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Kikki Vleerne



FERILLU

True adventure begins not with the search for a road, but with the willingness to understand where that road leads

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Аннотация

Velda lives in the forest, far from people and their bustle. Her life is peaceful and solitary — until the night when a voice crying from the mist disturbs her sleep. Someone, somewhere in the darkness, is asking for help. Asking to find the peace they cannot discover alone.Velda does not know who is calling to her. Does not know if it is a dream or something more. But the voice sounds so desperate that the fairy cannot help but answer.

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Kikki Vleerne

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Introduction

The midday sun stood high. It reigned over the enchanted forest, undivided and thoroughly pleased with itself — pouring thick gold across the clearings, shattering into a thousand tiny sparks in the streams, warming the bark of the trees until it gave off a pleasant, resinous scent. The forest lived its own unhurried daytime life: bumblebees hummed, birds called back and forth to one another, and somewhere in the ferns a hedgehog busied itself with important hedgehog business. The leaves rustled so softly and evenly that the rustling ceased to be a sound at all and became a backdrop instead — warm, lulling, utterly essential for an afternoon nap.

Velda knew this, and she made use of that knowledge with the fullest sense of responsibility.

She lay on her back, hands tucked behind her head, on a broad branch of an old oak — one of the few surviving giants of this forest. Most of its kin had long since vanished, giving way to younger, fussier, entirely unremarkable trees. This one, however, still stood. Its trunk was so wide that three people together could not have wrapped their arms around it, its bark creased with the wrinkles of centuries lived, and its crown spread outward with that unhurried confidence found only in those who have long since stopped needing to prove anything.

The branch Velda had claimed for herself sat high enough that

most troubles remained safely below. The moss upon it was soft and warm. Patches of sunlight slid across her face through the leaves — not blinding, just sliding, lazily and pleasantly.

Velda's wings — thin, amber-gold, threaded with veins like an autumn leaf held up to the light — lay folded beneath her back, forming something between a pillow and a nest. Her hair was scattered across the moss in complete disarray, a fact to which she was entirely indifferent. Her face — the very one that, under other circumstances, knew how to arrange itself into an expression of appropriate gravity — now wore only one thing: utter, unconditional bliss.

The forest breathed, and the sun warmed it. The wind rocked the branch, ever so slightly. The idyll was absolute. Which was, of course, precisely why it could not possibly last.

"Hey, Velda!"

The shriek was so piercing that the birds on the neighboring branch all took flight at once, and Velda herself jumped — quite literally, lifting clean off the branch — her wings snapping open before she had time to process anything at all. She hung in the air for a fraction of a second, then flipped over and, with an expression on her face that promised nothing good, hung down from the branch to look below.

At the roots of the oak, standing in patches of sunlight, was a kobold.

Small, stocky, with skin the color of old bark and ears jutting out at an angle. He tilted his head back, shielding his eyes from

the midday sun with one hand, and nervously twisted a red cap in his fingers — wringing it, unwinding it, wringing it again.

"Eh?" Velda said, with the intonation of someone yanked from the finest spot in the entire world. "What? What is it? What do you want, kobold?"

"Why are you sleeping?!" he squeaked indignantly. "The sun hasn't even set!"

Velda slowly shifted her gaze to the sky. The sun stood exactly where it had been standing — dead at its zenith, round, smug, in absolutely no hurry to go anywhere. The fairy studied it for several seconds with the air of a specialist examining someone else's claim and finding it, at best, dubious.

"And?" she said.

One word. But delivered with such finality that the kobold choked on whatever he had been about to say next.

"But you're the Fairy!" he blurted out, gathering himself. "Guardian of our forest! Chosen by the very spirits of the woods to keep order! Today the old oak by the great boulder is shedding its leaves out of season and no one understands why, the ivy on the eastern slope is strangling the young elms until they creak with despair, and then there are the yews on the hill — "

"Listen," Velda cut him off.

Her voice was even and very clear — free of irritation, free of haste, which somehow made it far more effective than any raised tone could have been.

"The oak by the sacrificial stone sheds its leaves at noon every

third year — it isn't sickness, it's its conversation with the earth, and I've already explained that twice to those capable of listening. The ivy received the elms' consent back in the autumn — I witnessed that agreement myself, sealed by the first frost." She raised an eyebrow slightly.

