

Chapter XX, 21st January

The snow was cold and wet against my cheek. I tried to recall how I had found myself lying on the ground, but I wasn't capable of thinking about anything else than the large snowflakes falling one by one on my temple, resting on my eyelashes. The pictures in my head were blurred, misshapen. I could scarcely feel my fingers, so cold was I. Despite the thick fur cloak, the cold came creeping up my spine making my whole body shudder. I didn't dare to open my eyes. I didn't dare to stir or make a sound.

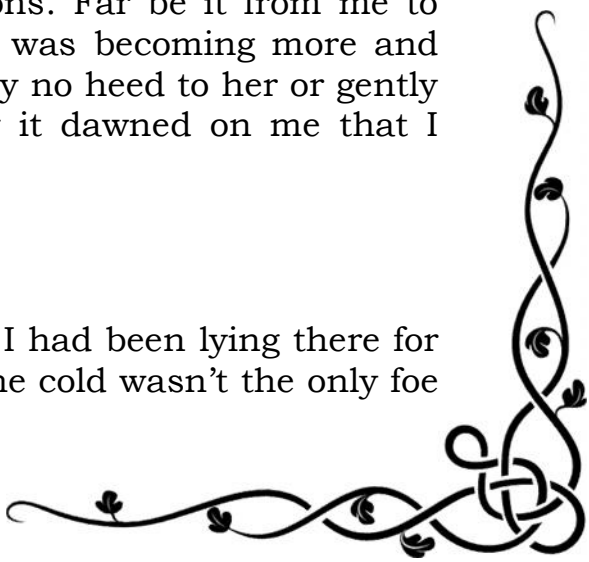
* * *

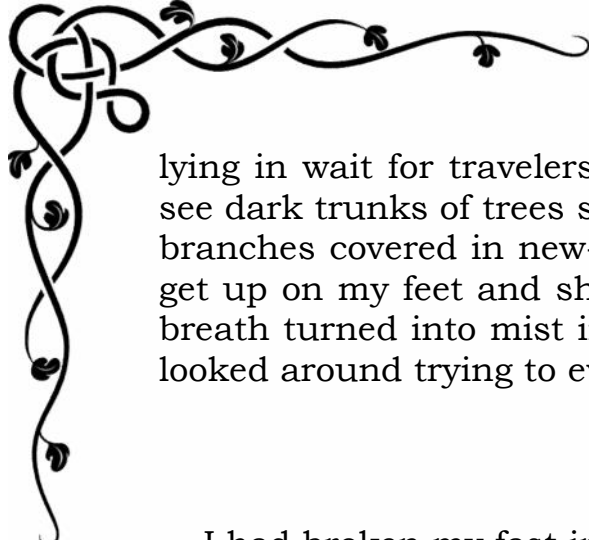
As I lied there hopelessly, the snow creating a soft cozy blanket on my back, I thought of home. I thought of all the warm evenings spent by the hearth with cold winter wind whistling outside the castle walls. I had always taken pride in being the Lord of Icehill – the mighty fortress, the oasis in the middle of the Haunted Forest. My father had prepared me well for this role. I had been doing my best not to disappoint him. He had truly been the only man I'd ever looked up to. However, after he'd passed away, something in my childish heart had died with him. I wasn't the same man henceforth. Only mother remained by my side. A loving woman she was, yet she could never replace father.

I have written plenty of pages about our relations, which had never been what true mother-son relations should be. She was my burden. She only posed an obstacle on my path to success. She could never resign herself with the fact that I was almost a man grown. Mothers can never accept the thought that their children mature and they have no need of their motherly advice any more. To make things worse, I was a lord. Icehill and its folk were under my responsibility, which was another source of my mother's concern. Perhaps she assumed I could not handle it alone, I could not keep the power in my hands. Even though I had my own council, she was never far, trying to help me whenever I was forced to take tough decisions. Far be it from me to tolerate this kind of behavior. Her presence was becoming more and more annoying and galling. Either I would pay no heed to her or gently bid her to leave me be. However, yesterday it dawned on me that I could not endure it any longer.

* * *

The snow never stopped falling. I felt as if I had been lying there for hours. If I wanted to live I had to move, for the cold wasn't the only foe





lying in wait for travelers in the Haunted Forest. I opened my eyes to see dark trunks of trees standing motionlessly like silent soldiers, their branches covered in new-fallen snow. It took all my strength to finally get up on my feet and shake the heavy layer of snow off my back. My breath turned into mist in the cold air of the night. Blinking rapidly, I looked around trying to evoke vague memories of yesterday.

