he said.

“It isn’t easy for me, either,” I replied, and for a short while we were both silent.

“There is one more thing I need to do,” he said, “I have to see your reaction to pain.”

“I hate pain,” I said. “Pain is horrible. I fear it. As I fear dying.” My voice was so low that I was surprised he even heard my last words.

“And still you do this *willingly*?” he asked — but he must have known the answer, must he not? I gave it anyway.

“If I loved pain, or if I did not mind it, or if I *wanted* to die, it all would be meaningless, wouldn’t it? There wouldn’t be a *point* to my sacrifice, would there?”

“No, there wouldn’t,” he said, and then he asked me to stand up again, with my back against the wall, with my legs slightly spread. He took a small metal object from his pouch — I tried not to look at it — held it between my thighs — I felt it touching my clit — and then I saw the muscles of his arm tense, and felt a pressure, and then a sudden pain hit me with a force that I had never experienced before. In vain I clenched my teeth to stifle my scream, I heard myself yelling out my agony, and after an eternity that could only have lasted a minute or less I lost all control and grabbed his hand with both of my hands and pushed it away with all the force that was left to me, and though I could never have forced his hand away against his will he let go, and I slipped down, crumbling to the floor, tucking up my legs and turning my face away from him in shame, and there I lay sobbing until I was able to pull myself together and struggle to my feet again.

“I am so sorry,” I said, quivering, resuming my position against the wall. Blood was dripping down from between my legs. “I am so sorry! Forgive me, *please*, and go on, with what you have to do.”

“Forgive you? How could I?” he said, and I cringed, but then I

realized there was no scorn in his voice, nor in his face. “You are the *Gift*,” he said. “You are far above my reprobation, or my forgiving. You answer to your conscience, and to your gods, if you believe in them. Not to anyone else, not even to the Queen, and certainly not to me.”

“But the shame ...” I said.

“Of showing your pain?” he answered. “It is only shameful to show weakness in the face of your enemies. You will be among friends when you die. You do not have to hide your pain from them.”

“But I want to give them an example ... something to remember ... something to look up to ...”

“You already do this by dying for them,” he said.

“No,” I said. “No, please! I have to be strong. I know I can. It is just ... hard. But I ... I must *try*. Please let me try again!”

He hesitated.

“Or do you think this is *pride*?” I asked, trying to fight back my tears.

“No,” he said, and his voice was kind. “No, it isn’t pride if you want to do something right.”

I bent down and kissed his hand.

“Get up, then,” he said, “and close your eyes.”

I did, and I stood there before him, immobile, unseeing, naked, legs spread, entirely his to practice his art on. For *me*. He let me wait a long time. I heard his quiet breathing, and the occasional clanking of metal, as he searched his bag for the right tool. Once he touched me, gently, with his hand; my face, my breasts, my crotch that was dry from fear. When the pain finally came, it came without warning. Something entered my body, and exploded in agony, in a fiery all-engulfing unrelenting intensity that I had not thought to be possible to feel. Even less possible had I thought it to be that I could bear this pain without

breaking, but I did. I did not scream, I did not beg, I did not fight, I did not try to escape. I did faint, though, in the end.

When I came to, I was alone — except for the remnants of the pain that were still with me, raging through my whole body. I was lying on the floor, in a pool of blood and urine, unable to move, but I knew I had not given in. Everything was all right. I had won. I was happy.

I lay there until Valerie came into my room, cleaned me, helped me into my bed, and then cleaned the floor. Later she brought me a cup with a bitter liquid — “It will help you to sleep,” she said — and I drank it gratefully. “I am sorry that I cannot give you more of this before ... you know ...”

“I know, my dear,” I said, and tried to smile for her. “And I wouldn’t want it.”

“You are so brave,” she said. “I wish I were like you.”

“Don’t,” I said.

She was kneeling in front of the bed, as if waiting for me to give her something which I did not have to give.

“Can you stay a while?” I asked, and she said yes, and lay down next to me on the bed, on her back, and I curled up to her, and put my head on her shoulder, and a hand on one of her breasts, and so we stayed, and I fell asleep.

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When I woke up the next morning, I knew that this was the day. How did I know it? Had I known it all along? Had either the Torturer or Valerie told me? Or did I know it from the muffled sounds that came in through the closed door of my room? The sounds of people, walking, talking, asking questions, laughing, carrying bags, opening and closing doors — had I heard them in my sleep? All those people who had

come to visit the ceremony, who had arrived not a day too early, and who were now filling up this guest wing where I had been the solitary occupant for so many days ...

Valerie came and brought me a cup with a thin soup — my breakfast, my last meal. Shortly thereafter, she gave me an enema. I knew that the ceremony would begin in the late afternoon — how many hours from now? Six? Eight?

Valerie offered to stay with me, or to send Vivian, but I declined. I wanted to be alone. There was nothing for me to do. I had finished reading a book the day before, and I did not feel like beginning a new one — besides, for a book I would have had to go to the library, and I did not want to leave my room, I did not want to encounter the visitors, to be stared at by them, to be talked to, to be whispered about. They would get what they had come for soon enough. They would get it from me. I would give it to them. I, the Gift, would give them my body, my life. How incredible, how amazing, how wonderful! What more could I ever have wanted? What more could *anyone* want?

I lay on my bed, looking at the ceiling, and out at the blue sky. From time to time I tried to touch myself, carefully, for everything down there still hurt, but it was a mechanical exercise, without arousal, and my mind was empty and blank.

