



Michael  
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**ELIZABETH'S  
MYSTERY**

# Elizabeth's Mystery

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Chapter 1 (of 11)

**The first draft. Not edited!**

The translation of “Elizabeth’s Mystery” is expected to be completed by May 2018. It will be available for free. Leave your email [here](#) and we'll notify you when the book comes out.

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*“After surviving a bloody raid by fierce mutants, a twist of fate brings orphaned country boy Thomas Young to Parthagon, the kingdom’s legendary, forbidden capital. All inhabitants of the ideal city are happy and wealthy, while their entire lives revolve around a mysterious practice that has brought people to perfection. Now a grown man, Thomas dreams of becoming a knight in order to take revenge for his family, but his path is beset by a large number of obstacles, oddities, and puzzles, with the main one hidden in one of the towers of the king’s castle.”*

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## *Chapter 1*

### **Tragedy on the Outskirts of Sallep**



A gray pigeon landed on the woven fence in front of a small wooden house with a thatched roof and proceeded to clean its feathers vigorously. In the center of the tidy yard, a bay horse stood chewing hay. It was hitched to a cart, next to which two barefoot children wearing baggy tunics with

plenty of growing room, were running around. A short man in a worn leather jacket was busy pottering about alongside them. All night long, the rain had come down, and now, as soon as the warm spring sun had risen, everyone was settling to their daily tasks. The morning ritual of the unfortunate pigeon, however, was abruptly interrupted by an arrow flying no more than an inch above its ruffled head, at which the bird immediately shot up into the sky.

“Missed it, missed it!” squealed the round-faced girl, trying to chase after the pigeon to the eager barking of a black pup.

“Practice, Thomas,” the man patted the boy on the back, a smile spreading across his simple, rustic features. “Practice makes perfect.”

“Wait...”

The plucky young hunter, unwilling to give up just yet, drew the flax string of his simple bow made out of the branch of an ash tree once more with all his might. However, the second arrow released at the increasingly distant bird met with the same lack of success.

Thomas was two years older than his three-year-old sister Irèn, who was his spitting image. They could only be told apart by the difference in age. The two children had long, chestnut hair and green-flecked brown eyes. Yet, whereas the boy was overly calm and reserved, a fact immediately apparent from his meek gaze and slightly upturned upper lip, his spirited sister was incapable of sitting still, always looking to get into some kind of trouble. Her lively eyes were always seeking out new adventures

and new victims for her cunning pranks. More often than not, it was her older brother who ended up being the unhappy butt of the joke, which tickled the girl's nose, with its almost imperceptible bump, to no end.

Their father, an experienced hunter and fisherman, had his mind on other matters. He was carefully loading the rain-soaked cart with this week's catch: an impressive bundle of dried fish, two fox furs and a handful of rabbit furs, as well as the carcass of a young buck. It was time for his weekly trip to Sallep, where he intended to fetch at least fifteen silver coins for his haul, or exchange it for other valuable goods. At any rate, a quarter of the catch was to be given over as a contribution to the needs of Parthagon. Short of the extinguished volcano, the kingdom occupied the entire southern half of breathtaking Celesia – a solitary land stretching in the middle of an endless and always raging sea.

“Your mother has gone off to do the washing and will be back by lunchtime,” the hunter instructed, hoisting himself onto the cart. “Thomas!”

“Yes, pop?”

“You're in charge.”

“Daddy, daddy, I promise, I won't do anything bad to Tommy!” interjected clever Irèn ahead of her father's orders. Her chubby hands were carefully holding up the gentle pup as it wagged its tail and licked her contented face.

“Yeah right! I hope you won't hold me responsible if I teach her a lesson or two this time!”

“She’s only a littl’un, son,” the hunter looked at his boy with tender eyes, and ruffling his unkempt hair added, “I’m counting on you.”

“Ok, pop,” Thomas replied with acceptance, hiding a bashful smile. Meanwhile, his restless sis had left the dog alone and was now trying to take possession of his favorite bow, all while sinking her sharp teeth into her brother’s shoulder and growling like a wildcat.

A light snap of the whip, and the creaking cart budged into motion. The hunter’s children, tripping over their own feet and mucking about, accompanied their father with joyful hollers all the way to the edge of their little village. Left to their own devices for an entire morning – the two young rascals could not believe their luck! Irèn, especially, was elated now that there was no one to stop her from pestering her older brother to death. He was simply too kind-natured to ever put the girl in her place.

On their way back home, stopping intermittently to dig something up in the roadside dirt or snap a few branches off other people’s hedges, they ran into a neighbor woman at the main village crossroads. The seamstress, wearing a pale linen dress with a red hem, looked terribly upset, wiping her puffy eyes and adjusting the colorful scarf on her head.

“Ma’am, why are you crying?” Irèn called out to her with alarm. “What happened?”

“Did anyone mistreat you?” Thomas frowned.

But the woman, deeply moved by the little ones’ concern, only laughed and proceeded to hug and kiss the hunter’s offspring, though they quickly grew tired of her attentions.

“Don’t fret my sweets!” she exclaimed in mid-snuffle. “Today is a red letter day! We ought to be celebrating!”

“Celebwating?!” the girl’s eyes grew big and round.

“Our King has just had a daughter. We have a princess. They say she’s as pretty as an angel too. Oh, what joy!”

“A princess? Wowzers!”

“Spread the word my good children!”

Thomas, however, felt less than ecstatic about the festive news. He continued glowering, following the neighbor woman with a grim gaze. Even though the mention of the princess made his chest feel strangely heavy and tight, he foresaw all too well the kind of onslaught he would undergo in the very near future. And he was not wrong.

“A bwide, a bwide!” Irèn began to squeal, jumping up and down and waving her arms in all directions. “We found you a bwide!”

“Oh, leave me alone!”

“And you’re the gwoom! You’re the gwoom!”

“If all girls are like you, I’m never getting married at all! No, thank you!”

“Foolish boy! She’s a pwincess! A weal one!”

Thus, continuing to bicker and gripe, the brother and sister made their way home. Once back in the yard, the children tried to amuse themselves as best they could: playing with the chubby pup, teasing the piglets and laughing at their funny grunts, playing with their homemade dolls and shooting arrows at pots and pans lined

up on the hedge. But pretty soon, even this got dreadfully boring, and the children decided to go for a swim and, while they were at it, pay their mother a visit. Between the village and the spring lay two small woods separated by a sunflower field, all overcome quickly and merrily in conversations about the bride-to-be.

A sun-drenched, marshy meadow spread before the barefoot babes, and at its edge, a stony, gently bubbling brook came into view. The clear stream cut the fragrant green land almost in half, and pooled into two small lakes that could have been mistaken for deep puddles. At the larger of the two, a few village women were hard at work doing laundry. The hunter's wife was a full-figured young woman, with a soft gaze and an upturned lip. Her chestnut hair and green-flecked hazel eyes were reflected, as if through a magic mirror, in her inseparable offspring. Upon hearing the news of the birth of the princess and the impending engagement, her belted linen dress and white bonnet shook as she laughed a long gentle laugh.

"You've got it all figured out, haven't you, my dear girl!" she exclaimed. "But your brother will have to look elsewhere for a bride."

"But why?!" Thomas's outcry disclosed what was really in his heart.

"Aha! Gotcha!" squealed Irèn and pushed him into the water.

"She is not like us, son. We are but simple villagers," the woman explained as her children splashed around in the



shallows. “They live by different rules. They are...they’re just different.”

“So it’s true what they say about them?”

“It’s complicated. When you’re all grown up, you’ll understand.”