* * *

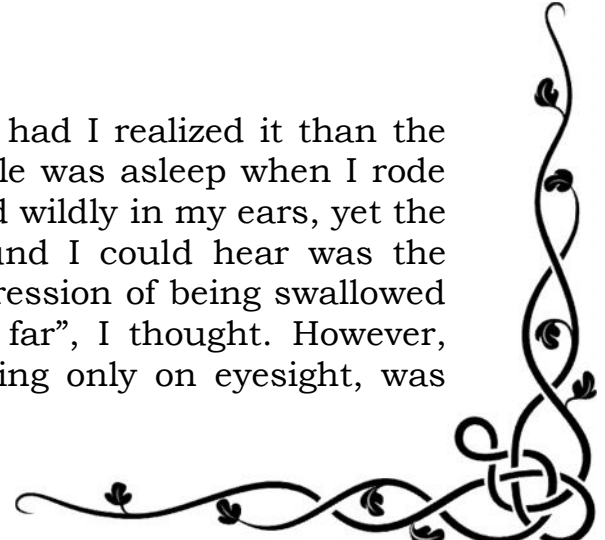
I had broken my fast in the shelter of my bedchamber, as the golden rays of morning sun had been slanting through the window. At midday I met my council to discuss the battle plans. On the next day I was to march south, to war. My mother had never accompanied me at the meetings, but she would always speak to me in private in order to give me another set of her counsels. It wasn't different this time. At sundown I stumbled upon her in the courtyard. I could see anxiety in her blue eyes. She began to plead me to carefully consider my decision once more, making me feel like a ten-year-old boy. She obviously was afraid for me, but she could not understand that it was my honor and duty to protect my people in battle. No matter what arguments I put forward, she would not listen. The ordinary disagreement soon turned into a fierce quarrel. People were halting in the courtyard, others opened their shutters intrigued by our shouts. Eventually, rage possessed me. I commanded the guards to open the gates and left my mother on the other side of the castle walls, at the edge of the Haunted Forest.

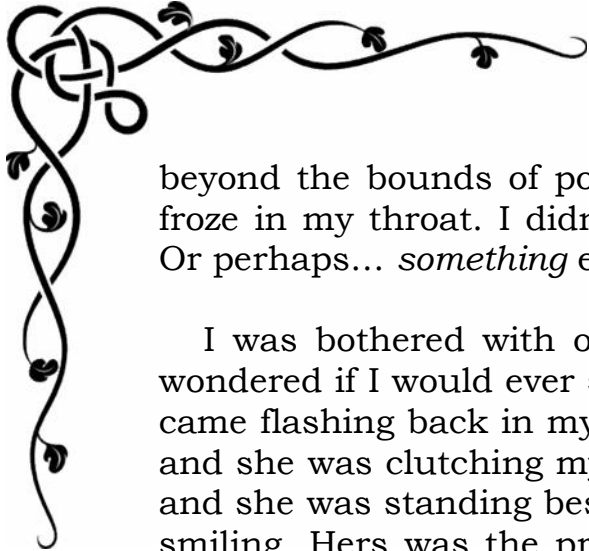
* * *

And the snow kept falling. Step by step I waded through the woods. Tall slender firs creaked ominously above my head as if they were talking in a language I did not understand. Dim moonlight struggled to burst through their crowns. The reminiscence of the facial expression of my mother standing in the northern gate filled my heart with sorrow. I winced at the very thought of my recklessness.

* * *

My deed had been sheer folly! No sooner had I realized it than the stableboy had saddled my stallion. The castle was asleep when I rode unseen towards the forest. The wind whistled wildly in my ears, yet the moment I entered the woods, the only sound I could hear was the ringing of utter silence. I had the queer impression of being swallowed by infinite darkness. "She can't have gone far", I thought. However, finding my mother in such conditions, relying only on eyesight, was





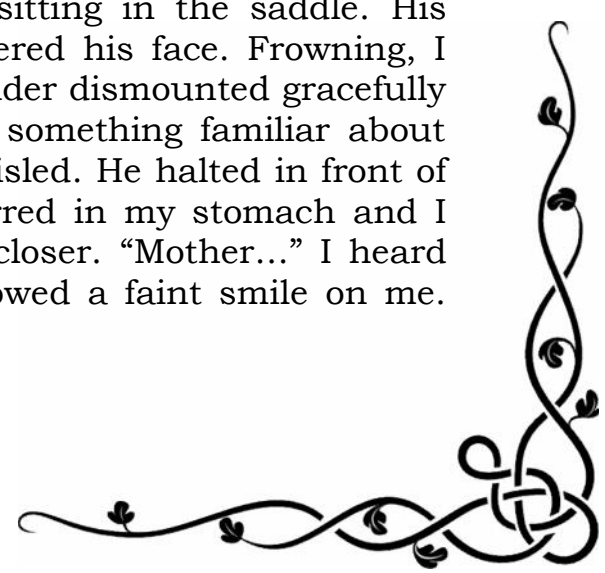
beyond the bounds of possibility. I wanted to call out, but the words froze in my throat. I didn't dare to risk being heard by someone else. Or perhaps... *something* else.