Time passed.

I closed my eyes.

My mind drifted ...

I had seen the place where the ceremony would be held from one of the windows in the Queen's room. She had casually pointed it out to me: a small platform at the end of a pier that stretched out some 300 feet into the sea from the embankment in front of the flight of terraces that fell from the castle to the shore — a spacious open

landscape with its famous fountains and carefully trimmed lawns and well-tended flower-beds, filled with people strolling along its paths and resting on its benches, single or in couples or in small groups, leisurly enjoying the sunshine and the beauty around them ...

And today they would have the opportunity to enjoy a rarer treat ...

This would be the common public — the guests of honor would watch me die from much closer. The pier itself was too narrow to accomodate more than the few people directly involved in the ceremony, so the spectators would be seated on tiers mounted to large floating rafts — floating in the water west of the pier, with the afternoon sun in their backs — ah, they would be able to take in every detail! The Queen setting the ceremony in motion, Sir Edmond's act of love that I had longed for for so long, then the Torturer's slow and thorough work, the agony and abandon on my face ... and should I still be alive after the sun had set, torches would be ready to dispel the darkness ... yes, they would see it all — and I knew all this, without remembering to have been told, or to have asked ...

After a long time, the knock on the door came.

Without having given it much thought, I had expected I would walk the distance from the palace to the pier, but in this I was wrong. Two men came to to fetch me from my room with a sedan chair — a closed cabin, with dense curtains drawn before the windows on its sides. They were friendly, soft-spoken and shy in a way that was strangely at odds with their huge tanned muscular bodies, bare above their waists.

"May we come in?" one of them hesitatingly asked, and then the other one said, "We have come a few minutes early ..." He paused. "We wonder, whether we may ask you — as you are the Gift — whether you might ..." — he *blushed*.

"If you say that there is time," I said and smiled. My vagina still

hurt — besides, it was Sir Edmond's today, and the Torturer's, after him, whatever he would do to it — so I served them with my fingers and my mouth, dividing my attention between them, relishing their pleasure and arousal and receiving their sperm with their final satisfaction.

“Thank you,” one of them said, and the other one cleared his throat and nodded.

“It is me who has to thank you,” I said, and I meant it.

Giving pleasure ... what could be more gratifying than that? And what better way, what *other* way, could there be for me to give it?

Could there have been, I silently corrected myself — after all, this would soon be past now ...

“Do I take my gown?” I asked, and they shook their heads. I walked out of the room without looking back, and courteously if a bit clumsily they helped me into the sedan chair. “Actually, why don't we just walk?” I wanted to know, before they closed the door. “My legs would not fail me.”

“Oh no! Do not think ... but ... there have been ... incidents ... when the Gift walked past the spectators, incidents which ... violated the dignity of the event — so it has been decided that is better ...”

“Fine,” I interrupted him, and finally they picked up their load, a slim naked girl in an ornate wooden box on her way to her slow, painful public death. Occasionally I peeked from behind the curtain as they carried me along corridors, up and down stairs, through parts of the palace that I had never been to, and finally through a door, out into the afternoon light of day, onto the uppermost terrace, down the flights of terraces to the embankment, onto the pier, along its length ... and then we were there.

I stepped out of the small cabin, blinded for a moment by the

bright sunlight, before I saw the platform with the pillar in front of me. The platform was circular, some fifteen feet in diameter, and constituted the end of the pier; three steps led up to it. The pillar had about twice my circumference and was some ten feet high. Both platform and pillar looked very impressive, being made from solid green marble that was infused with veins of dark red, like the color of dried blood; looking at their intricate swirling patterns for too long would make a person's head spin, I thought. From the top of the pillar hung two heavy chains, with solid shackles at their ends. With my arms stretched out above my head, they would reach down to my wrists. Two more shackles were attached to the pillar's base, waiting for my ankles. No need to keep them waiting.

I walked up the few steps to the pillar and turned around, resting my back against the smooth and warm stone. I was looking towards the shore now, slightly facing to the left. I saw the big rafts with the guests of honor drifting in the calm water, I saw the eager and expectant faces, I saw their appraising eyes take in the anguish that I could not keep from showing on my face, I saw them scrutinize each detail of that body that was now fully on display for them — this naked tender body — *my* body, that had arrived at the end of its own journey now ... to my embarrassment, under their intent gazes I felt a twing of arousal stir between my legs.

Farther away, on the beach and on the terraces, there was a huge crowd of spectators, and I was touched by how many had turned up to witness the ceremony. And behind the terraces and the crowd, lined up in front of the castle wall, just discernible in the distance, were the statues — the statues of all the Gifts who had given their lives before me ... I had hardly thought of my statue since I had arrived at the palace, and now it came back to me, this overwhelming feeling that

soon there would be a statue of myself among them — I saw it standing there, I saw myself in it, huge, of solid stone, enduring, beautiful, forever looking out onto the never-changing sea, a small but everlasting part in an eternal ever-growing line — forever crediting me with having lived my life and having been chosen to give it ...

And here in front of me, not fifty feet away, was she who would create this monument, who would give me this time-defying dignity and beauty, how little I ever deserved it — the Artist, Abigail. She was sitting on a stool, a sketchbook on her lap, a pencil in her hand, and next to her sat the three other people to whom I owed all that had happened and that would happen: Sir Edmond, the Queen, and the Torturer. They all looked at me, as if waiting to see whether I was ready. I was.