“Mom, is it twue that they’re all vewy beautiful and all they do is go to fancy balls and pawties?” asked Irèn, clumsily imitating a ballroom dance while knee-deep in water.

“And that they live almost forever?” Thomas added.

“Wowzers! Is that twue?”

“It’s not important, my dears. We’re not allowed there anyway. And we have our own kind of happiness in the village. Believe me: we’re in no way worse off here than they are in the capital.”

All at once, the women around them gasped as they turned their attention to the sky above the treetops: in its southern part, roughly in the direction of Sallep, a dark pillar of smoke rose up to the heavens. It was soon joined by other such pillars. Like giant poisonous mushrooms, they streamed up toward the clouds from the depths of the forest. The mother’s heart began to beat faster and she gave her scamps strict instructions to go home directly as she herself proceeded to energetically scrub the rest of her washing, discussing the unfolding events with her equally worried neighbors.

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Thomas didn’t know what was happening, but he knew one thing for certain: he had to get home with his little

sister, who could not for the life of her get this business with the newborn princess and the strange people of Parthagon out of her head. On top of that, she was genuinely confused as to why all the grown-ups should be so worried over a little bit of smoke.

However, having quickly traversed the first wood and come out into the open sunflower field, their eyes met with a bone chilling sight. The meadow, so solitary and peaceful on the way there, was now overrun with frightened people making their escape. There were so many of them. Young and old. Adults and children. Some shouting, some crying, some carrying chests and bundles; one sobbing woman in a burned-through dress was carrying the limp body of a suckling infant. Many had had their clothes torn and damaged; some even bore traces of blood. But all had one thing in common: an animal terror in their eyes and an all-consuming panic in their motions.

They were all coming from the south – from the direction of Sallep, where happy-go-lucky Irèn and Thomas had seen their father off to just this morning. The naturally empathetic girl was fearful for the people running past them, even though she did not comprehend the looming danger, unlike her brother, whose arms and legs had begun to tremble.

Speechless and frozen in place, the two children did nothing but observe the scene before them for a whole minute. Finally, Thomas came to and grabbing the astonished Irèn by the hand, bolted through the trampled field in the direction of home. The endlessly streaming people were in such a state of fright that no one even

noticed the two unsupervised children. What made matters worse was that Irèn now began to persistently stumble and literally trip over flat ground. By this point in time, even she had begun to realize that something awful was taking place, and her chubby little legs were failing to obey her, thereby constantly getting twisted and caught around each other.

“Get up! Get up!” Thomas cried in exasperation, as the girl tumbled to the ground yet again. “Come on!”

“I’m getting up,” Irèn barely managed to answer before she tripped once more.

“You’ve picked one hell of a time to become clumsy!”

Once they were past the field and under the cool shade of the trees, Thomas avoided the well-trodden path and ran straight through the wood, to gain precious time. This made Irèn stumble even more frequently and get herself entangled in the long branches of the thorn bushes. And yet, despite the pain and the scratches, she never cried even once, but ran silently on, intermittently throwing a worried glance at her brother’s tense face.

Soon the children were out of the damp forest and making a beeline through the old familiar village yards directly to their front gate. First and foremost, Thomas hid the trembling Irèn inside a fragrant bale of hay that was leaning against the fence, next to the long rows of young carrots and cabbages, while he himself ran on towards the house. In doing so, he noticed that he felt not a hint of fatigue, as if a magical fountain of force had sprung up inside him.

“Where are you going?” his sister called out to him.

“Just sit still and don’t peek out! Got it?”

“I’m so afraid,” the girl started crying, burying her head in the hay.

“I’ll be quick!”

Out of breath, but happy to have found his handmade bow on the doorstep where he’d left it, Thomas was now faced with a difficult decision: should he run into town to look for his father, or go back to his mother? The option to stay home and wait never even entered his mind. Despite his young age, the boy did not consider himself a child in the slightest. His father had brought him up to make decisions and take on responsibility, leaving him alone to mind his troublesome sister or taking him hunting and fishing overnight. It was accordingly his father’s example that finally pushed the boy towards one particular course of action - his mother surely needed him most, as she was likely unaware of the stampede of panicking fugitives. Thus, with plenty of energy still left in him, Thomas sprinted back to the spring.

Running past the sunflower field again, he saw plenty of terrified people still making their way through there, but their numbers had dwindled significantly. Yet when he finally reached the marshy meadow, he was in for a disappointment. The women had gone. Their baskets were scattered haphazardly by the banks of the reservoir, the freshly washed clothes and linens inside them now wallowing in the mud.

“Mom! Mom!” cried the frightened boy loudly, cupping his palms over his lips. “Where are you?”

Thomas did not know that he’d passed right by her in the forest while taking a shortcut through the ravine, and there was nothing left for him to do now but to go back home. Running through the ill-fated field again, he noticed that there were only a few straggling fugitives still left out there. Mostly these were men and women who were feeble, old or wounded and thus couldn’t move very fast, frequently stumbling and having to pick themselves up off the ground. Among them were also some who had packed up their entire households and were now using the last of their strength to drag these possessions along, risking their lives for a few overstuffed bags and cases. Thomas too was now beginning to feel tired, but he did his best to ignore it.

Back at the house, he immediately went over to check the hay bale, but there was no one there either.

“Irèn! Mom!” he shouted, looking around perplexedly. “Where are you?! Mom!”

On the one hand, he felt the grip of utter terror come over him. So much so that the entire inside of his stomach shrank and strained, and his legs felt like ice. Yet at the same time, he had an inkling that his sister must already be with his mother, and they should therefore be alright. But where could they be? Running into the house, he found it empty as a bird’s nest in winter, so he hurried back out onto the village street where he continued to proclaim their names to the four winds. But no one answered – the village was completely deserted.

The boy ran into the nearest yard, however, there was not a soul to be found there either. Then he remembered the seamstress and ran over to her house, but she had gone as well. Calling out the names of his loved ones a few more times, Thomas returned to the street. Only now did it finally dawn on him that the village around him was really and truly abandoned and that all of its inhabitants must have fled, just like all those people running across the sunflower field. What could have startled them so badly?

Realizing that he was utterly alone, the boy headed in the direction of Sallep. Even though the road led towards unknown danger, it was there that he could hope to meet his father, who would immediately solve all his problems. On the whole, the child simply could not think of anything else to do. All he wanted was to be reunited with at least one of his loved ones.

Drawing on the last of his forces, Thomas ran panting along the twisting and bumpy forest path towards the ominous black smoke in the sky. He too was now stumbling over flat ground, and his heart seemed to be on the brink of leaping out of his tiny ribcage.

“Where do you think you’re going?” a disheveled old woman who lived on the next street over called out to him as she spotted him running towards her. “Stop!”

“Have you seen my dad?” Thomas skillfully avoided her grabbing hands.

“You have to turn back! Where’s your mother?”

But Thomas could no longer hear her. He ran on, dirty, tired and lost, feeling nothing - neither the passage of time,

nor his feet, nor the hard ground beneath them. At some point, he stumbled once again and with a deafening smack fell face first into a cold puddle, soaking the hair stuck to his cheeks, dropping his bow and scaring the life out of a brood of fat tadpoles. Having no more strength left to raise himself up, he barely managed to scramble up to his knees before he fell down again, swallowing a mouthful of murky water. It was at this hopeless instant that he felt a pair of mighty hands lift him up and confidently hoist him over a rugged shoulder. The familiar smell of hay instantly calmed the boy down, and he soon tumbled into the beckoning darkness.

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“Bwother...bwother...,” Thomas heard a voice calling to him as if from a great distance.