"But the yews — "

"The yews near the lake," she said calmly, "stood there before the first human ever laid eyes on our forest. They will go on standing for one more day without my intervention. That much I promise with complete confidence."

"On what?!" the kobold burst out, unable to hold back.

Velda looked at him.

It was a particular kind of look — calm, without a trace of malice or disdain, which made it all the more convincing. A look that, without a single word, conveyed to its recipient everything he needed to know about his current place in the order of things — and that place was a decidedly modest one. So modest, in fact, that the kobold suddenly felt uneasy, though Velda hadn't so much as lifted a finger.

The kobold opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. Then muttered something under his breath — quietly enough that he could later pretend nothing had been said at all. The cap in his hands had by now been wrung into a tight, hopeless knot. After one more moment's hesitation, finding nothing worthy to say in reply, he turned and walked off, crunching acorns underfoot in irritation. Velda watched him go.

“Acorns,” she said quietly, to no one in particular, “happen to be alive too, you know.”

And, entirely unbothered, she closed her eyes. With unconcealed pleasure, Velda rolled back onto her spine, tucked her hands behind her head once more, and let the sun and the silence return to their rightful places.

Chapter 1

Sleep came quickly. But it was an entirely different sleep. The mist appeared from nowhere. Not the familiar kind — light, half-translucent, smelling of dew and morning chill, the sort that lies peacefully over the lowlands and vanishes by noon without a trace. This one was different. Dark. Thick almost to the point of solidity. Cold with that deep, penetrating dampness that settles on the skin and refuses to leave no matter how hard you try to shake it off. It came from every direction at once.

Velda was walking. She did not remember getting to her feet — did not remember the transition from the oak branch to this shapeless darkness. She simply found herself, at some point, walking forward, and this seemed the only possible thing to do. The mist stood so thick before her face that an outstretched arm disappeared into it before it could even straighten fully. Her wings had grown damp with cold droplets and heavy with them. Beneath her feet was something solid — textureless, nameless.

She walked in silence. There was no reason to panic — panic requires a comprehensible threat, and here there was nothing comprehensible at all. All that remained was to observe. To keep her thoughts in order. To walk forward. This was something Velda knew how to do — holding her inner balance steady in a place where the outer world had long since dissolved. It did not always come without effort, but it came.

And then, ahead, something flared.

A red light — bright, sharp, almost painful — pierced the veil of mist for a fraction of a second and went dark. Velda stopped, utterly motionless. Then the light appeared again — different this time: pulsing, deep, like an ember still smoldering but on its very last reserves of strength.

"Velda…"

A voice sounded. Low, strangely distorted — by distance, or by the nature of this place, or by some third thing for which she had no fitting word. As though spoken through several layers of something dense and impenetrable. But it was not the way it sounded that mattered. What mattered was that between the words, in the pauses, in the very breath of it, there was exhaustion — exhaustion so profound it became almost tangible. The exhaustion of a being that has been carrying something heavy for a very, very long time.

"Guardian of the wondrous forest… I beg you…"

Velda did not move. Unfamiliar voices in a dark mist — precisely the sort of situation where haste is out of place. But something kept her from turning back. Something in the very nature of this voice — not threatening, not cunning. Something entirely the opposite.

She walked toward it. The mist retreated reluctantly — in wisps, sealing itself back together behind her as though alive and unwilling to let her pass. The red light pulsed ahead — flaring a

little brighter, then nearly dying away — and in that unevenness there was something like the labored breathing of someone who has been tired for a long time but continues to hold on.

"I beg you…"

"Who are you?" Velda asked.

Silence. Long, taut.

The red light trembled.

"A wanderer lost in the labyrinth of his own despair," the voice said at last.

Velda's brow furrowed slightly — barely perceptibly. Not a name — a state of being. Not who, but what. Thus answers one who has long since lost the first and lives only in the second.

"How can I help you?"

A pause. The red light pulsed — slowly, unevenly.

"Come at nightfall," the voice said. "To the house where the lilac bush grows."

Velda walked forward. The red silhouette was already quite close — blurred, indistinct, small. Something pulsing in the mist, clearly unwilling to be seen clearly.

"Let me look upon you," she said simply.

The mist around the red fire immediately stirred.