My anguish was gone now, and also my arousal, and in their stead my mind and my body were filled with a pervasive feeling of contentment, of accomplishment, of gratitude.

And now the Queen rose, and, carrying the stool on which she had sat she walked up to the platform, and up the three steps, and then she knelt down before me and fastened the shackles around my ankles, for which I slightly had to spread my legs, and then she stepped upon the stool, and I raised my arms, and she closed the shackles around my wrists, before she got off the stool again.

“Thank you, my Queen,” I said.

The chains must have been tailored to my height, for they held me stretched out with my heels still resting on the ground, and likewise did the shackles fit my ankles and wrists to a tee, holding them tight but without painful pressure — with amazement I noticed that they were padded with soft leather inside.

“Are you comfortable?” the Queen asked me, and I almost had to

laugh at the question, but of course I didn't, and seeing in her eyes the sincerity of her concern I thanked her again, and truthfully said that yes, I was.

"It is we who have to thank," she said, and then with her left hand she touched my breasts, then my crotch, and then she put her hand to her own lips. Then, taking my head in both of her hands, she kissed me, a firm but quick kiss, not long enough for me to wonder whether I was meant to kiss her back. "I bless you, my child," she spoke the ceremonial words. And then she picked up the stool, and walked back and resumed her place between Sir Edmond and the Torturer.

Sir Edmond was the next to approach, and suddenly I realized that I would not talk to Abigail again, and that she would not get closer to me again than she was now, fifty feet away, for her role in the ceremony was strictly to be that of an observer. But then, we had said goodbye on the day we had arrived at the Beautiful City, and what more could there possibly be for us to say to each other?

It is strange that I thought of Abigail when Sir Edmond was walking up to me, isn't it? When that moment finally came, the moment that I had so keenly been desiring for so long ... when Sir Edmond disrobed and stood before me naked, as I had seen him so often, but never before had seen him being naked for *me*.

His penis was limp, and I regretted that, immobilized by my shackles, I could not lend him a helping hand or mouth. Abigail, I was sure, would gladly have assisted, but that was out of the question — a bit awkwardly, Sir Edmond worked his penis with his hand, and then he squeezed my breasts and bent down to kiss them, and then he rubbed his penis against my crotch and finally he got hard, and entered me. Since he was much taller than me he had to bend his legs to gain access, and this put him into an inconvenient position. Again, there

was little I could do to help, since the shackles on my ankles kept me from getting up on my tiptoes — they should have positioned me a few inches higher, I thought.

I felt his strong body pressing against mine, pressing me hard against the pillar — other than that, I felt nothing. It was my own fault, I knew, for my mind wasn't in it, and, I believe, his wasn't either. This public mating of the Envoy and the Gift — what ancient symbolic meaning did it have? Did he know and understand it? I did not need to understand, of course, I only needed to be there for this ceremony, and I was happy that I was. And then it was over, his sperm spilled into my vagina, and he withdrew. On his face I did not see satisfied passion, but something much closer to relief.

I almost had a fit of hysterical laughter — so *this* had been what I had waited for and dreamed about all the time? But, after all, what did it matter? Nothing. This was not what I was the Gift for, this was not what I had been offered to *give*, and, of course, nothing that I had been offered to *take*. This was not what the Journey had been about, not its purpose, not its final destination. *That*, of course, would come soon now ...

Without either of us having spoken a word Sir Edmond turned around, picked up his clothes, put them on again, and walked off. He did not resume his place next to Abigail, the Queen and the Torturer, as he was expected to do, but walked past them, without looking back, down the pier, on to the shore, until he disappeared among the crowd and I could not see him anymore. I do not know why he did this, and I can only hope it was not a severe breach of protocol, not a grave insult to the Queen, but if it was, she did not let it show.

And now, the third and last one to pay me a visit at my final pillar-on-the-platform home, I saw the Torturer get up from his stool, and I

saw him grab the handle of a cart behind him that I had not noticed before. Mounted to it was a rack that held his tools — oh my god, all those blades, straight, curved and serrated, and the spikes and drills and hooks and wires and thorns and mallets and pliers and pincers and tongs and whatever else he had with him, just to use on one vulnerable little girl! No, not a little girl anymore, but a grown woman — how fast the years had passed! All those instruments to cut and rip and rupture and squash and break and tear my skin, my flesh, my organs, my bones ... it had to be, I knew. There also was a sort of open hearth on this cart, with a charcoal fire burning in it ...

And then he was here, and with powerful arms lifted the heavy cart up to the platform; I tried not to look at it, but I could feel the heat from the fire on my bare skin. The Torturer's upper body was bare, too, and so were his feet, his only garment was a pair of black leather breeches. They looked shiny and new — would he take them off before he got them stained with my blood? Or could it be washed off? It would be a shame to waste a pair of perfectly good breeches just for my death, wouldn't it? I remembered how aroused and how resolved I had been when he had visited me in my room, but it was only a memory, I did not feel either now. I did not feel anything.

"A lot of tools you have," I said.

"I wouldn't need all that stuff," he replied. I loved his calm baritone voice. "It is for *them*," he said, nodding towards the rafts. "They expect it for the show, it wouldn't seem imposing enough to them without."

Oh yes, *they*. I had almost forgotten about *them*, I realized, and I was glad he brought them back to my mind. After all, this was not about myself, this was about those for whom it happened, and I owed them to be aware of them, to be grateful for their attention.

"Well, then ..." I said, and tried a smile.