The pitch blackness was pressing down on his eyelids and a damp chill enveloped his body from head to toe, tickling his nose with the stench of rotting vegetables. Warm, motherly hands were stroking his head, resting on a soft thigh, and somewhere nearby Irèn was gabbling about something or other.

The grown-ups were whispering about the latest news:

“I won’t tell you what I saw. Not with the children present,” he heard his father’s voice say. “But it’s the mutants from Arogdor, no two ways about it. It’s all happening again.”

Thomas had only heard the word “mutant” a few times in his life, and so he did not quite understand what they were talking about. He did, however, know that they were some

kind of ghastly creatures and that their involvement could only mean trouble. Arogdor, on the other hand, was as familiar a name as his own. The village urchins didn't go a day without spooking each other with some new terrifying tale about this sinister place. The realm of Arogdor was located at the top of the volcano, which, on clear winter's day, could be seen rising in the north. And since there was always smoke rising from its maw, especially in winter, Thomas believed that monsters resembling giant fiery spiders lived there in the molten lava. This was another point of fierce disagreement between him and his sister, for little Irèn never tired of assuring him that Arogdor was inhabited by people who were "almost normal". That is to say normal, but missing their heads. And if one were to go there, they too would have to learn to live without a head, which, according to the girl's ironclad logic, posed quite a few difficulties and was not an easy adjustment to make in general.

"But what about the King?" the bewildered seamstress questioned the hunter. "And where are all the knights?"

"I didn't see anyone. The only ones there, in Sallep, were the tribute collectors. They are of little help in such matters."

"It must've been something unexpected," suggested another familiar male voice.

"I had a suitor once was a tribute collector," the elderly woman said wistfully. "Those were the days!"

"A tribute collector? There's a tall tale if I ever heard one!" the same male voice spoke back. "Even if you was the



prettiest dame in the village, they'd still find you as homely as a sow!"

"It's true I tell you!"

"Please! Leave off this nonsense, you silly old crone!"

"So what are we to do now?" Thomas's mother interrupted the squabble.

"Either we run, or we wait for the knights to get here," her husband explained. "Running is dangerous, since we don't know where we could run to. Nobody knows anything, and the mutants could be anywhere and everywhere. Sallep is closer to Parthagon than we are which means that we've been cut off from the army."

"So all that's left for us to do is wait? Here?"

"We don't know when it will end. What if Parthagon has been defeated and there's no army coming? One thing's for certain: we have to do everything in our power to avoid falling into the hands of those mutants. Otherwise, that'll be the end of us. You can't imagine the kind of things they do to people!"

Hearing these words, Thomas felt a strange transformation taking place within him. Suddenly, all the things that had made up his brief existence up until now faded one by one into the background or disappeared altogether. Everything became unimportant or insignificant, and once it had all melted away, like frost under the warm spring sun, there was only one thing of value left standing solid and concrete – life, simply life, or to put it more precisely, life in the company of his loved ones. It didn't matter where or how, the important thing was to be

together. The important thing was to keep feeling the tender hands of his caring mother, hearing the bright voice of his beloved sister, and seeing the kind eyes of his wise father. Nothing else seemed to matter in the slightest now that these real precious things had come under threat, a threat that managed to scare even his intrepid father, whom he used to think unfamiliar with the sensation of fear.

Thomas was so overwhelmed with these new realizations that he could no longer hold back his gushing emotions. He opened his eyes and burst into tears. Raising himself up, he wrapped his mother in a tight embrace and only then looked around. The villagers were hiding in some kind of cellar, illuminated only slightly by the dim light of a single candle. In the corner, he could make out piles of shriveled up turnips and carrots, and near the wall stood a neat row of clay pots full of grain and flour. Dad's favorite leather jacket was wrapped around mom's shoulders for warmth and partly covering his little sister as well.

"Bwother!" Irèn cried out gladly.

"How do you feel?" his mother asked in a worried voice, but the hunter quickly calmed her down.

"He's fine. Just a case of overexertion."

"What should we do then?" lamented the balding old carpenter, his simple, rustic clothes smeared with mud. It was his voice that Thomas had trouble recognizing.

The hunter hung his head low and sank deep into thought. Only now did the boy notice the bloody stains on his father's gray shirt and the deep gashes on his arms and

face. In the bleak candlelight, there was an emptiness, even a kind of fatality, peeking out of his thoughtful eyes.

“We do, of course, have weapons,” he pointed his hunting knife at the crossbow and the axe lying in the corner of the cellar. “But those will be of little help.”

“I can find some other things,” the carpenter suggested.

“No, no. There’s no point!” the hunter raised his voice suddenly. “Our whole village combined couldn’t take on one of those mutants. And they aren’t likely to just go past here. Therefore the smartest thing to do is to hide ourselves as best we can.”

“How long do we have?”

“I don’t know. I suppose by this evening they will have pillaged Sallep and every town and village between the city and here.”

“Maybe we should try running after all?” the seamstress was almost weeping now.

“Where to? We’re cut off from Parthagon, and to get to any of the Towers it’s at least a day’s journey.”

On this count, Thomas's father could not have been more right. The attack of the mutants had turned out to be the most ambitious and surprisingly thorough one in decades. As usual, its goal was to inflict maximum damage to the enemy, plunder the kingdom’s territories and steal young children – to make future mutants. The birth rate in Arogdor was too low to compensate for losses from constant wars with Parthagon and high rates of general mortality.

Likewise, the primitive organization of the realm prevented its leader, Werner Eisenberg, from providing enough food and other resources to sustain his subjects. Considering that the might of his army, as well as that of every individual mutant, depended solely on the amount of food they could consume, it meant that raids on neighboring lands were a vital necessity for Arogdor. It was for this precise reason that their military commander – the ruthless General Ivar Gaver – had decided to perform a surprise invasion, daringly cutting off the northern territories of Parthagon. The mutants intended to plunder these lands clean. Besides, they were also hoping that the operation, unprecedented in its cruelty, would leave King Albert III overwhelmed and his kingdom would finally face the threat of defeat.

Having discussed it among themselves, the adult villagers decided to stay put after all, and to take all possible measures to ensure their safety in case the mutants did end up entering the village. It was agreed that they should continue hiding in this very cellar, since it was located in the only brick building in the village, up until recently belonging to the locally renowned blacksmith, Max Lank. The latter, it seemed, had succumbed to the general panic and run off in an unknown direction. It was no use cleaning the other houses out, as General Gaver's army always burned and raised anything left behind on the lands they conquered. This two-story brick house would also be destroyed, but there was a chance of surviving long enough in the cellar to emerge after the army would have moved on. Besides, the stench of the spoiled vegetables could mask

them from the mutants' keen sense of smell, with which they could easily sniff out their victims.

The little time they still had to spare was best used in preparations for the enemy's arrival. The less cause there was for the mutant army to stick around the small settlement, the better. Rumor had it that the Arogdorians moved on as soon as there was nothing left to raid or pillage. Accordingly, the men now went out of the cellar to go set fire to the neighboring houses. Before setting each property aflame, they let all the livestock and fowl out of their sheds and pens, so that they too stood at least a chance of surviving the ordeal.

The practical women, meanwhile, occupied themselves with more pressing problems. For one thing, it was necessary to find as much clothing and as many blankets as possible, so as to not freeze to death overnight in the cold cellar. Likewise, they had to collect as much food, water and candles as they could find. Luckily, their village was a rather prosperous one, and so these goods were in plentiful supply in practically every household. Finally, when they'd collected all useful items in large sacks, the women quickly returned to the blacksmith's house, just as the sun was beginning to set. The village, however, did not grow dark – the blazing and crackling houses illuminated its narrow streets as if it was high noon. Pigs, cows, horses, sheep, rabbits and chickens were scampering in all directions. Only a small number among them, not knowing where to run to, preferred to stay in the vicinity of their burning, but familiar pens.