Frantically, almost in panic. The silhouette retreated. The light shuddered and beat irregularly. And the voice — only moments before so weary, so quiet, so utterly drained — suddenly cracked. Something sharp entered it. Something hunted. Fear — not the fear that threatens, but fear itself. The fear of one about to be

seen and recognized.

"You…" the voice broke. A pause. Another. "You… y-you'll… kn-know me…"

The last word dissolved into darkness before it could sound complete. The red light went out. Darkness closed in — total, absolute, soundless.

Velda stood motionless, staring at the place where the crimson flicker had pulsed only moments before. The midday forest, the oak, the moss, the warmth — all of it seemed now like something from another life entirely.

One thought held in her mind — not an anxious one, but the kind you cannot rid yourself of: sharp, clinging, insistent.

Who is so afraid of being recognized? And why does this voice — through the mist, through all the distortions, through the cold and the darkness — seem so familiar to her?

***

The day was dying slowly and beautifully. The sunset spilled across the sky in broad ribbons — from deep purple at the very horizon to pale, almost white gold where the sky still held the memory of the sun. The forest beneath this light was transformed: shadows stretched out and grew soft, colors deepened and grew rich, and the air took on that peculiar evening density that carries with it the scents of cooling resin, damp moss, and something elusive — not quite the approaching night, not

quite change itself, but something hovering between the two.

Velda opened her eyes. For several moments she lay motionless, gazing at the interwoven branches above her head and allowing her consciousness to return from the depths into which sleep had drawn her. The return did not come at once — sleep clung to her, unwilling to let go. The red light, pulsing in the darkness. A voice speaking her name with such weariness that it became almost painful to hear. Mist, thick as oblivion itself.

She sat up and rubbed her face with her palms. Hunger made itself known immediately — dull and insistent, utterly unwilling to consider that she had more pressing matters to attend to. Velda reached into a hollow beside her and felt around until she found a small bundle — a handful of blueberries, set aside that very morning. The berries were warm, slightly bruised, but perfectly serviceable. She ate slowly, watching the sunset through the leaves, and thought.

"Who is this voice?" she murmured quietly, as though reasoning aloud before someone unseen. "Or what? A sufferer who begs for aid and yet fears being recognized — this is a contradiction in itself, one that demands resolution."

She finished the last berry and looked at her fingers — stained blue with juice.

"A house with a lilac bush. It cannot be far from our forest. Otherwise, how would this lost wanderer even know who I am?"

The decision ripened of its own accord — without hesitation or superfluous deliberation. Velda slipped down from the branch,

spreading her wings in flight, and retrieved her cloak from where it lay along the fork in the wood.

The cloak was long and dark green — once a rich, deep shade, but the sun and the years had taken their toll. The color had faded unevenly: olive in some places, nearly gray in others, and the hood had faded more than anything else, now resembling old moss more than living leaves. Velda regarded this with complete indifference. The cloak was comfortable and did not bind her wings — what more was needed for the task.

She threw it over her shoulders without fastening it, spread her wings to their full width, and with one strong beat rose upward, piercing through the canopy. The enchanted forest remained below — a green sea of crowns, already touched by the blue-gray shadows of evening. Velda set her course westward, toward where the trees grew sparse and the open world began with its roads and its people.

At the forest's edge she descended into tall grass, folded her wings tight against her back, and drew her cloak close, carefully pulling the hood over her head. Here, where magic ended and the ordinary world began, it was better not to attract unnecessary attention. The road appeared exactly where she had expected it — narrow, rutted with cart tracks, its edges overgrown with burdock and plantain. Velda stepped onto it and looked about.

A cart appeared from around the bend almost at once — small, with high sides, packed to the brim with baskets of every conceivable size. An elderly man drove it: broad-shouldered,

stooped, with a beard the color of mouse fur and hands that clearly knew what real work meant. The horse moved at an unhurried pace, jingling its harness.

Velda raised her hand. The old man pulled the reins. The cart stopped with a creak and a soft chiming of baskets.

"Good evening," Velda said. "Would you be so kind as to tell me — is there not a house hereabouts with a lilac bush growing near it?"

The old man squinted, studying her with that cautious attentiveness with which country folk always regard strangers appearing on the road at the evening hour.