He took up a knife with a pointed long and thin and narrow blade. It was a beautiful knife. Its polished silvery blade, reflecting the rays of the sun, drew flickering strips of light across my skin as it moved. The smoothly curved ebony haft must be a pleasure to touch, to hold firmly in one's hand. He held the knife with its tip pointing upwards.

"It is the Envoy who should do this," he said. "It would have been for him to make the first cut, to initiate the sacrifice, but he has asked permission from the Queen to be relieved of this honor, and so it fell upon me. If you too give your permission, that is?"

"Of course," I said. The occasion seemed to call for something more ceremonious for me to say, but I could not think of anything. "Do it, please," I added.

"I am greatly honored, my Gift," he replied and took a step back and bowed, and the grace and sincerity with which he did it kept this gesture from seeming ridiculous to me.

And then with his left hand he took hold of my left breast, and with his right hand he held the knife against it, from below. The blade's back rested against my chest, its edge pointed towards him, and its tip made a dent in the underside of my breast. Slowly he increased the pressure, and then the skin gave, and I felt the blade enter. Slowly, very slowly, but steadily, he pushed it upwards. The pain was terrible, but I knew it was nothing compared to what was still to come. I concentrated on breathing deep and regularly.

The blade was pressing against the skin at the top of my breast now, from the inside, creating a slowly growing upward-pointing bulge, and then the skin parted and the blade emerged, like one of those first flowers of spring breaking through a sheet of thin ice, and a little blood flowed from it and trickled down my breasts's pale skin. And then he did not push upwards anymore, but pulled the knife towards

himself, away from me, and I feared that he might cut himself, but of course he knew what he was doing and how to do it, and with soft sawing up and down movements he cut through my breast, my small breast, outwards, and the blade was sharp but my breast was firm and did not give easily, but bit by bit it gave, and now the blade reached the nipple, from the inside, and one last time it met resistance, but then it came free, slicing right through, and I looked down in horrid fascination upon the two parts of my bisected breast between which a cleavage now opened from which my blood flowed freely, and I heard the first gasps from the spectators and then their cheers and applause, while the pain spread through my whole body and almost robbed me of my senses, but I knew this was only the beginning and I must not give in, and I held on, and did not faint, and did not scream, and did not close my eyes, and did not cry.

Then I felt the tip of that same blade rest against my vulva — lightly, teasingly, threateningly, and, yes, erotically, and my vagina's lips responded on their own to that gentle touch while my mind tried to brace itself for the agony of the first cut, and the Torturer smiled at my body's reaction, a warm and friendly and understanding smile, and given enough time, I thought, I might fall in love with him, but would a few hours be enough?

“Savor the applause,” he said, “it is for you.”

He had moved half a step to the side, to my right, to give Abigail and the Queen a better view of my body's first mutilation, and my gaze went above their heads, to the distant line of statues, and suddenly I had a strange and curious vision — I saw these statues beginning to dance. They danced, and then the palace behind them danced, and the whole Beautiful City with its walls and spires and towers danced, and the mountains behind the Beautiful City danced, and then it wasn't

a vision anymore, and not a dance, and the Beautiful City stumbled, and fell.

And then the ground below me began to dance, but the platform and the pillar held, though the pier behind Abigail and the Queen did not. It crumbled and broke, and on the rafts people started to shout and scream, and then, most strangely, the rafts began to move, out to the sea, and they disappeared from my view behind my back, with their screaming occupants, and the sea disappeared with them. A few people who had managed to jump off the rafts stood on the seabed that had suddenly become dry land, utterly bewildered. A sound like a thousand thunders filled the air.

Abigail and the Queen had fallen off their stools, but seemed unhurt. The Torturer was still standing next to me, with great effort keeping his balance.

“Run!” I shouted, “run and save Abigail and the Queen!” I blushed at having said Abigail’s name first, without thinking.

He turned around just as Abigail stumbled to her feet, and, neglecting the Queen next to her, started to run towards me, her face full of horror at something she seemed to see behind me, and the Torturer now ran towards the Queen, but neither was given to reach their goal, nor did they even reach each other, for before they had taken more than a few steps the sea returned, returned in one huge destroying wave, in a rushing and raging wall of water that seemed to reach up to the sky, and it was upon them with irresistible and unescapable force and speed, and swept them away as if they were nothing, as it swept away everything and everyone.

I had just drawn in my breath to shout to Abigail to run away, and the air that filled my lungs saved me from drowning as the mountain of water rolled over me on its way to the shore, and the chains that held

me tightly to the pillar, which miraculously did not fall, saved me from being dragged away and crushed. And when that watery mountain had passed over me, it flowed back, and I took another deep breath as I saw it coming towards me, and now its force hit me from ahead, trying to rip me apart, trying at least to rip the two halves of my sliced breast from my chest, but its force was not strong enough, and when it was gone I was still breathing, and still whole.

There were more waves rolling in and out, but they got weaker, did not submerge my head anymore, and finally the sea was exhausted, and quietly resolved to occupy its former place.

But now there were fires burning in the ruins of the Beautiful City, and their smoke filled the air, but there was more smoke than that which came from the fires, smoke was coming out of the earth, too. Foul smelling smoke that spread and darkened the sky, smoke that made me retch and cough when it reached me, but a gentle breeze was blowing in from the South, and the clean air that it brought diluted the smoke and blew it back to the shore and kept it from choking me, but it was not strong enough to drive the smoke from the sky, and the sky turned black and darkness fell.