The women went into the kitchen, lit up by the fiery glow coming from behind the blue tulle curtains over the window. A square table stood in the middle of the room and the walls were fitted with a thick-chimneyed brick stove, as well as generous cupboards with wooden doors. Cast iron pans, clay pots, wooden cups, ladles and other kitchen utensils were stacked neatly on the shelves. But as they opened the cellar door under the table and looked down inside it, they were horrified to discover that both Thomas and Irèn were no longer there. The two children were nowhere to be found in the house either. Going out into the street, the seamstress tried to call out their names, but was immediately tackled by the carpenter who put his large hands over her mouth. Together with Thomas's father, crawling close to the ground, they dragged her all the way back to the house, where they knocked over the second woman in much the same manner. The latter tried to scream and wrestle herself free, but the tenacious hands of her husband curbed her desperate impulses and stubbornly dragged her in the direction of the cellar.

Getting the sobbing women down to the cellar, the men proceeded to lower their sacks full of provisions down the hatch, only to realize that the children had gone missing. The hunter quickly leaned over to the old carpenter's ear and whispered:

“Go down there and stay with them. I'll find the kids.”

“Just don't get caught out there yourself!”

Using all his skills, crawling and crouching to minimize his visibility, the hunter noiselessly made his way out of the house and circled the immediate area. However, soon he

was forced to beat a quick retreat back to the cellar, as hideous mutants began to appear in the nearby yards. With tears in his eyes and in utter despair, he knocked on the cellar door and tumbled down through it as soon as it was opened. His wife had kept hope alive to the last, but seeing the helpless state of her husband, there was nothing left for her to do but to press herself tightly against him, and sob uncontrollably.

A short while earlier, Thomas, though still half-asleep, noticed that Irèn had begun to move away from him. At first he put it out of his mind, but soon he was puzzled by the complete silence around him. Opening his eyes, he found himself in the cellar all alone and presently hurried to climb out. Over the past week, his sister had been literally inseparable from her puppy, so Thomas had a pretty good idea of where she might've run off to.

He caught up to Irèn at the gate to their yard where she was watching, slack-jawed, as the house she'd lived in all her life went up bright red, crackling flames.

“Puppy!”

“Why did you leave the cellar?”

“I want Tumtum!”

“He’s run away. Or been taken by the neighbors. Let’s go back!”

“Is that twue?”

“Of course. He’s perfectly fine.”

“What about dolly?”

The wooden toy in its sack-cloth dress lay forlorn on the porch, which was about to burst in flames any second from the unbearable heat.

“Quickly, follow me!” ordered Thomas, grabbing Irèn by the hand, but she stubbornly resisted:

“Dolly! She’s in pain!”

“My dear, darling sister, I’ll make you five other dollies,” begged Thomas, almost on the verge of tears. “Let’s go!”

But the girl, oblivious to what was happening around her, categorically refused to leave, and with a deathly squeal clung to the woven fence, knocking off the animal skins and skulls that hung there. Finally, Thomas realized there was only one way out of this.

Disregarding the fact that the fire had already made its way to the porch, the boy carefully ran up to the dolly and, yanking it by the leg, rescued the toy from the gaping maw of flame, while slightly singeing his own long hair. Together with the now satisfied Irèn, they hastened back to the brick house.

Suddenly, Thomas stopped in his tracks as he noticed, through the raging flames, a strange movement on the clearing between the village and the woods flanking it from the south. Thinking quick on his feet, he shoved his sister into the overgrown roadside ravine and then threw himself in after her. It was only a few moments later that, through the shrubs and the grass, they both saw a sight that their consciousness at first refused to take in fully. It could only have been compared to a nightmare, the delirious delusion of a madman or the product of a particularly sick



imagination. Except that it was really happening, making it seem as if the regular, ordinary world didn't exist anymore, as if it had all been make-believe to begin with. It was this kind of paralyzing and otherworldly fear that the impressionable children experienced upon seeing their first ever mutant.

Riding out of the thick forest on a mighty stallion, the mutant stopped to observe the fiery scene, all the while sniffing the air intently. Flashes of flame illuminated his grotesque physique in all its immense, hideous glory. He was almost one and a half times the size of a regular person, and his tanned, snub-nosed face, while retaining its human features, looked more like that of an animal. Such was the impression created by the jutting lower jaw, the massive overhanging brow ridge and the yellow fangs protruding over his upper lip. His humongous, wide-chested body, was covered in outgrowths that were like dark shields protecting every rippling muscle. This organic bio-armor was an integral part of his body and sprouted out of it naturally. The skin under the shields was covered in short, and similarly dark colored fur. But above all else, the children's minds were stunned by his two pairs of muscular arms and the long dark dreadlocks cascading down from his head.

In terms of clothing, the mutant wore nothing but a pair of trousers, tucked into road worn leather boots. Straps, securing a sword sheath and a quiver of arrows behind his back, were crisscrossed across his chest. His massive belt was adorned with a pair of scabbards containing two daggers, and a weighty oak bow together with bags and bundles of various sizes hung off his saddle. Using his lower arms, the warrior was holding onto a wooden crossbar at the

front of his saddle, while his upper arms held an intimidatingly long axe and a slightly curved sword with a wide blade and a long handle.

Looking around, the Arogdorian finally decided to move toward the blazing houses. It was then that Thomas and Irèn saw that what he was riding was not a heavy-lifting draft horse, as they had first assumed.

Whereas they'd at least heard of mutants before, this beast, heaving under the unusually cumbersome saddle, was something utterly new to them. On the one hand, they could see that this tailless creature too had some familiar features. The look in its eyes had something human about it; perhaps there was even a hint of kindness there. On the other hand, it resembled a cross between a horse and a buffalo, only taller and with more muscle mass, not an ounce of fat to be found anywhere on its body. The glistening skin of the wondrous creature was covered in places with dark curls, especially in the chest and stomach areas. It wore no clothing, discounting the saddle with the scorched red fabric covers hanging from the sides and from the back. Its cheekbones were set above an inordinately wide jaw, and two long braids hung from its tanned round face, scrunched up from the smoke. The strangest thing about the creature was its hand-like hooves, for this was a mansteed – a human mutated to resemble a horse.

“I told you they weren't spiders!”

“Be quiet,” Thomas snorted, closing his sister's mouth shut with his hand and dragging her, on all fours, away to the shelter.

Finding themselves back at the safe house of Max Lank, the blacksmith, they crawled to the cellar door in the kitchen and quietly knocked. The door was immediately flung open and two pairs of manly arms almost instantly dragged the runaways down below. After giving the children two sharp knocks on the head, the relieved parents embraced them more tightly than they'd ever done in their whole lives.

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The mutants of Arogdor, mounted on their mansteeds, slowly and with great suspicion broached the abandoned village from different points of entry. There were only two small squadrons of them, about two dozen warriors altogether. But considering each mutant's monstrous strength, that was more than enough to conquer and completely annihilate a small town. Provided, of course, that it wasn't defended by the brave Knights of Parthagon.

Accompanied by four mutants, Ivar Gaver, commander of the Arogdor army and leader of the ruthless raid, rode out of the forest.

Physically, the legendary General was even larger than the other mutants, and stood out from among them. He was easily recognizable by his deep-set eyes, thick black dreads, the steel helmet with the wide twisted horns on his head, and the chainmail glistening metallically under his striking crimson cape. In all other respects, he was much like the other mutants, with the same bulging fangs, black bio-armor, two pairs of arms and a deeply tanned face. An uncanny resolve, leveraged by an extraordinary intelligence, made him an exceedingly successful commander whom

Parthagon had been trying and failing to eliminate for many years.

