

The Mad Storyteller's Inn was packed with civilians and soldiers. Music was almost covered by the crowd's hubbub. They were singing, laughing, screaming and beating the rhythm with their fists and feet. The waitresses came and went back endlessly, bringing mugs of ale, plates of food and even sometimes, whole kegs. Countless candles lit the room. Courtesans were scattered in the main room. Some went for private quarters, others couldn't care less about fucking in front of everyone. The air was smelling of alcohol, sweat, tallow and cum. Minstrels gave their best performance on a small stage. The owner, sweating and panting, took orders, wiped mugs in haste and commanded the tired cooks and staff.

Uesburg was a modest village. Its main activity was pig farming. Fat was used for tallow, and then candles. Meat for food and bones for handcrafted jewelry and religious icons. What was at first a few houses along the river became a busy stopover for travelers and merchants going to Mistcastle, in the Kingdom of Laaria. As the war against Dehest started, it became a rally point for soldiers and patrols. Inns were thriving, even though the lord of Mistcastle was taking a substantial tax. Everyone tried to forget that food and liquor reserves were getting lower and lower. Even the very people of Uesburg had to tighten their belts. *"At least here, war is just a distant nightmare"* the people said.

Only the moon lit the path in front of Priscilla. Wrapped in her heavy fur cloak, she finally reached the used steps of the Mad Storyteller's Inn. She scraped the mud sticking to her boots before pushing wide open the door. Pulling back her hood, a wave of heat and foul smells assaulted her. Despite her height, Priscilla had to jostle her way to the counter. There, she waved at the barkeeper.

— Good night, friend ! he shouted to cover the noise. What does she wants ? Food ? Drink ?

— Both. A glass of red wine and a warm meal.

— Soup or mashed peas.

— Soup.

— Already on its way !

He limped in the kitchens and shouted again. Priscilla put a single large gleaming coin on the counter. That was more than enough to pay for her mediocre diner. She examined the room. Most soldier were wearing the gray and blue colors from Mistcastle. Some however were dressed in gold and crimson from the capital, Valitta. A few though sported the black and white checkerboard from the mining city of Hogback.

— Here's the wine ! said the barkeeper. Aaaaand, there's the tasty soup ! Eheh !

— For you, added Priscilla, pointing at the coin. I am taking a bed too.

— For sleeping or....

— Only sleeping.

— Right. I have a few more beds in the dormitory, and... maybe... ah, yes, one last

room.

— The dormitory is good enough.

— Noted ! Enjoy.

The traveler ate in silence, sat at the counter. She tried to remove the small bits of cartilage floating in her bowl. A young woman came out of the kitchen.

— You're alone, m'lady ? she asked while grabbing a rag.

— Indeed. I had my share of chatter.

— Men have won a great victory today, we celebrate !

— So I heard.

— A relief, for sure ! We were concerned about the proximity of the gray elves. Folks say that if things had gone sideways, the Silent Ones would have been there before nightfall !

— A relief, repeated the traveler. That leaves more time to tackle other problems, like the soldiers' mood, is it not ?

The maid turned pale. She looked at the crowd before leaning closer to her interlocutor.

— They aren't all that bad...

— But some are, right girl ?

She nodded.

— Hogback men, added Priscilla.

— Aye. Brutes.

— Very well. Stay away from them, little one.

Priscilla offered her a coin she hid in her shirt before walking back in the kitchen. The traveler finished his meal, thoughtful. Rumors were true. She was going to act.

For more than a week, words were spreading about a troupe settled in the region. Reinforcements. Sadly, it was not their prowesses making them well-known, only their abuses. According to the rumors, only the rank of soldier differentiated them from common thugs. Priscilla dealt with many racketeers, carpetbaggers, thieves and alike. She was about to teach them a lesson. She couldn't kill them, they were soldiers after all. Doing so would have terrible repercussions for her. She had other plans.

Later, the mood changed. Everyone still awake calmed down. Priscilla ordered a mug of ale before getting closer to the Hogback soldiers' table. A few people were gathered around them. These men were betting money on a game of cards. After a tense round, the woman sat, putting a hefty purse on the table.

— How much to participate ? she asked.

They looked at her, mostly at her extravagant neckline. The officer finally grunted :

— Five silver ecus. It's not the peasants table here.

— So be it !

Priscilla throw the coins on the pile. Surprised, the men giggled. The one shuffling the cards sniffed loudly, still glancing at the woman's voluptuous breasts.

— You know the rules ?

— I do.

— Watch out for Pieter, he bites when he loses.

— And he loses a lot.

— Shut up boys. Last time I lost, you were still hanging at your ugly mom's tit !