"A house with lilac, you say?" he said, scratching his beard and turning his head to the side — the gesture of a man who thinks with his whole body. "Hm-m-m…"

"Perhaps it stands in some town not far from here," Velda added.

"M-m-m…" the old man fell silent for a while longer, then nodded with the air of a man to whom something has finally become clear. "Ah! There is such a little house. Though I must tell you, girl, that place is no good. They say it's cursed."

"That matters little to me," Velda said calmly. "Where is it?"

"In Manmir, in the town there," the old man nodded in the direction of the road. "About ten versts from here, if you go straight on."

"Thank you," Velda had already turned away, but the old man called after her.

"Wait a moment, girl. You'll walk all the way?"

"Of course."

"Then you won't get there till morning," he shook his head. "And the road's not safe these days either. All manner of things prowl about in the dark."

"All manner of things?" Velda raised her brow slightly beneath her hood.

"Well… monsters and such, or brigands," the old man gestured vaguely with his hand. "It's unsettled, to put it plainly."

Velda looked at the darkening sky. Then at the road. Then back at the old man.

"I would be grateful to ride with you, if you have no objection to bearing me company to Manmir."

"Climb up," he said simply.

The cart set off at an unhurried pace — with that steady, measured gait of those who long ago ceased to hurry. Twilight descended gradually, filling the space between the trees with a bluish haze. The road whispered beneath the wheels. The horse snorted. The baskets knocked softly against the ruts.

Velda sat watching as the trees along the roadside transformed from individual trunks into a single dark wall, and found herself drifting toward sleep unbidden — the slumber interrupted by sunset apparently believed itself to have been dealt with unjustly.

"You're looking for someone, aren't you, girl?" the old man spoke up.

Velda stirred.

"Pardon?"

"I'm saying — this house with the lilac," he glanced at her sidelong. "Someone's waiting for you there, perhaps?"

"One might say so," she answered cautiously. "But why do you ask?"

"Well, you see… I've heard things about that house," the old man fell silent, and there was something uncomfortable in that silence. "The people say — they hear groans from there at night. All manner of wailing. And the house has been empty for about a month now, no owners about."

"And no one has tried to enter it?" Velda asked.

"Oh, they've tried," the old man fell silent again. This time the pause stretched considerably longer, and Velda had already opened her mouth to ask again, but he spoke of his own accord — more slowly than before. "One of the local men tried to go into the house…"

He stopped short.

Velda looked at him more closely. The old man was staring at the road ahead, but his gaze was somewhere far away — the kind of place people look when they remember something they would rather not remember.

"What is it, grandfather?" she said more quietly. "You look as though you yourself have encountered that ghost."

"Well… one could say so," he cleared his throat, and something in his voice changed — it became drier, more clipped, like a man forcing himself to speak. "In any case, the door is

locked tight. They knocked — and then, mind you, everything went silent all at once. Not a sound. Quiet as the grave — until the next night. And they looked in the windows — nothing. Empty as a bell, no one there."

Velda narrowed her eyes.

"Allow me to clarify," she said. "You said that after the knocking, everything falls silent until the next night?"

"That's exactly what the locals say," the old man confirmed with a nod. "During the day — silence and calm. Only at night does it cry out."

"I understand." Velda paused for a moment, turning over what had been said in her mind. "And what exactly was heard? Just groans — or something that resembled words?"

"Well-l-l-l…" the old man drew out reluctantly. "There were words there, but you couldn't make them out at all. Wailings, some sort of unintelligible speech, foreign. A tongue not of this place." He fell silent. "Out of all that noise, only one word could be made out clearly."

A pause.

"Which one?" Velda asked quietly.

"Velda," said the old man simply. "That's the only word that was clear. Velda."

Silence fell between them like a stone into water.

Velda felt something cold pass down her spine — not from the night air. For a moment, while the old man looked at the road, something sharp and defenseless flickered across her face — not

at all the expression she usually allowed herself to wear. Quickly. And it vanished, concealed before he could notice.

"What is it, girl?" the old man glanced at her. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No," she answered evenly. "All is well."

It was a lie, and they both knew it — but the old man was wise enough not to insist.

The rest of the journey they traveled in silence.