Having made their way through the village streets lined with burning houses, the perplexed mutants gathered at the central crossroads, where they saluted each other, raising their left hands in solidarity:

“Hail Arogdor!”

“Hail Eisenberg!”

“Whose work is this?” the General thundered in a rolling basso profundo, glancing back as the house behind him collapsed noisily.

“Looks like the locals,” hissed a senior mutant, distinguished by the red bands around his shoulders. “Once again, they must’ve burned it all themselves.”

“You sure?”

“Full granaries on fire, livestock walking the streets and...”

“I see. Find another place.”

“No need. Follow me!”

It so happened, that the General had chosen this particular village for his troops to spend the night in. The place was so small that the Parthagonian scouts were hardly likely to look for them in such a backwater.

The rest of Arogdor’s army, consisting of almost a thousand mutants, continued its bloody rampage in hundreds of other settlements, and whatever village the scattered units found themselves in at the end of the day,

there they hunkered down for the night. Two more large reserve divisions hung back at the volcano, awaiting orders, making up a total of two and a half thousand soldiers under Ivar Gaver's command. Taking into account their concentrated strength and the speed of their mansteeds, the army was a crushing force of destruction. It had the equivalent might of at least thirty, perhaps even forty thousand regular warriors.

The mutants had just finished establishing a cordon around the brick house, the only one left standing in the entire village, when a reserve cart arrived carrying the General's provisions as well as two of his female companions. Since the beds in the house were too small, a special feather bed was laid for Gaver right on the floor of the blacksmith's bedroom, after the furniture it contained had been thrown out the window. The Arogdorians devoted much care and attention to the quantity and quality of their sleep, even in the midst of a battle excursion.

Finally, everything was ready for dinner. The square kitchen table was set with an oil lamp and huge quantities of food in enormous bowls. Mostly, it consisted of roast piglets and chickens, as well as flatbreads and nutritious pearl barley with green onions. The spread was to feed just four mutants, whereas a regular family could have lived on this amount of provisions for a whole week.

Into the kitchen entered Gaver and a senior warrior. Accompanying them, heels clip-clopping on the kitchen floor, were the General's companions – a blond and a dark-skinned brunette. The women were tall, of slender built, but incredibly voluptuous at the same time. Despite their thin

ankles and delicate waists, their exceedingly ample attributes were on the verge of bursting out of their long, flamboyant dresses. Their smiling faces seemed remarkably similar to one another, albeit slightly startling by virtue of their pointed chins, enormous lips, and tiny noses. One might have thought that they looked precisely the way many women dream of looking, given the opportunity.

Sitting across from each other silently, the four-armed mutants tossed their long dreadlocks behind their backs, and gnashing their teeth greedily, commenced eating. This was a most important part of the Arogdorians' daily ritual. After all, their colossal size depended directly on the food they consumed - without it, it would have been impossible to maintain their formidable physique. Therefore, any disruption of food supplies or, heavens forbid, famine, could lead directly to Arogdor's defeat in their centuries-old war with the self-sufficient Parthagon.

Little did they know that right beneath the table upon which this feast was taking place, Thomas, his sister, and their parents, as well as the elderly seamstress and carpenter, were sitting frozen in place and terrified half to death. Not only could they hear the beastly sounds of chewing and bone crunching, but they could also partially see into the room through the cracks between the floorboards, which were bending and groaning under the weight. None of the villagers could have predicted this nightmarish scenario. The sturdy brick house, instead of providing them with a safe haven, had on the contrary made the situation infinitely worse, almost annihilating any hope they had of escaping with their lives. The mutants were

only three feet above their heads, which could spell nothing but imminent trouble.

Recovering from the shock, Thomas, still trembling, lowered his eyes away from the ceiling and looked at the grown-ups and his sister illuminated by the dim stripes of light seeping through the floorboards into the otherwise solid darkness. His father looked agitated and kept shifting his gaze from one slit to another with intense concentration. There was no fear whatsoever registered on his face, unlike the poor carpenter, who was barely holding onto his axe while also staring upwards, practically without blinking. The seamstress was rolled up into a ball in the corner, covering her eyes and mouth with her hands. Thomas's mother and Irèn were huddled together on a blanket in the middle of the cellar, hiding their heads underneath a large pillow to prevent the girl's involuntary outcries from giving away their extremely vulnerable position.

“What is that stench!?” Gaver roared all of a sudden, loudly sniffing the table and the air around him.

“I can't stand it either, darling,” the blonde confirmed irritably, earning a steel gaze from the brunette seated across from her.

“Forgive me, General,” one of the warriors began justifying himself. “We had no choice. It must be coming from the cellar under the table.”

“Rotten vegetables! Disgusting!” the Arogdorian dame renewed her complaint.

“Yes, and something else as well...” Gaver continued to sniff thoroughly, sending panic coursing through the veins

of the poor villagers under the floor. The frightened women tried to make themselves even smaller, quivering, while the men exchanged helpless looks, trying to find some kind of support in each other's eyes. The carpenter lifted his axe, as if preparing to launch into the uneven battle right then and there, as the hunter slowly aimed the locked and loaded crossbow at the cellar door. Meanwhile, still chewing on the tougher hunks of meat in their maws, the monsters slowly rose from their chairs and began circling the narrow trap door, examining it from above as they hunched under the ceiling clearly designed to accommodate more modestly-sized guests. Gaver's lower arms rested on his hips, while the top right arm gripped the handle of the sword behind his back, slightly pulling it out of its scabbard with a scrape. The senior warrior grabbed the two daggers from his belt with his upper set of hands and bent down toward the cellar door:

“Let's see, what do we have here,” he said, pulling on the handle.

The villagers prepared for the worse: Thomas pressed himself against his trembling mother and buried his face into her hip; his father took aim at the opening. The carpenter, on the other hand, quietly laid his axe on the dirt floor and glistening tears began to roll down his flabby cheeks. In these torturous moments, they were certain that their end had come.

Finally, there was a creaking sound, and the heavy trap door began to lift, flooding the cellar with light.

“Wait!” the brunette jumped up abruptly.



“What?” the General looked back at her.

“You’ll let out the terrible smell!”

“And?”

“Can’t we finish eating first?”

“Oh, but she’s right,” the blonde had no choice but to swallow her pride and admit the truth of her rival’s objection. “Darling, let’s have our dinner first!”

“Damn broads! First it’s one thing, then another...How do you even manage to get through the day?” muttered the annoyed General, returning his sword into its sheath and going back to the table. His senior warrior did the same, letting go of the handle of the ill-fated trap door. The villagers could then exhale with relief, having realized that they had been holding their breath for the last minute or so.

The reticent and hungry band of monsters resumed their feeding frenzy, wetting their throats with buckets of full-cream milk and water. Suddenly, through the loud chewing and the clatter of dishes, there came a quiet tapping sound from the direction of the dark-skinned brunette. Thomas’s father’s eyes grew wide and he exchanged glances with the carpenter. The boy couldn’t see at first what it might have meant, but then it dawned on him: the strange woman had deliberately saved them from her compatriots! And indeed, the brunette’s wide face showed almost imperceptible gleams of a smile and there was relief in her eyes. The other gluttonous guests were too busy filling their stomachs to pay attention to such trivial details.

Having stuffed their guts to the brim, the contented mutants either forgot about the cellar, or dismissed it from

their minds by choice. After such a hard day, all they wanted now was to get into some kind of bed and go to sleep as soon as possible, especially since the Knights of Parthagon were already out scouting for them far and wide, leaving them no more than a day to beat their retreat to Arogdor.