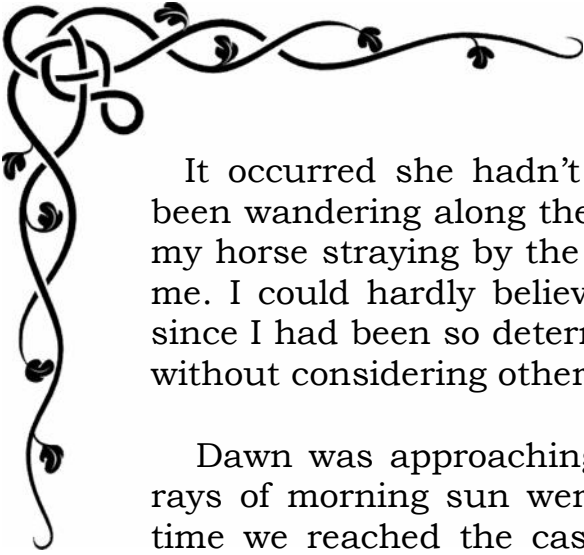
I was bothered with one question: how could I let this happen? I wondered if I would ever see her face again. And then all the memories came flashing back in my mind. I was standing by my father's sickbed and she was clutching my hand ... I was celebrating a victory in battle and she was standing beside me with pride in her eyes ... and she was smiling. Hers was the prettiest smile in the world. And I had treated her so indifferently. Would that I could turn back the time.

Suddenly my horse whinnied apprehensively. I looked around, but there was naught to be seen save for the dark silhouettes of trees. Yet I knew something was amiss. Even the firs fell silent. All of a sudden a shadow ran... no, *flew* across the path right in front of me. I only managed to catch a glimpse of a pair of glowing red eyes before my hack reared up and galloped forwards. I could hardly keep myself in the saddle. Two more shadows appeared among the trees, their eyes burned like rubies. I felt long fingers of fear tightening about my throat. I wasn't able to rein back my horse. The last thing I remember was a thick bough rushing to meet my face.

* * *

I was too absent to see when exactly the snow stopped falling. I was tired of constant dwelling on the past as well as forcing my way through the woods. My fingers were numb with cold. Suddenly I heard a muffled sound. I instinctively reached for the hilt of my sword, but to my astonishment my fingers only brushed the scabbard – *it was empty*. The steel had been there when I'd ridden into the forest. Now, with no weapon, I felt vulnerable, naked. I took a deep breath and stood ready to face any creature that was to emerge from the woods. Before I could imagine red eyes glowing between the trunks, I beheld my own stallion trotting towards me. I felt a huge relief, yet the feeling died the moment I realized someone was sitting in the saddle. His cloak was coal-black and a large hood covered his face. Frowning, I waited for him to make the first move. The rider dismounted gracefully and took several steps forward. There was something familiar about that person, but I could not let myself be misled. He halted in front of me and pulled off his hood. Something stirred in my stomach and I held my breath for a heartbeat. I stepped closer. "Mother..." I heard myself say. But she only nodded and bestowed a faint smile on me. The prettiest smile under the sun.





It occurred she hadn't even entered the Haunted Forest. She had been wandering along the stream by the eastern gate when she'd seen my horse straying by the castle walls. She said he'd led her directly to me. I could hardly believe what I heard. Nonetheless, I felt abashed, since I had been so determined to find her that I had chosen the forest without considering other possibilities.

Dawn was approaching. As we left the forest, the first golden-pink rays of morning sun were already creeping lazily up the sky. By the time we reached the castle its towers were bathing in all shades of yellow. The reflection of sun was sparkling on the surface of water in the stream. And so, both of us safely returned home. However, had it not been for me, this incident would have never taken place. I hadn't learned to appreciate mother's love as a child, therefore my greatest desire is to change it now. But I am not the only one. Mother promised not to intrude in my duties, emphasizing the fact that she would always be near in case I needed her. I was glad to hear it, still I wish I had been aware of it years ago.

Trust

Empathy

Forgiveness

Now we both know their true meaning.

*

On the morrow I am holding a great feast. I had better see to the preparations now. She certainly won't be disappointed.