The horse clipped steadily along the road. The baskets knocked softly. Night had completely covered everything around them, leaving only a narrow ribbon of road in the starlight and dark tree silhouettes on either side. Velda stared straight ahead, and in her mind something was taking shape that refused to assume its final form — yet the outlines were already distinctly visible.

The creature in that house knows her name. It called for her — not someone else, not a chance passerby. And at the same time, it fears being recognized.

This combination gave her no peace. And the longer she thought about it, the clearer the feeling became that the answer was somewhere very near — and that she would not like it.

The cart slowed and came to a stop with its familiar screech of wheels and soft jingling of harness.

"Here we are," said the old man, pulling the reins taut.

Velda lifted her head. Before her in the night darkness, the outlines of a town began to emerge — low houses with dark

windows, narrow streets barely distinguishable in the light of a few scattered torches. Manmir slept or pretended to sleep. The silence here was different from that of the forest — not living and breathing, but dense, watchful, like that of a man listening to something and not wanting anyone to know it.

"Thank you most sincerely," Velda said, jumping down from the cart. Her cloak settled softly around her, and she adjusted her hood with a familiar gesture. "You have done me an invaluable service."

"You mean to go there now?" the old man looked down at her, and there was something in his voice that was difficult to call simply a question. Rather — a final attempt to stop someone who can no longer be stopped.

"Yes," Velda answered simply. "Right now."

The old man was silent for several seconds. Then he slowly shook his head — not in condemnation, but with that particular expression worn by people who have lived long enough to understand: there are decisions that cannot be argued against, because they have been made not by the mind, but by something far deeper.

"Alone?" he said at last. "In the night?"

"Precisely so," Velda confirmed. She looked at him — directly, without challenge, but without a shadow of doubt either. "Do not worry for me, I beg you. I shall manage."

"Ah, girl…" the old man sighed — heavily, from the depths of his soul. The sigh of one not frustrated by stubbornness, but

helpless before another's fate. "Young you are yet, and you go where even the grown fear to tread."

Velda did not answer this. Not because there was nothing to say — simply because some things require no answer.

"Go in peace, grandfather," she said quietly. "And I thank you for all — for the road, for the tale, for not turning away a stranger from an empty road at the evening hour."

Something in her voice — or in the words themselves, or in the way they were spoken — made the old man fall silent for a moment. He looked at her from his cart, and his expression was difficult to discern in the darkness.

She took a step back, making it clear the conversation was at an end. The old man watched her a moment longer, then touched the reins. The horse stepped forward, the wheels creaked, and the cart moved slowly on down the street — deeper into the town, to some nighttime business of its own.

Velda watched it go until the sound of the wheels dissolved into darkness.

Then she turned and looked out upon Manmir.

Somewhere in this sleeping town stood a house with a lilac bush. A house from which, in the night hours, someone's name rang out. Her name.

She adjusted her hood and walked forward.

***

Velda found the house without difficulty. It did not need to be sought — it found itself. It stood at the end of a narrow street, slightly apart from the others, like a man long since ceased to be noticed and long since ceased to wait. Dark, squat, with collapsed shutters and a roof blackened by time. But what gave it away above all was the lilac bush at the entrance.

The bush had long since escaped all restraint. What had once clearly been a neat decorative plant at the threshold had grown into something that laid claim to the entire façade of the house. Branches of lilac — thick, gnarled, covered in withered inflorescences — clambered up the walls, clung to the windowsills, reached toward the roof. The flowers had long since faded, but the scent still lingered — sweet, almost cloying, strangely out of place in the night air of this abandoned place.

Velda stopped at the gate and listened. A sound came from within — muffled, barely perceptible, yet clearly present. A groan. Not sharp, not piercing — prolonged, low, like the sound a man makes when pain is no longer acute but ancient and familiar. A male voice, or something that had once been one. Velda looked around. The street was empty — Manmir slept, and slept soundly, apparently preferring not to know what transpired in the house with the lilac in the night hours. Satisfied that there were no witnesses, she cast off her cloak, folded it carefully, and laid it across the fence of the gate. She spread her wings.

A window beneath the eaves — the only one not boarded up — gaped as a narrow stripe of darkness. Too narrow. Velda

squinted, assessing, then sighed and took flight.