The long suffering inhabitants of the cellar rejoiced with relief as they heard the warriors bang the now empty dishes on the table and settle down. Barely able to move their legs, the mutants made their way into their separate rooms, holding onto their full bellies covered with bio-armor and short tufts of fur. After exchanging a few whispers, the women were the last to leave the kitchen.

The villagers too could now go to sleep. Irèn, still clutching her dolly, had fallen asleep under the pillow in her mother's arms even before the Arogdorians had finished their dinner. Despite the lingering fear, Thomas, now also gave into exhaustion and fell into deep slumber along with the others. Only his father, the hunter, forewent the comfort of sleep to make sure no one snored or groaned in their sleep, which could have cost them all their lives.

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The next day, all of the lodgers at the blacksmith's house had to wake up at dawn. Even though in their everyday lives the mutants slept inordinately long hours, during raids they could not afford themselves the same luxury. As for the villagers hiding in the cellar, they in turn were awoken in the early morn by the sound of heavy footsteps when ravenous Gaver and his senior aid walked into the kitchen:

“Where's the grub?”

“Our convoy was ambushed. And we’d finished last night’s provisions...”

“What’s this?!” thundered the General, accompanied by the scraping of a scabbard.

“Forgive me! We didn’t expect the village to be empty,” the senior warrior uttered a stifled groan as his throat felt the pressure of cold steel. “They’ve left nothing in the pens here.”

“Look inside the stinking cellar. You’ve got half an hour while I’m being briefed on the war situation. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Must we really, Ivar?” the terrified villagers heard the dear voice of the brunette. “We can wait.”

“I will not wait, woman!”

“What’s the rush? We can eat somewhere else.”

“Don’t listen to her. Follow the order you’ve been given!”

The freezing children once again pressed against their mother who, blood draining from her cheeks, carefully led them into the far corner where the seamstress was already cowering. The men, for their part, mournfully picked up their weapons and readied themselves to rebuff the enemy. Tears of despair welled in the women’s eyes. Their gazes darted from the hunter to the carpenter, trying to sincerely believe that they could do anything to change their wretched lot.

At first, the villagers heard the mutants file out of the kitchen, replaced by a blessed silence that filled them with hope of survival. But only a short minute later, those hopes

were dashed into oblivion, like a soap bubble bursting in midair, by the heavy footsteps of two monsters ruthlessly coming closer and closer. Finally, they stopped right by the trap door and with a loud clang, it swung open.

The lantern hanging down in the mutant's lower arm illuminated the cellar, revealing the horrified grimaces of its dwellers. A well-aimed arrow shot out of the crossbow and into the very middle of the Arogdorian's massive forehead, while the carpenter's axe lodged itself deep into the left bio-armor plate on his chest. Emitting a blood-chilling howl, but not taking so much as a step back, the giant pulled the sharp blade out of his body and boldly headed down the stairs, his upper arms brandishing daggers that gleamed cold and deadly. He was followed by a similarly armed comrade, who in addition was cloaked in a cloud of foul stench. The men had no other option but to throw themselves at the warriors with knives in hand and desperate battle cries. However, the mutants' long arms, protected by their natural armor, made quick work of the hollering madmen right in front of the screaming women and children huddled together in the far corner of the cellar.

With a broken arrow sticking out of his head and almost doubled over due to the cellar's low ceiling, the angry Arogdorian pummeled the lifeless body of Thomas's father again and again - until there was nothing left of it but a bloody dismembered mass. The entire cellar, along with the people in it, was spattered with warm blood and slimy scraps of human flesh. The women, in the meantime, continued to wail at the top of their lungs, holding onto the squealing children. Though they had tried to shield the little ones' eyes, Thomas, through the stupor of horror, saw every

last detail of his father's demise. At first, it had seemed to the boy that none of it was real, that it was just a dream or an illusion. Then his precociously serious eyes flooded with tears while within him everything seemed to crumble under the impossibility of changing what he'd just seen.

Soon, the yelling and the commotion had reached the ears of the other mutants and they all rushed into the kitchen, including the General and his companions. Circling the trap door, they carefully examined the bloody scene before them.

"Kill the women!" sounded the order, making Thomas clutch his arms around his mother as hard as he could.

"Isn't it enough?! Stop this madness!" the half-naked brunette stood up in their defense. She immediately received a kick to the stomach and tumbled under the table, sobbing and tearing at her hair. "You're all brutes! When will it end?!"

The wounded senior warrior and his assistant silently ripped the helplessly whimpering children away from their mother and the seamstress. They then proceeded to deal the dumbfounded women, who were still desperately reaching their arms out toward the children, a few blows to the head and chest, sinking the blades of their daggers all the way down to the haft.

Calm settled over the blacksmith's house. Only the hoarse bleating of the hunter's trembling offspring disrupted the quiet rural morning.

But the General was not yet satisfied.

The mutants all froze in place as he withdrew his broad sword from its sheath and descended into the bloody cellar.

Thomas and Irèn, quivering, huddled against each other, thinking it was now their turn. However, in his cool and collected manner Gaver quietly approached the now dazed senior warrior and with a blood-curdling crunch, drove his blade into the mutant's bottom jaw, pinning his head to the low ceiling. With eyes bulging out of their orbits, the warrior dropped the lantern, went limp and fell to his knees, his massive chin still hanging from the hilt of the sword and drowning it in a stream of thick blood.

“Thick-headed imbecile!” cursed Gaver. “Throw the runts into the cart and head out north. Report the situation along the way.”

As soon as the General and his entourage had left the charred remains of the village behind, a score of carts from the supply convoy came rumbling up to the brick house. Pulled by boney mares, a large part of them were overloaded with looted treasure: sacs filled with provisions and domestic goods. One of the carts, in the shape of a cage with thick wooden bars, was packed to the rafters with small children. They were all dirty; their tunics were muddy and torn. Some of them were wounded or bore signs of beating and all emitted constant sobbing and wailing sounds, desperately calling for their mothers and begging for a little water and bread in their hoarse, sickly voices.

A young mutant with underdeveloped lower arms and reeking of a nauseating mixture of sweat and some kind of sour rot, led the desolate Thomas and Irèn to the cage. But just as he was about to shove them in, a warrior with red bands tied around his shoulders, as well as red dreads and a similarly rust-colored beard stopped him:

“And what’s this then, dimwit?”

“What’s the matter?”

“Never mind the girl, she’ll do,” hissed the older warrior, shifting his bloodshot eyes in Thomas’s direction, “but I won’t be taking this knuckle-dragger along. He’s an overgrown good for nothing! Just look at him, numbskull.”

“I’ve got my orders.”

“Do you now? Well here’s a new order for you: the girl goes in cage, the boy gets his throat slit.”

The redheaded monster said this so casually that it became immediately clear just how often he’d given similar orders. As the younger warrior stood idle in hesitation, his elder comrade took it upon himself to tear Irèn, kicking and screaming, away from her brother and roughly throw her into the cage on top of the other children. This done, the convoy immediately departed in the direction of the woods, passing through the smoking husk of the village, accompanied by the hysterical barking of the pup who’d reappeared out of nowhere, probably drawn out of hiding by the noise. The girl stuck her chubby arms through the bars of the cage, and crying desperately reached out in the direction of her sobbing brother being held tightly by the hair while the mutant tentatively grappled for his sword.