~

The night was long and utterly dark, except for the red glow of the fires, and when day finally came, only pale yellowish light penetrated the thick cover of clouds.

Fear had grown in me that all might be dead, and I was so glad when I saw movement among the ruins — an awful number of people must have died, but still some had survived. I did not expect anyone to come for me, and no one did, they had more urgent things on their minds; they had their dead to bury, their wounded to tend, and their

own lives to fight for. Should anyone have given me even a passing thought, they must have assumed that the naked girl chained to the pillar out there on her little island in the sea was long dead. Had anyone come within shouting distance, I would have asked them for a merciful quick death, but the only ones who came near were dead bodies drifting by on the water.

In the afternoon it started to rain, and I bent my neck and opened my mouth to catch as much of the rain as I could, though it tasted bitter. The second night was much like the first one, except that most of the fires had gone out now.

During the next day, the sky cleared up. My breast had stopped bleeding and hurting acutely, only a dull throbbing pain remained. During the day two small ships arrived at the harbor that was about a mile to the east, where all the proud warships and merchant vessels now lay shattered, heaps of broken wood, smashed to pieces by the big wave. After a few hours the two ships left again. I hoped that they had brought some help, food, fresh water, bandages, whatever was needed, and taken the sick and wounded to a place where they could be cared for better, but I had no way to know.

The day was hot. The pillar largely protected me from the sun's rays during the noon hours when it stood at my back in the south, but I increasingly suffered from thirst and from cramps in my arms, legs and chest. When the wind blew from the land the stench of rotting corpses that it brought made me painfully sick. During the third night the stars and the moon kept me company, but now I shivered from the cold. When the sky began to brighten in the east — when the child of morning, rosy-fingered Dawn, appeared — where had I once heard or read that? — I was very weak, and almost delirious. I took comfort in

the hope that I would die, or at least lose consciousness, before the evening.

I did not die, though.

The pirates came shortly after sunrise. They did not stay long, a quick raid of the palace ruins, then their boats returned to their ship. Having seen me, and having noticed by some motion that I made that I was alive, on a whim the Captain ordered me to be taken on board. When they broke open my shackles I collapsed, and they had to carry me.

For a few hours I lay on a heap with their other loot, then someone came and was kind enough to give me a cup of broth to drink, and after a while I was given another cup, and then some bread, and finally even a cup of wine. As I slowly moved away from the brink of death I became more interesting to them, and several of the men used me. One of them had the idea to sew up my bisected breast at the nipple, and for the rest of the day they amused themselves by making use of the narrow tunnel of flesh that they had thus created.

When the next day my breast was inflamed they debated whether to let nature take its course and let me die, or throw me overboard immediately, but then they decided to try to save my life by slicing it off completely.

They let the ship's cook perform the surgery because he claimed he was the one most experienced with cutting meat. They laid me on my back on a table that was short enough for my head to hang down on one end, while my legs hung down from the other, so they could have fun with me from both ends while the cook did his cutting, which they encouraged him to do slowly and painfully, though I do not think that he would have needed much encouragement for this.

After he was done with cutting off both halves of my mutilated

breast, he said that he was going to cut off my other breast now. Whether he really meant it, or whether he only said it to taunt me, I do not know. Or maybe it was a test. The Captain himself was now standing in front of me, the head of his penis touching my face, and I knew better than to plead instead of giving my full attention to the Captain's needs.

Someone, probably the cook, entered my vagina. Someone poured a bucket of sea water over my chest, to cleanse my wound. Salty water, mixed with my blood, ran into my nose. The Captain, now fully erect, thrust his penis deep into my throat. I remember fighting for air, I remember receiving the Captain's sperm, I remember losing my fight. The droning in my ears stopped, the light faded, only the pain still remained, for a while ...

When my senses returned I found myself lying on a mattress; my wound had been dressed, my other breast was unharmed, and next to me were a tray with food and a jar of water.

The Captain gave me three days to recover, then he took me to his cabin to serve him — I later learned that the girl he had had before had recently died from, as they said, an accident. He kept me, for his pleasure and to do some cleaning, and though he used to hurt me during our sexual encounters, needing my pain to be fully able to perform them, he never hurt me badly, and sometimes he even showed me kindness. Once he gave me a beautiful large silk shawl, the only garment I ever wore on the ship — when I wrapped it around myself skillfully, I could show my good breast while almost hiding the fact that the other one was not there, beneath the folds of the delicate fabric.

When he did not need me I was free to roam the ship's upper decks. I had never been on a big ship before, and I truly enjoyed the experience, even more so as the *Jenny* was a big, fast and powerful

ship, with her eight sails and fifty cannons, and she had a skilled and practiced crew who sailed her well and kept her clean and ready and in good repair. The Captain was very proud of her, and indeed she was a ship to be very proud of.

Since I was now the Captain's personal property, no one touched or harmed me, and there were moments, when I was standing at the guardrail, wrapped in my silk shawl at which the wind gently tugged, feeling the sun on my face, looking out at the endless sea with its magical southern shades of green and blue, listening to the splashing of the waves against the hull, when I felt at peace and almost happy.

EPILOGUE: A SOUTHERN BREEZE

Of course, this could not last.

After a few weeks, the Captain tired of me. He kept the shawl, when he sent me out of his cabin.

After a few more weeks, the first mate, and then the second mate, and then the other officers tired of me — there were new girls brought upon the ship, and they all had two breasts, and most of them had larger ones than mine.