Rounds after rounds, they emptied mugs and bottles. The inn emptied as well. Priscilla won a few times, though the said Pieter proved to be excellent. The hours went by and not long before dawn, they were the only one in the main hall. Minstrels had finished their concert already, they were sleeping. Loud snoring resounded from time to time. The barkeeper was leaning on the counter, head between his hands, about to fall. Waitresses were roughly cleaning the tables, pushing filth on the floor, among alcohol and mud stains.

— Fucking bad luck, creaked a said Dallan. You bled me dry.

— Speaking of coin or drink ? replied captain Karl Jortz.

— Both, that's the problem.

— I'm too drunk to sleep, comrades, stammered Herbert.

— Oh, that's why you never sleep, eh ?

A horrible scream ended their discussion. It came from the darkness outside. Some of them shivered.

— What can make such a nasty noise ? grumbled Pieter.

— That was a monster.

— A Suffering Soul, certainly, added Priscilla.

— I didn't heard shit, admitted Dallan.

— What did you say, woman ?

She looked at the captain. He was curious.

— You know what Suffering Souls are, right ?

— Only in tales.

— Ghosts of women who died the day of their wedding. Too sad to leave this world, they come back to haunt those who mistreat their wives. They lure them with illusions before tormenting them. Those who survived end up mad.

— Do you know more bullshit stories like that ?

— Well, I know a legend.

— Go on, so I can fall asleep.

Men shared unmotivated looks. One of them yawned, others grumbled.

Folks say that long ago, this place was covered by a forest, dark and wild. Brambles were hiding hungry predators. People were avoiding the place, as the only few who ventured in the forest never came back (at the same time, Priscilla was handling the cards, making some disappear from the deck).

One day, four warriors traveled through the woods, unaware of the cursed place they were trampling with their heavy boots. Armed with courage and the certainty of discovering a hidden treasure (Without even looking, Priscilla drew the four jacks : cups, coins, batons and swords), they braved the dangers. After a perilous journey, they reached a high fence of iron spikes and hooks. Behind the fence, was a lush garden, perfectly maintained, surrounding a manor with grimacing gargoyles covered in ivy.

The warriors scouted the area. No way to pass through the fence. The gate was locked. They set up camp until morning. Then, an old man in a large cloak arrived and stood in front of the gate (Priscilla drew the King of Swords and put him in front of her). He spoke to the agitated warriors, telling them he could let them in. However, he warned them : There was nothing left inside holding any value. This was a long forgotten place.

The men laughed, convinced that such a place could not be deprived of riches ! They ordered the old man to open the gates, which he did. He grabbed a golden key from his pouch and unlocked the lock. Without further consideration for the stranger, the warriors stepped in. Flocks of crows flew from the trees as they approached the porch. The dean did not omit to close back the gates before leaving.

As soon as they entered the main hall, the men's eyes twinkled before such luxury. Chandeliers of gold and crystals holding thousands of candles. Massive paintings with ornate frames depicted nobles and unknown landscapes. Thick carpets covered a marble floor and sumptuous tapestries embroiled with pearls hanged on the walls. They progressed in endless corridors, marvelous rooms, discovering more and more treasures. They could not care less about not seeing anyone, quite the opposite.

— This is so long ! And it's bullshit anyway ! sighed Herbert.
— Shut up, you stupid cunt, grunted Captain Jortz. This world is very old. Who knows what happened centuries ago... Forgive my men's behavior, your hum... My Lady.
Priscilla displayed a sultry grin.

The warriors entered one more room : a banquet hall. They could not believe their eyes ! Steaming plates of food everywhere, jugs, bottles, and cauldrons. Famished, they shouted victory and took seats on the four exquisite chairs around the table. Soon they were unable to talk, their mouths full of marinated crab, peppery cheese gratin, juicy porc roast, grilled fish filets, beans and lard stew, rabbit pâté, pullets, venison, mushrooms omelets, mashed potatoes with onions, pies, crusty tarts, honey biscuits, jams, cobblers, baked fruits, breads.

Everything was delicious, cooked with perfection, fresh from the oven.

They ate a lot, stopped a few moments and then ate again. As the chief told the band a story, something hit the younger warrior's boot (Priscilla pointed at the Jack of coins). The man's mind was fogged by numerous mugs of beer and wine he drank. His hand groped on the floor until he touched a small object. A silver ecu, stamped with a lovely feminine face. As he leaned back, he noticed a door ajar. No one noticed when he stood up and left. The warrior entered a hallway, continuing on his left and right until he could not see into the darkness. Another coin rested on the carpet. At that moment, the bright giggle and quick steps of a young woman resounded (Priscilla revealed the Queen of coins). The man, surprised, smiled. He ate well and drank his share, he wanted to sate other needs. He looked for the sneaky girl, picking up every coins on his way. Soon, he was holding a fortune in his hands. Then, he ended up behind a gilded door. Pushing it, the sweet voice of the young lady greeted him. He entered the dark room, closing the door behind him.