Thomas’s executioner was very young and inexperienced. Unlike the other mutants, his lower arms were somewhat stunted, thin and short, as if they’d stopped growing before they could reach their full size. It was apparent that he’d never actually participated in real combat, having been assigned to collecting resources from captured territories

instead. For that reason, he found killing a human, not to mention a child, to be a rather difficult task. Looking around as if expecting some kind of reinforcements to arrive, he spent a long time trying to work up the courage to carry out the order he'd been given, not daring to so much as look at the grubby peasant boy.

As the cart carrying Irèn away finally disappeared from view, Thomas was suddenly overcome by an uncontrollable rage boiling up inside him. Added to the thought of his beloved sister left helpless and alone were the bloody images of his parents being murdered before his eyes. All at once, his fear vanished entirely and an animal instinct took control of his body, clouding his rational mind altogether. As if from out of nowhere, a force he'd never felt before in his life came flowing into his limbs, and he had no choice but to use it, lest it tear him apart.

With a sharp jerk, and at the cost of a whole lock of thick chestnut hair, this new ferocious Thomas tore himself out of the bewildered mutant's hands and deftly dove through his legs. By the time the clumsy warrior managed to turn around, the boy had already disappeared behind the corner of the smoking remains of a nearby house. Cursing profusely, a few of the other Arogdorians dropped what they were doing to chase after him. However, unlike the foreign intruders, the child knew his home village well, and could find his way around it with his eyes closed. Nimbly crossing from one fence or charred wall to the next, he almost made it to the safety of the forest where the crowded trees would protect him from the ruthless monsters. But passing through the last yard before the clearing where the woods



commenced, he felt a mighty blow to the hip followed by agonizing pain.

Falling into a carrot patch and looking himself up and down, Thomas saw an unusually thick and long arrow sticking out of his left leg, its point having gone right through his thigh and come out the other end. His tunic was quickly soaking up blood, and the terrible pain prevented the boy not only from getting up, but from moving at all. He could only cry and scream, trying to remove the arrow stuck deep in his flesh, as the mutants, grunting contentedly, gathered around him. They were laughing among themselves, at the expense of their inexperienced comrade, mocking him:

“Hey, this little sucker’s braver than you are!”

“Check out his arms! You wish you had a pair like that, huh?”

“They’re twice as thick as yours!”

“Leave me alone you weasels!” snapped the young executioner, swinging his huge axe breathlessly. But the little villager would not surrender quietly: he threw a well-aimed sharp stone at the mutant’s eye and then, accompanied by the hysterical laughter of the other Arogdorians, threw himself at him and proceeded to bite his legs. The frenzied warrior at first seemed to have no trouble avoiding Thomas’s milk teeth, when all of a sudden he dropped to the ground right next to his unsubdued victim.

At first, the hushed mutants, as well as Thomas himself, all froze, unable to comprehend what had just happened. But soon enough they saw the arrow in the back of the

disgraced warrior's head as he sprawled out unnaturally right on top of the young beetroot shoots. Immediately there sounded the whistle of more arrows flying through the air as well as the thud they made as they hit mutant flesh and armor. Another two mutants fell down dead on the spot, and a third one grabbed onto his run-through shoulder with a pitiful cry. The arrows were followed by the sounds of raucous voices, an earth-shaking stamping of hooves and the ominous clatter of heavy steel as, with tremendous speed, a small squadron of the Knights of Parthagon burst out of the forest.

Up until that moment, Thomas had only seen them in old and rather shoddily made paintings, in his imagination and in his dreams. He loved listening to the stories, fables and legends surrounding these warriors, which in turn inspired the frequent wooden sword battles he would wage with the neighboring kids. There was nothing extraordinary about it – all boys across the kingdom dreamed of becoming knights. For a villager, this was an impossible ambition, but the children knew nothing about that.

Unlike the mutants, the brave soldiers of the Royal Knights Brigade got around on regular horses, albeit the tallest and most powerful of their breed, and were shaped like any other human being. They were set apart from regular people by their incredible musculature, their supernatural strength and their remarkable height. But even though each one among them was at least two or three heads taller than a regular man, they still could not compete with the sheer size of the four-armed mutants. Under their blue capes, they wore thick linen shirts, on top of which shone the shapely steel mail armor with the mail

sleeves, a collar and a short skirt. Protecting their heads was a rounded helmet that covered not only their necks, but almost the entirety of the face as well, leaving only two oval openings for the eyes which tapered down into a narrow slit for the nose and another horizontal one for the mouth. Below the waist they wore thick trousers and immaculately shined, thigh-high leather boots. In addition, they possessed a curved rectangular shield, which hung down from their horse's harness along with their spear. In terms of weapons, they carried a sword with a blue handle, a spear, a dagger and a specially calibrated crossbow that could pierce the exceedingly thick skulls of their enemies.

A lightning fast battle now ensued right before Thomas's eyes, as he watched, slack jawed: the fast-riding knights plunged their long spears and sharp swords into the scattering mutants. Some of the Arogdorians fiercely resisted, some begged for mercy, but in the end the Royal Knights managed to mercilessly dispose of the ambushed enemy without suffering any losses.

Almost trampling the boy, the fired up knights went on to gallop directly into the heart of the burned down village. There were no more than a dozen of them all in all, but together they made up a colossal force that made an unforgettable impression on the young boy. This was the first time he ever experienced those unique feelings that an adult would call patriotic pride. Which is why, forgetting the loss of his loved ones and the excruciating pain he was in, Thomas, still bleeding profusely, watched enthusiastically as the armored knights of King Albert III killed off the remaining mutants, until he finally lost consciousness.

The squadron of the Knights of Parthagon, consisting of elite warriors under the command of Niels Dohr, spread out on moss covered logs around a crackling fire. From the depths of the forest, there came the faint sounds of screaming and the portentous hoots of an owl. The exhausted men of the capital silently enjoyed the smell of roasting boar. Only a couple of wounded warriors, tossing from side to side at a distance, sometimes moaned or groaned softly.

The yellow flame caressed Niels, illuminating his big head complete with wide cheekbones, an imposing nose and a thoughtful gaze peeking out from under locks of flaxen hair. He appeared to be little over thirty years of age, but he was not one to strive for physical perfection, unlike most inhabitants of Parthagon. As far as Niels was concerned, he believed that men don't need to be particularly handsome to enjoy all that life has to offer. And even though many might have sniggered at this idea, in his case it really was rather effective.

The soldier had served almost an entire century in the King's army and strived to become a great general, yet despite his remarkable vitality, he found it difficult to advance through the ranks. Even though he was in good standing with the chief commander, the armor above his heart was decorated with nothing more than a bronze plaque bearing the crest of Parthagon, in the shape of two interlocking rings. This mark of distinction, resembling the cross section of a somewhat angular apple, designated a low-level officer bearing the title of centurion. He could command no more than one hundred soldiers – a century

that is – but more often than not his squadron amounted to just a few dozen men.

“Don’t worry,” said Richard Fein, a strikingly good-looking soldier with long blond hair, nobly elongated features and bright blue eyes, “he won’t get away next time.”

“If only we’d gotten here a few minutes earlier...”

“We’re getting closer.”

“What will I tell the legate this time? How can I look the King in the eye,” lamented Niels, prodding the coals with his sword. “The same exact story time and time again!”

“Wait a minute now, surely it’s not our fault? We got here as quickly as we could.”

“It’s always our fault.”

A little to the side, from under a blue knightly cape, Thomas moaned faintly and grew quiet again. Niels anxiously got up and quickly went to check on him. Seeing that the poor little guy was still unconscious, he tucked the blue fabric more tightly around the small body and returned silently to his place near the fire, where his fellow soldiers were engaged in a merry discussion.