Only the crew did not tire of me. They played rough games, though, and they liked to make me beg for water and food, and often they gave me their piss to drink and a dead or half dead rat to eat, but some of them were kind and gave me some water and hardtack, and occasionally even some fish or, very rarely, a piece of fruit. I made them spout their sperm into my mouth as much as I could, and what they spilled in my vagina or upon my body or onto my face I tried to scoop up with my fingers and lick from my hands. It amused them to watch me doing it, and sometimes they beat me for it, but their sperm was what kept me alive, or, at least, slowed down my dying.

I tried to please them as well as I could, and I tried to be of help, do some simple cleaning tasks, as far as my slowly weakening condition allowed, and so I made it through the fall, and the winter, and the spring, and soon a whole year had passed, though I had no way of knowing the exact date, nor did I care. Most of the time I spent below, and I rarely saw the sun or the sea, except on some special occasions when they took me on deck for what they considered fun — like, for instance, the punishment of a girl, dark-haired, olive-skinned and slim,

the way the Captain liked them best, who had disobeyed him. I was to provide sexual services for the men while they watched or participated. They chased her across the deck, treating her more and more violently, until she lay on her back on the planks in a spreading pool of blood, her whole body covered with cuts and bruises, her face smashed, her legs broken, her bowels flowing out of her open abdomen. Almost worse than the sight of her suffering were the gurgling sounds that came out of her throat, and worst of all was the stench. They still enjoyed her, and I turned away and retched; laughing, they made me pay dearly for this offense, but then they forgave me and let me live, and let me continue to serve them.

As you know, all this came to an end one day. As I was below when this end came, I cannot tell you much about how exactly it happened. One evening the ship got into a fog bank and the Captain had her anchored and allotted his men an extra ration of rum, and when the fog lifted in the morning we were surrounded by a squadron of the Royal Navy, nine time-worn but proud and powerful battle ships, their polished guns aimed and ready. But no shot was fired; the sea soldiers, as the Navy's troops are called, swiftly boarded the *Jenny* and overwhelmed and bound her crew, most of them in their sleep, before they even realized that something was seriously wrong. The few who tried to resist, the Captain among them, were easily overcome.

Our officers, except for the Captain, they immediately killed and threw their bodies overboard; the Captain and the girl who had been in his cabin they took aboard their flagship. At that time, I was the only other woman on board, the other girls either having died, or jumped off the ship, or been killed, or sold, or just disappeared, and they had not yet been replaced.

The crew, all tightly bound hand and feet, they lay out on deck next

to each other, like I have seen game laid out after a hunt; the soldiers seemed to keep the decision for later, or wait for orders, what to do with them. From the main mast the crossbones and skull had disappeared, the *Jenny* now flew the colors of the Royal Navy, though in the morning's calm they hung limp.

I was found and dragged on deck by some of the sea soldiers, who in my dilapidated state did not find me attractive enough to be of sexual use to them, so they tied me to a mast, poured some buckets of sea water over me to get off the worst of the dirt, and then, to pass the time while waiting for new orders, started to whip me. Their laughter, the sounds of the whip, and my subdued moans attracted more spectators, someone found a second whip, and after a while two or three dozen men and a few women stood around me, while two men, trading their places with others when their arms got tired, shredded my skin, and they all cheered when they succeeded to draw blood from my one breast or, even better, from my crotch.

The commotion finally attracted the attention of the commanders, and two men in resplendent uniforms pushed through the crowd, one very stately and with long gray hair, the other one clearly his junior, but also exuding an air of authority. "The Admiral and his Adjutant," I heard someone say, and the crowd parted to let them through.

"Is something going on here that I should know about?" the Admiral asked, scrutinizing from some distance my naked blood-covered body.

"We are just having a little fun with a pirate whore," one of the men said.

"Do you have something to say?" he asked me. I shook my head — what could I have said? I could have begged for mercy, and the Admiral, whose eyes were not cruel and who did not seem to like what

he saw, might even have granted it. But for what? What then? Better to get it over with.

“All right, then,” the Admiral nodded, and he and his companion were about to leave, and the two floggers raised their whips, and I prepared myself for the oncoming pain, when the Adjutant suddenly stopped in his tracks, turned his head, and intently looked at me over his shoulder. I saw his face getting pale. The floggers, sensing that something strange was going on, lowered their arms again. The Adjutant now fully turned around to face me, made a few steps in my direction, then he took a white silken kerchief from the breast pocket of his uniform, knelt down in front of me, and wiped the blood and dirt from around my crotch. Then he jumped up and stumbled a few steps back. His face, from which all blood had drained, was not that of a man who had just seen a ghost, but that of a man in front of whom the gates of Hell had opened.

“Oh my god,” he said. All the others were silent now, and watched him curiously.

“Pray! Pray for your lives, for all our lives, all of you!” he said, his faltering voice so low that I could hardly hear him.

“Why should our lives be in danger?” one of the men asked, careful to keep the derision in his voice under control, not to commit insubordination. “Who would have the power to kill us?”

“She has,” the Adjutant said in a whisper.

“Oh, how would she do it?” the man asked, the derision now nearly unchecked. “Is she a witch, do you think? Will she strike us dead by muttering a magic spell?” Several of the men and women now openly laughed.

“She does not need a spell,” the Adjutant replied, and his voice was still hard to hear, and his face still white as death. “All she has

to do is *order* any of us dead, and anyone who has sworn allegiance to the Queen, any loyal citizen of the Queendom, would be bound to execute this order immediately, and without hesitation, and were it their own deaths that had been ordered.”