She had to squeeze through sideways, drawing in her wings and trying not to catch the rotten wood of the frame, which clearly required little effort to crumble. She nearly got stuck — forced to exhale and literally push herself through the opening, scraping her shoulder against a protruding nail.

But she was inside. The attic greeted her with darkness and the smell of ages past — dust, dry wood, mice, and something else that could only be called "time" with any precision. Objects loomed everywhere — covered in dust, shrouded in cobwebs, their original forms lost beneath the layers and transformed into mysterious angular silhouettes. Here was something that might have been a trunk. There — an outline suggesting a spinning wheel or loom. In a corner — a stack of things that might once have been books.

Velda stood motionless and listened.

The groan from below continued — steady, monotonous, with a barely perceptible rhythm. And then — a wooden creak made by the fairy. One. Sharp.

And silence.

No, Velda thought to herself, and in that short word lay vexed understanding. Then it knows I am here.

She folded her wings at once — their sound could give her away before her time. From here on, only on foot, slowly, shifting her weight from toe to heel so the floorboards would not creak. It was unknown what lurked in this abandoned house — and

the unknown is best met with whatever advantage of surprise one can muster. In the attic floor lay a hole — wide enough to pass through, with the remnants of a ladder leading down. Velda knelt and began her descent — slowly, step by step, gripping the rickety rungs and testing each before transferring her weight to it. The room below met her with darkness — dense, but not absolute. Through the cracks in the shutters, thin ribbons of moonlight penetrated, painting pale stripes across the floor. This was enough to make out the contours: a table against the wall, a bed in the far corner, something else — vague outlines of objects.

The silence was absolute. Velda listened — not a sound. She walked slowly to the table. Upon it stood a glass bottle — apparently containing water — and a clay cup. Old, well-used, with a crack running along its rim. At the bottom of the cup something dark had dried.

"What has happened here?" Velda mused aloud, and her voice sounded unexpectedly loud in the silence.

"At last you have come, fairy-enchantress."

The voice was from everywhere and nowhere at once — quiet, without a clear source, yet perfectly distinct. Not an echo, not a whisper. Simply a voice, existing in space without attachment to a body.

Velda did not start. She exhaled quietly — and whispered an incantation. A small flame flickered to life in her palm — no larger than a fist, yellow-green in color, resembling will-o'-the-wisp, only obedient and steady. Light fell upon the walls, upon

the floor, upon the ceiling — and the room gained dimension and substance.

"Who are you?" Velda asked, turning slowly.

"A wandering soul, thirsting for peace."

"I do not see you. Where are you?"

"I am on the bed."

Velda turned toward the bed in the corner. She raised the flame higher — a bed like any other bed, wooden, its headboard darkened by time. A blanket lay in a mound, as though someone lay beneath it. She approached and peered closely. The blanket lay too evenly for anything larger than a cat to be underneath it.

"Are you mocking me, spirit?" she said with mild irritation. "You are not here."

"Remove the blanket."

Velda pulled at the fabric — heavy, damp with age — and cast it aside.

On the pillow lay a rose.

Red. Still alive — petals dense, unshattered, the stem green. A perfectly living rose on a bed in a house where no one had been for a month.

Velda exhaled slowly.

"And there I am," the voice said.

"You are… a rose," Velda said carefully — not asserting it, but as though tasting the words.

"Anticipating your question — yes. Now I am a rose. But before, I was a man of flesh and blood. I fell asleep on this bed

— and, as you see, have not awakened since."

Velda stared at the rose. Then slowly she sat down on the edge of the bed, holding the flame in her palm so it burned evenly.

"So you are an unquiet spirit, having taken the form of a rose," she said, more formulating the thought for herself than asking. "But why precisely a rose? Of all forms — why this one?"

"I do not know," the voice answered after a pause. "My… my lady."

"I am not your lady," Velda said without harshness, but firmly. "Call me simply Velda, if you wish." She fell silent. "What did you feel before death? If it is not too difficult — tell me."

"What people feel in the ache that follows the joy of a realized desire. And following that ache — disappointment in certain deeds I had committed." A pause. "I was happy. Then I was unhappy. Then I grew weary of being unhappy. Then I fell asleep."

Velda squinted, examining the rose more carefully. Something in the shape of the petals, in the curve of the stem — something elusive and familiar, something that eluded her grasp. And one more detail: at the base of the bud, where the petals converged in a tight knot, a barely perceptible spot — dark blue, nearly violet, the color of the night sky just before the very first light of dawn.