“I still don’t understand why you decided to bring him along,” Richard nodded in the direction of the villager.

“There’s something about him. We couldn’t just leave him there.”

“Even the mutants wouldn’t take him. And we certainly can’t make anything of him – he’s past the age.”

“He’ll make it. He has no choice.”

“You’re serious?”

“You saw it yourself, he was alone and barely alive, but ready to fight to his dying breath.”

“And?”

“Not every one among us is capable of something like that. Fully grown and trained men that we are, some of us are still likely to give up once our chances at survival have dwindled to zero. This boy, on the other hand... Have you ever seen such courage? Incredible! And he’s only a child!”

“Well, do as you please...You do understand that it’ll be extremely hard for him to master the phase? As brave as he might be, he’s in for a rough deal in Parthagon. And who’ll let him into the city in the first place?”

“He stands a chance, Richard.”

“He’s an outsider. A peasant. You know our laws.”

Niels spat in frustration and glanced at Thomas’s sleeping figure:

“I understand it all perfectly clearly. But we have to give him a shot. If the King can suddenly have a child, why can’t I?”

“Yet another strange tale in our kingdom, for sure. But your situation is slightly different, wouldn’t you say?” Richard playfully punched his friend in the shoulder. “And don’t go comparing yourself to Albert, old chap! What name did they end up giving her, anyway? And who’s her mother, we ought to know that at least?”

“They call her Elizabeth. They say she’s the child of one of his secret mistresses who died in childbirth. She was probably just a child herself. You know what he’s like...”

“Hmm, tragic....But she still got the title of princess?”

“What choice did he have in his position? That’s why he’s likely to be more lenient. All the better for our brave little chap here.”

“Well, brother, you’re nothing if not a gambler!”

Having stuffed his gut full of undercooked wild pork and then nearly busted it open laughing at the vulgar tales exchanged by the tipsy soldiers, Niels gave the order to retire. After checking the patrols, he carefully lay down next to Thomas, shielding him from the cold with his mighty arms, and fell asleep immediately.

The knight felt like he’d barely shut his eyes when he heard his grumbling comrades begin to awaken in the dawn twilight. It was time to go home. Not waiting to be roused, he attempted to envision the interlinked rings of Parthagon before his eyes. But it was no use; the scraping of metal in his vicinity disrupted his concentration. Niels then tried to tune into the sounds around him, trying to hear his name being called out, as if someone were actually there, looking for him. But even though the noise of world in his ears grew quieter, he still did not hear his name. He then went back to the rings, trying his hardest to picture them before his eyes, somewhere at the level of his forehead. Suffering yet another failure, he had no recourse but to return to imagining his name being called out. Suddenly, a thin female voice lustfully uttered “Niels” and vanished

immediately into the silence. This was a good sign, which is why the warrior perked up and tried visualizing the rings yet again. His gaze was immediately blinded by a brilliant flash of light and two iridescent blue rings came together before his eyes, resounding brightly against each other!

The magical vision blazed so realistically, it was as if he could reach out and touch it. But the knight had other things on his mind. Realizing that he would soon be awakened, he swiftly rose to his feet and found himself all at once at the top of a precipitous mountain. Black clouds overhead rumbled and spewed out sheets of lightning that illuminated the bare cliffs below. Directly in front of Niels there was a huge blue sword, glowing from within, with a wavy groove running down its middle and a ruby set in its handle. Exhaling, he grabbed the magical weapon with both hands, at which instant an enormous gust of wind almost knocked him off his feet and his whole body began to hum. Gritting his teeth against the pain, the growling warrior held onto the burning metal, feeling his whole body ripping at the seams as it expanded outwards and upwards. At some point, his chainmail burst apart with a loud ringing sound and their owner increased to such dimensions that the sword now appeared to be of a suitable size.

But then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the vision was gone and Niels felt his prostrated body strongly tingling from head to toe. And yet his fingers could still feel the handle of the sword through which flowed a palpable might and force.



“Expanding yourself some more in there, are you?” he heard Richard’s voice followed by another kick to the shin. “As if you’re not enough of a hulking ox already!”

Meanwhile, Thomas was still sunk deep in an endless procession of nightmares in which his parents’ screams were succeeded by frenzied mutants giving him chase, which were in turn succeeded by Irèn’s desperate cries. Hunger and thirst constantly tugged at the boy, at which he would suddenly wake up, only to fall asleep again just as abruptly, not knowing where he was or what was happening to him. On top of that, the constant hurdling and shaking made his left leg hurt. Soon, bright sunlight, the trills of forest birds and the knocking of hooves on the paved road added to his torments and finally caused the little one to wake up completely.

Opening his sleep-crusted eyes with great difficulty, Thomas found himself in a saddle, seated in front of a flaxen-haired warrior with a prominent nose and a tired gaze. Beside them, several other warriors on horseback trotted along in the same calm manner. Riding through a field, the company was approaching an enormous wooden gate set within a stone wall that stretched as far as the eye could see, its top edge fortified with narrow arrow slits. In many places this wall, which was taller than even the mightiest trees in the kingdom, was covered in moss and vines from the ground all the way to the top. Behind it, it was possible to make out the shapes of formidable towers and the brown clay roof tiles of incredibly tall and beautiful buildings. Thomas had never seen Parthagon but he understood immediately that this was it – that wondrous city inhabited by extraordinary people, the stuff of so many

myths and legends. Within these very walls stood the famed castle that was home to the King and the newborn Princess, the subject of his sister's relentless teasing.

"Good morning, little daredevil," the knight winked at him.

"Hello!" Thomas answered bashfully.

"My name is Niels. What's yours?"

"Thomas. Thomas Young."

"Hey, sleepyhead!" a voice sounded from behind.

Looking over his shoulder, the young villager saw a fantastically handsome knight with light blond hair riding a smoky-gray stallion. Beneath the beaming smile that spread across his elongated face, he was carefully holding a small black puppy, peacefully asleep in the crook of his muscular arm.

"This little ball of fur wouldn't happen to be yours, would? He's been asleep this whole time too."

"Yes, mister, he's mine."

"Can I keep him?"

"Of course, you can take Tumtum."

"A gift for the wife, eh? You pitiful doormat," Niles grumbled with fake contempt as he frowned at the sundial he'd pulled out of his pocket. "How do they even take men like you into the army?"

At that moment the guffawing warriors passed a wooden bridge over a marshy moat filled with croaking frogs. Before

them, the heavy Northern Gate, protected from both sides by armored guards, opened slowly with a loud creak:

“Long live the King!”

“Long live Parthagon!” answered the roadworn squadron.

Thomas was met with a warm breeze carrying thousands of smells and sounds that were all new to him. Directly at the foot of the colossal gate began a seemingly endless avenue crowded with people and lined with luscious green trees, as well as neat two and three story buildings. Wherever his gaze happened to land, something was happening and someone was busily doing something. The faces of the smartly dressed citizens were beaming with happy, contented smiles. However, finding himself in this place gushing with life, the boy couldn't help think of his parents and his sister, who would never see any of this, as well as of his home village which was no more, just like the rest of his past life. Grief and gladness mingled within him into an overwhelming ball of emotion that sat like a gag in his throat.

Thomas tried his hardest not to burst into tears in front of his heroic saviors, especially Niels. But when he was suddenly enveloped in a warm embrace by a divinely perfumed woman with short red hair and slightly pointed ears, he could no longer hold it back. His childish lips twisted into a bitter grimace and sparkling tears began to flow uncontrollably from his tightly shut eyes, dropping one by one onto the freckled beauty's lilac dress.

“Welcome to Parthagon, my poor child,” he only just heard her say through the sound of his sobs.

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