In the banquet hall, the three other men remained unaware of their friend's disappearing. They were focused on the food and drinks. So much that the taller among them (Priscilla pointed at the Jack of cups) could not divert his attention from a chiseled crystal bottle filled with a captivating amber beverage. He stood up, grabbed it and raised the bottle neck at his lips. No sweet liquor leaked out of it though ! He looked at it again, and the golden liquid stirred inside. Trying again, he could not managed to taste any drop of it. He cursed. His eyes must have been playing tricks on him. Thus he decided to find the kitchens, and more of these fine bottles. With a tottering step, he left the hall and wandered until a metallic sound catch his attention. Pots and pans clashing on the stove, that was the sound he heard. He found the large kitchen and before noticing no one was here, he discovered a crate of similar crystal bottles. He drank in all of them. At least, he tried. Nothing would came out. Furious, he broke them all, spilling sharp fragments around him. The clash attracted a servant who stepped out of the cellar (The storyteller put the Queen of cups on the table). She gazed a the intruder with severe eyes, hands on her large hips. The warrior stammered a few words, pointing at the broken bottles. She leaned and grabbed the now empty crate, which did not miss to captivate the drunk man. He cleared his throat, eyes fixed on the maid's round rump stretching her petticoats. She then walked back towards the cellar.

— Stop breaking my kitchenwares and follow me down. We have all the liquors you could dream of in this house.

— I'm not only dreaming a-about drinking now, woman...

She was already in the stairs, also, he walked in her steps, closing the door behind him.

They had no idea of the hour of the day. The chief was making circles around the table, tasting what he was not able to reach from his seat. He burped between each meal, satisfied and proud. The other one, the strongest, was dozing in front of the roaring fireplace. Without warning, the main entrance opened wide, doors

slamming against the walls. A tall lady with ashen blond hair stepped forward, her heels clicking on the floor. She was radiant, breathtaking. Diamonds glittering on her elegant coif and earrings. A large gold necklace hanged from her slender neck. Her long black dress revealed her stunning silhouette as she walked closer (Priscilla, like magic, drew the Queen of swords from the deck and placed her in front of the matching Jack).

She was the mistress of the manor. She greeted the visitors and revealed her intent : rewarding the leader of this courageous party for his victory against the many dangers of the forest. The warrior chieftain swaggered as he strolled towards the lady. She showed him the gift she was hiding under a cloth. A sword worthy of a true leader, a king ! The huge gem at the pommel reflected the dancing flames. Not only she offered him this blade, she added that many more pleasures awaited him in her private chambers. The man scratched his chin, looking deep down the square neckline of his host, ornate with delicate lace and ribbons, subtly hinting her soft freckled breasts. She offered him her hand. Their steps resounded in the large staircase, vanishing into darkness. The banquet hall door closed by itself.

Pulled out of his acrid vapors slumber, the last fighter, until then unaware of the departure of his comrades, hoisted himself up on his massive legs. He was alone. The fire was still vigorous and the night, still dark. Sated, he did not eat more. Tipsy, he forgot about the drinks. He made sure his purse was still full of gold and gems and chuckled. A swift lightning bolt scarred the sky, followed by the roaring thunder. The windows trembled and a creaking sound alerted the warrior. He grabbed his mace with two hands. Something was trying to enter by the window ! He came closer, ready to strike hard, only to see a dead branch scraping the glass pane. The man looked outside. Heavy clouds rolled in the sky excepted in one small spot. Moonlight rushed through the opening, lighting up a corner of the garden. A swing hanged from the branch of a century old tree. On it waited a pale, petite figure (Finally, Priscilla revealed the Queen of batons). The girl's body barely hidden under a silk nightgown was as pale as the orb of night. A quiet alabaster beauty. The warrior stamped behind the window : should he let her out ? The girl looked up, directly at him. The wind increased in intensity, bending the smallest trees. The woman was but a pale stain behind the pouring rain. The warrior witnessed her blurry silhouette leaving the ground, coming up the branches, getting closer to him. He tried to open the window, in vain. Soon she was there, her hands pressed on the glass panes. The storm raged even more. She began to cry, to hit the window, begging him to let her in. The handle would not move. The warrior grabbed his mace again and struck the casement. It shattered and the girl screamed even more. Terrible wind rushed in, lifting the chairs and tables. The flames were snuffed out in an instant. Water covered the floor. The storm roared, seemed to laugh, then moaned before fleeing for good. A painting of a swing hanged where the broken window was originally. The room was empty, the last warrior, gone (Priscilla directed the soldiers attention on the table. All the Jacks were missing, replaced by the Queens and the King of swords).