It was the Admiral who answered now, frowning. “The *Queen?*” he said. “Which Queen? There are no surviving descendants of the Royal Family. Last thing we have heard, before we left the port two weeks ago, there were five pretenders to the throne, fighting against each other in bloody wars, and none of them had any justifiable claim, or any hope of a fast victory. So, tell me, in your deranged mind, who do you think is the Queen, and what does this dying wretch have to do with her?”

“You *fool!*” the Adjutant exclaimed, his voice now clear and loud. All the men stared at this unprecedented spectacle of a man losing his sanity, and his honor, and, certainly, in a few moments, his life — never on board of a Royal ship an Admiral could ever have been spoken to in such a way — but the Admiral was so stunned that he did not immediately react, and the Adjutant spoke on.

“You fool,” he said again, “all you fools, do you not know the law? Have you no eyes? Have you no brains? Have you not seen the statue, the only one that is *standing* in front of the Palace ruins, because it is the only one that was erected *after* the quake? Have you not seen her *face?*” His voice was like thunder now, though tinged with a note of hysteria. “Do you not recognize the Royal signet on her body? Do you not recognize *her?* Do you not *understand?*” He made a short pause here, not for effect, but because he had to fight for his breath. “*She* is the Queen!”

And the Admiral, who by now had drawn his saber and was finally wielding it to discard this raving lunatic mutineer, looked at me again, and halted in his movement, and then he did a very curious thing.

He turned the saber around, and stuck the haft into a chink between two planks so that the blade pointed upwards, and then ...

“No!” I cried. “For god’s sake, *no!*”

He halted again, half-bent forward.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked, so bewildered that to my shame I neglected the most basic forms of decency. “Forgive me,” I added belatedly, and blushed.

The Admiral straightened up again, and now to my confused mind it almost seemed as if he were standing before me at attention.

“At the beginning of the ceremony,” he said, “the Queen must have blessed you — to bless the Gift has always been part of the sacrificial tradition. And now the Queen is dead, with no living descendants of her family. And you are the last person who has been blessed by her. And the law unambiguously states ...”

I did not listen anymore. I did not ask him to explain it to me later and untie me now. I did not care. There was only one thought in my mind. *Abigail!* When there was a statue, one that showed so much likeness that someone would recognize my face from it, only one person in the world could have created it, couldn’t she?

“Abigail!” I exclaimed, interrupting the Admiral’s words. “The Artist! Is she alive?”

My voice brought him to his senses. “Forgive me,” he said, then he stepped behind me and untied the knots that held me, and then he found back into his role as commander, and shouted, “Bring a stretcher! And bring some clothing! And have the surgeon stand by! And have a courier ship ready to sail! Throw everything over board that might slow her down, deliver the message, the wars must stop, immediately! Where is the stretcher? Don’t stand here, *run!*”

“Kind sir,” I said, “I think I can walk by myself, and I’d rather not

have some cloth upon me before your kind surgeon may have treated my wounds, but please tell me now, what do you know about the Artist? Does she *live*?”

“She lives,” he said. “Badly hurt, never fully to recover from her injuries, but she lives. For many weeks she was between life and death. Then, even before she could walk on crutches, they had to carry her on a stretcher to the quarry where the stone for the statue was waiting, miraculously undamaged, and she started to work, and worked each single day, beginning at sunrise, and when it got dark they had to bring her torches so she could work by the light of the flames, and only when she collapsed from fatigue were they allowed to carry her back to her room somewhere among the ruins. She couldn’t hold on to her crutches and work at the same time, so each day she let herself be tied to a scaffold she had devised for this purpose. How she organized all that, without means and with no authority, in the middle of all the chaos and need and destruction, and how she survived it all, no one knows, but she did. The mad sculptress, people called her, but they brought her food and water and wine, even those who didn’t have enough for themselves. Since she has finished the statue she hasn’t been seen in public, but we know that she lives.”

I listened, first to his words, and then, when he had ended, to the silence, and then I started to cry. For the first time since all had begun I cried without restraint, without shame, and without being aware of the people around me. I sat down, no, I collapsed, and leaned my back against the mast to which I had been tied, and I cried, and I cried. My tears mixed with my blood, and someone held a cup of wine to my face, and my tears fell into the wine, and I drank and kept on crying, and I cried for hours, for days, for years, but when I finally stopped, the sun in its travel across the sky had not reached the zenith yet.

I wiped the tears from my eyes, and looked around. The deck was empty except for the Admiral and a woman who seemed to be the surgeon. A cold fear gripped my heart.

“The men?” I said. “The pirates? You haven’t ...?”

“Not without your order, my Queen,” the Admiral asked. “They are on board of one of our ships. May I ask now,” he continued, “for your permission to die, for allowing the Queen’s life to be endangered on a ship under my command?”

“May I treat your wounds now, my Queen?” the surgeon asked.

“Yes, you may,” I answered the surgeon. “No, you may not,” I answered the Admiral. “You did nothing wrong. And stop this Queen nonsense, both of you, will you, please?”

I saw them exchange glances. I was grateful to them for refraining, at least for the moment, from explaining to me, patiently, respectfully, but unbendingly, that it could not be stopped, that I *was* the Queen. There was so much I would have to think through, try to comprehend, come to terms with, and, possibly, finally, inevitably, to accept — later, not now, surely not now, for now I felt weakness overcome me, and I longed to get into the care of the surgeon, who looked friendly, and who on board of a Royal Navy flagship must be competent in her art. I would succumb to her care now, and afterwards I would fall into a long sleep of recuperation, but before that, there was one thing I had to do. Everything else was unimportant, everything else could wait, but this I could not bear to be delayed.