“Allow me to clarify,” she said, continuing to look at the rose. “Who were you in life?”

“That no longer matters,” the voice answered, and something in it shifted. It became quieter. More closed off. “I am dead. That is all that matters now.”

“I see.” Velda did not press — not yet. “But it seems to me that I have seen you somewhere before. You are familiar to me.”

Silence. Long, taut.

“Indeed?” the voice, when it finally came, was deliberately even. Too even. “No. We have not met.”

Velda did not respond to this. She simply took note — of both the pause and the tone.

"In that case, tell me, spirit," she said. "How may I help you find peace? Why did you summon me?"

"We must travel to a certain place. Beyond Lake Mano, in the rolling lands of Riedsaal."

Velda raised an eyebrow slightly.

"There, where the young king Enjen rules? The city of Ernberg?"

"M-m-m… Yes. There is a place there where I may at last find the peace and solace I have long sought."

"But why did you turn to me for aid, above all others?" Velda asked. "Of all the beings in my forest and these lands — why to a fairy?"

The rose fell silent. Then:

"And to whom, in your opinion, should I have turned?" there was something like a bitter smile in the voice — insofar as a voice without a body could smile at all.

"I do not know," Velda shrugged. "To the forest kobolds, for instance. They know the forest paths better than anyone."

"What use would they be to me?" the rose responded, both bewildered and indignant.

"Through the forest paths, they could guide you to your place of rest," Velda explained calmly. "The journey is long — Riedsaal beyond Lake Mano is more than a day's travel."

"Perhaps they could," the voice said after a pause. "If they could fly like birds. And if they could understand me."

"What do you mean by that?" Velda looked at the rose.

"You understand perfectly well what I mean," the voice answered simply.

Velda fell silent. Then she nodded — slowly, the way one nods when agreeing not with another's words, but with one's own understanding of the situation.

"Very well," she said. "Do we leave right now?"

"Yes."

"Then — "

"Wait." The voice carried unexpected firmness. "There is something I must take from here first."

"What, exactly?"

"A small pouch beneath the bed. And there, too — a dagger."

Velda squinted slightly.

"Are you certain they are needed for the journey?"

"Yes."

She knelt down and held the flame to the space beneath the bed. There, in dust and darkness, lay two objects: a leather purse, stuffed tightly with something that gave off a quiet metallic chime, and a leather sheath from which the hilt of a dagger peeked out.

Velda pulled both free, examined them, and placed them in her bag. Then she reached for the rose.

Her fingers touched the stem — and one of the thorns, which had looked quite harmless at first glance, pierced the skin at the base of her index finger with such ease, as though there were no skin there at all.

"Ow!" It escaped involuntarily before she could stop herself. Velda jerked her hand back and looked at her finger — a thin line of blood, small, but quite eloquent. "Your thorns are very sharp, spirit."

"Be careful, lady," the voice said — and in it was something very much like concern. Real concern, not merely formal.

Velda looked at the rose. Then at the drop of blood on her finger. Then back at the rose. She understood finally that before her lay not simply a rose. But who exactly — that remained a question.

She wrapped the stem with the edge of her sleeve to protect her fingers, and carefully placed the rose in her bag atop everything else.

The street met her with night chill and silence. Velda looked around — no one. Manmir slept. She pulled her hood lower, drew her cloak close, and moved away down the street toward the town's edge.

Houses on either side loomed dark with closed shutters. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked — lazily, without real alarm. The cobblestones of the street glistened with night dew.

At the last houses of Manmir she stopped. Ahead lay open road — fields, dark hills on the horizon, night sky full of stars.

Velda cast her cloak from her shoulders — not removing it, merely freeing her wings. She spread them in the night air, feeling her shoulder blades open after such prolonged sitting. The earth fell away below.

Manmir remained behind — small, dark, sleeping. The road below became a bright thread stretching toward the horizon. The hills of Riedsaal were still far away, beyond Lake Mano, beyond the darkness — but they existed.

"Home at last," said the quiet, solitary, otherworldly voice from within the bag.

Velda flew on in silence. And thought about where, exactly, she had seen that familiar spot at the base of the bud before.