Next morning, the old man walk once again in front of the rusty twisted fence. A sinister mist was rolling above the dry soil. This place was in ruin for so long that only him could remember the glory of his past domain. He sighed, feeling tears coming up.

— Oh my dear, sweet love. I am so old now, widowed since you left this world. I hope you still watch over our girls, wherever the four of you might be.

The soldiers who cracked some corny jokes at first were now quiet, captivated, confused. Only Dallan, dozing on his chair didn't seem bothered.

— Did you tried to give me the creeps, woman ? spat Herbert.

— What happened next ?

— More people came in this region. They cut down the forest and buried the ruins.

— Buried where ? Here ?

— Who can tell ? whispered Priscilla.

— What does this means, growled the captain.

The lady shrugged. Karl Jortz wiped sweat from his forehead.

— I don't know the moral of this story, she admitted. If I had to find one, I'd say these warriors should have thought twice before taking stupid decisions.

— So they did poor choices, right ?

— If it is actually the case, I guess it is too late.

The officer frowned, staring at the woman. Finally her grunted out of resignation. Then, Priscilla stood, nodded at the men and left, leaving her gains beside the deck of cards. She walked out of the inn. Immediately, Pieter who already won, grabbed her coins. He chuckled in his beard before heading for his room. Herbert, still drunk inspected his empty cup, cursed and followed his comrade. The captain, thoughtful, picked his sword and walked up too after noticing that the deck was arranged in order. The last man, Dallan, remained at the table. At some point he woke up, disturbed by the half-open window behind him. He closed it, but something catch his eye.

Across the road, on the swing hanged under an old tree, he saw a pale shape. A small doll, a toy forgotten here. Probably belonging to the daughter of the peasant he had beaten up good a few days ago. He chuckled before getting back to sleep.

Pieter, his hands full of Priscilla's coins and hes went back to his room. Upon entering, he let his gains slip on the ground. He abandoned the idea of picking everything up now and fell on his hay mattress. Before sleep took him, he thought about all the ways he would spend his money, and how good he was at robbing unaware players.

Herbert, rubbed his face with his calloused hands. He was nauseous ans sweaty. But most of all, his mouth was terribly dry, he needed something to drink. His eyes landed on a beautiful bottle of wine he took by force from a nearby

winemaker. He tried to drink, though, it was empty, already finished the night before.

The captain's heart was beating against his ribs. He was panting in the stairs, barely able to breath. In his room, he got rid of his clothes like if they were suffocating him. He stumbled on his weapon after letting it fall to the floorboards in his panic. His head hit the ground. The man opened his eyes in front of the ruby inlaid on the pommel. Seeing his reflection, he noticed the cut on his cheek, made by the woman he abused earlier, in a refugee camp. He gasped of terror before falling unconscious.

Before the break of dawn, screams thundered out of the inn. All clients woke up in panic. Some witnessed the Hogback soldiers leaving, half naked and visibly terrified. They fled in the countryside without looking back. Priscilla looked at them. A drop of blood dripped from her nose. It was common after such use of her new capabilities.

— This is an illusion they will never forget, she whispered.

She had to leave. She has been seen among them and, undoubtedly, people would talk. Leaving the inn, she found the soldiers' steeds and chose one for herself.

— Hey you ! shouted a young soldier. This is not your horse ma'am. It's a military steed.

— It is mine, and I'm leaving immediately.

— I will not allow it, step back.

— And who the fuck do you think I am ? shouted Priscilla. I am the Queen of Laaria, you ignorant boy ! This horse is mine, you are too, and if you disagree, I command you to dig a bloody hole and to stuff your face in it until it sprouts !

The young soldier jumped and knelt before his queen, stammering some poor excuses. His head started to turn and he fell into the mud. Priscilla gasped, exhausted by so much spell casting. She threw her horse into a gallop and left Uesburg for good.

A few miles later, she had to stop. Priscilla crawled back from the saddle and passed out under a tree. The vibration of an approaching troop woke her up. Before she could move, the soldiers surrounded her.

— I guess we can all agree this is not the Queen, spat a one-eyed soldier.

— Indeed. All I see is a filthy horse thief !

— And a sorceress whore ! Well, can you fool all of us now ? Well ? No ? Then get up !

A colossus of steel unsheathed his sword and walked towards her. She cursed while getting up again, exhaustion still making her legs shake.

— No need to remind you your crime.

— Everyone seems on the same page already, she replied.

— Silence ! You're going to rot in a cell until your judgment. Believe me, you are going to suffer.

— You two, take her to Mistcastle.

A small guy brought heavy shackles, symbols carved in the metal.

— Put that on her wrists. You don't want her to cast more spells on you.