“Bring me to her,” I said, raising my voice with effort now, to make sure the Admiral could hear me. “Bring me to Abigail.” He saluted.

And then, just before I fell asleep, or fainted, I heard the sails rustle softly in a gentle southern breeze.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

A few words about some references or allusions in the text, which may not be obvious to all readers.

Prologue:

All this is actually true. The ladies' full names are Candy Couch and Emily Rosson. The detailed article about them appeared in the on-line edition of the Washington Post on Sunday, December 10, 2006.

Chapter 3:

“Out of nowhere a thought entered my head, that there was no one's hand that I could hold,” as well as the title of the third chapter, refer to the song *In Another Land* by Brian Jones, performed by the Rolling Stones on their *Their Satanic Majesties Request* album — with the words “Then I awoke ...” in its chorus. This is one of a few hints in the *Journey* that it may be understood to all be a dream.

Chapter 4:

Snow White has not taken her name from that girl with the evil stepmother who went to live with the seven dwarfs; instead, Snow White's and Rose Red's names are borrowed from a different German fairytale, *Schneeweißchen und Rosenrot*, not *Schneewittchen*.

Chapter 5:

“Gaia, my fair sister” — Gaia, or Gaea, is the Greek goddess personifying the Earth. “My fair sister” refers to the lyrics of the song

When the Music's Over by Jim Morrison, performed by The Doors on their album *Strange Days*: “What have they done to the earth? What have they done to our fair sister?”

Chapter 7:

“In my mind, I gave them names — the Bearded one, the Tall one, the Ugly one, and the Lame one” — and these later turn out to be the names they use among themselves. This may be mysterious, but it is deliberate.

Chapter 9:

Valerie and Vivian are names taken from Bob Dylan’s song *Too Much of Nothing*, for no particular reason. Don’t ask me what this song is about, I have no idea.

“When the child of morning, rosy-fingered Dawn, appeared,” is a quote from the *Odyssey*, in Samuel Butler’s translation.

The pirate ship with eight sails and fifty cannons is an incarnation of the (unnamed) ship that appears in the song *Pirate Jenny* from the *Three Penny Opera* by Bert Brecht and Kurt Weill. Who could listen to that song without having their own dreams about where this ship has come from, and where it will sail to? While “eight sails and fifty cannons” will be understood by those who know the original German version, in some English translations these numbers are being omitted, or altered — 55 cannons, for instance, in the translation by Frank McGuinness, so beautifully performed by Marianne Faithfull.

Finally, here is about a ship that didn’t make it into the story. When, in the Epilogue, the Admiral orders a courier ship to sail, it should sail

as soon and as fast as possible — but, there is a calm, isn't there? So, instead of speeding off, it has to idle, just as the other ships. What I wanted to have, for this scene, was a *steam ship* — an unheard-of, secret, stunning new invention:

Turning my head towards where I had seen a movement out of the corners of my eyes, I saw a strange thing, then. One of the smaller ships, its sails furled, was moving off, slowly at first, then gathering speed. I could not see any oars, and soon it was much too fast for possibly being rowed, anyway. Smoke came out of a tall tube near its stern. It quickly got smaller, as it headed for the northern horizon. I did not understand what I was seeing.

“The *Spirit of Fire*, my Queen,” the Admiral said. “She is an experimental ship, the first of her kind. When there is no wind to drive her, she is driven by fire and water. One day, we believe, ships like her will be the pride of our fleet — of *your* fleet, my Queen!”

So, not only would this ship be able to sail off in the calm, it would also herald a new time to come ...

It would have unduly interrupted the flow of the narration, though, so the Royal Navy will have to do without steam ships, for the time being.

I had even devised a propulsion system, that works without pistons or any rotating parts. Two thrusters drive the ship, they are mounted underwater to both sides of the keel (later, more advanced ships would have the propulsion system integrated into their hulls).

The *thruster* is a cylinder, about one foot in diameter, six feet long, with a hemispherical front, open at the rear.

Near the front, a steam pipe leads into the thruster from above, pointing forward and down at an angle of 45 degrees.

In the lower part of the hemispherical front is a water entry valve — basically a lid that, from the inside, sits on a large round opening. This lid is attached to a lever by which it can be opened (raised) or shut.

The drive operator has two handles, left and right, which he pulls alternately, one handle for each thruster (with two thrusters, propulsion is smoother than with a single one) — you can envision his or her workplace according to your own tastes.

When the handle is half pulled, the lid is pushed down, that is, the entry valve is shut. When the handle is pulled fully, a gust of superheated steam is blown into the thruster through the steam pipe.

The hot steam brings the water at the front of the thruster to the boil — this steam adds to the injected steam, and by the combined pressure water is ejected from the back of the thruster, generating the desired propulsion. The pressure of the steam also helps to keep the lid of the entry valve tightly shut. After the pressure has been released, the operator pushes back the handle, the lid is raised, and fresh water flows into the thruster from the front.

On the *Spirit of Fire*, much depends on the right rhythm, on the accurate timing, of operating the handles. More advanced versions of the steam drive will probably have the working of the entry valve automated — but, who can tell what the future may bring, for the new Queen, for the Queendom, and for its ships ...