Chapter 2

Velda flew for a long time. The night had passed its midpoint, and Riedsaal remained unforgivably distant — too far to think of it as anything but tomorrow's goal. Dark forests flowed beneath her, interspersed with open meadow spaces — silvery in moonlight, covered with tall grass that swayed in slow waves. The trees below blended into a single dark mass, meadows gave way to copses, copses to meadows once more. No dwellings, no lights. Only the night, only the stars, and only the road — a pale thread winding somewhere below through the grass.

Her wings began to tire. At first — a barely perceptible burning at her shoulder blades, then a heaviness that grew with each beat. Velda descended, searching for a suitable place. A small thicket at the meadow's edge served well enough — dark, dense, sufficiently secluded. She landed at its edge, folded her wings, and listened. The forest breathed with night sounds: rustlings, a distant screech owl, the scent of damp earth and rotting leaves. Somewhere nearby a stream burbled — not loudly, but distinctly. Velda made for the sound — her throat had dried from the long flight.

The stream proved to be narrow and swift, tumbling over dark pebbles. It looked quite respectable. Velda knelt, scooped water in her palm, and took a drink. A decision she regretted instantly.

"Ugh!" escaped her entirely unbidden. She began spitting

vigorously, trying to rid herself of a taste that could only be described as bog mud mixed with slime and stagnant filth. “What abomination is this! Is this water at all, or liquid clay that has taken the form of a stream?”

She stood, wiped her palms with distaste, and reached into her bag.

“I shall drink from my own bottle,” Velda muttered, withdrawing a small flask of water from the forest spring, set aside back in the enchanted wood. She took a drink — and the taste of familiar clean water washed away the unpleasant aftertaste.

A suitable tree was found quickly — a tall, spreading pine with long horizontal branches. Velda climbed onto one of them, leaned her back against the trunk, and caught her breath.

From her bag she withdrew several berries — blueberries and wild strawberries, brought from the stores of the enchanted wood. She ate unhurriedly, watching as the moon slowly crept toward the western edge of the sky.

Just a little rest, Velda told herself. Not sleep. Only to recover — and then onward. Riedsaal is still too far away to allow myself such indulgence.

The night air was warm and still. The wind could barely be felt in the depths of the thicket. The branch swayed slightly. Her eyes closed of their own accord.

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The awakening fell upon her like a blow. Ice-cold water, combined with the rising dawn sun, rushed over her all at once and without warning — torrents of it, from every side, with that merciless generosity with which one empties a full bucket without regard for consequences. The cold was so sharp and sudden that her body reacted before her mind could comprehend anything.

Velda screamed. But there was nowhere to scream to — she was lying on the ground. Not on a branch, not in a tree — on the ground, on something hard, covered with nothing whatsoever. And her hands were bound.

She understood this the next second — when she tried to rise and discovered that her wrists were cinched with something rough and tight. She jerked — the rope did not yield. She tried to spread her wings — they too were pressed against her back by some strap that had caught them at their base.

Velda sat up sharply, flinging her wet hair from her face. And looked around. She was in a camp.

And everywhere — creatures. There were not many of them. She did not count — because they moved, jostled, spoke among themselves with that deafening lack of ceremony of beings for whom the concept of personal space is utterly foreign. Bipedal, human-shaped from the waist up — broad-shouldered, muscular, with faces that under other circumstances might have been called almost human, were it not for the horns. Horns jutted above the

temples of each — curved, sharp, goat-like. Below the waist — fur, goat legs, cloven hooves.

The one holding the empty bucket — clearly the source of the icy shower — was red-haired, young, with a pleased smirk plastered across his entire face.

They were laughing. Exactly as goats might laugh, if goats were capable of laughter — loudly, in bursts, with brazen self-satisfaction.

"Awake at last, you winged thing! Ha-ha-ha!" bellowed the red-haired one, shaking the bucket.

Velda looked at them.

Water streamed from her hair onto her shoulders. Her bound hands she placed on her knees — calmly, as though this were the most ordinary state of affairs. She took a slow breath. Then exhaled.

"Where am I?" she said evenly. "And who are you? And what do you want from me?"

"Lost your way entirely, have you, girl, to have wandered into our camp — to us, the satyrs?" came a voice from the depths of the encampment.

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