**The Contradiction - Book 1**

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**Summary**

A fifteen-year-old Viking teenager named Rodêne recalls his past. He had a troubled childhood, often finding himself too awkward to fit in anywhere. Despite this, he found a
wonderful friend, and was quite happy. Unfortunately, the land they lived in, the island of Lelondell, would always be in constant danger from fire-breathing dragons. Rodène had initially been a soft-hearted, kind « weakling », but eventually he grew up to be a complicated teenage swordsman who hated dragons with a burning passion. Things eventually began to fall apart for him, and one day, he was whisked away from everything he knew, to a place where he is now. A place where he feels frozen and lost. Eventually, he realises bit by bit what went wrong and discovers the reasons behind the Dragon-Viking war. Can he forgive others ? Can he forgive everything ? Can he forgive himself ? Can he save himself ?

A combination of an original story and a fanfiction. Set in the expanded universe of HTTYD. Original characters first, canon characters later. Friendship, slice-of-life, adventure, romance.

Note : Very different from a normal How To Train Your Dragon fanfic.
Darkness and loneliness surround me. I realise that my tears, and much of my fiery emotions, have subsided some time ago. Except that my guilt and remorse still stubbornly remain; along with the shocking self-realisation that I have jumped from a naive innocent child to a —

Cold! The cold metal bars of the cage send a coldness through my bare elbow... and down my spine. I back away from it immediately, only to find myself knocking headfirst into the other end. [Clang!]

Apparently, the floor of my cage is tilting violently. The metal bars that I have knocked myself into now become the floor. My body rests onto the bars for a few painful seconds.

A hand of mine manages to grasp an icy metal bar as my little prison with four metal sides sway to and fro — and even up and down. The cage rights itself again. Luckily it’s bolted to the wooden floor. The iron door of the cage is rattling itself like mad. The ship must be in a storm right now. Grumbling, I kick that annoying door in a vain attempt to quiet it down. The door rattles even harder.

«Stop making noise! The pitch and roll of this ship are enough trouble already!» I complain to the door, and just barely stopped myself from saying a forbidden word.

I’m going to kick that door hard enough to burst it open...

Okay, no. It would be futile. Instead, my shoe presses hard against the door, which minimizes the noise. Ha. This is equivalent to covering an annoying chatterbox’s mouth with my hand, except that now I’m using my foot. Hmmm... The cage is about as long as I am tall, so...

Sandwiching myself in between, my hands clutch the bars above my head, and my feet <stand> on the bars. Finally. No more bumping around and I can lie in peace. Peace, even when it’s stormy outside.

It’s best not to even attempt to break out of prison. I don’t even have a plan. If those thugs comprising of stony-hearted men find out, it may even be suicidal. I have been captured by them and thrown into this metal chatterbox below deck on a ship that is now starting to make me seasick... What is going to happen to me is definitely not something good.

{sigh} Rodène Statenson, a fifteen-year-old Viking boy quite tall for his age. Prefers to cease to exist if possible, wiped out from the memories of everyone once dear to him... so that he is missed by no one.
Stop. That thought feels unbearable. I probably shouldn’t be so negative.

Okay, okay… try to think positive then. Why? *How did I end up here?* It’s a long story. In fact: a very, very long sad story, in which I gradually mess up everything in *every aspect* of my life. Every aspect of my life? Err, that’s not positive. At all.

Something positive… Hmm. Okay. Self-hating issues aside, I still like the way I look. I am always very particular on my outward appearance and how I present myself to others. If I had a mirror right now, I wouldn’t mind distracting myself from my current terrible situation, by looking into it and staring at that dark black hair, black eyebrows, and those deep, melancholic black eyes and that permanent frown that destroy my handsome face. Right now, I am dressed in what I call my classic look: a pair of dark black trousers and dark-brown soft-soled leather boots. A very dark coat, brown and long, securely covers my dark navy-blue tunic which is held together by a brown leather belt. {sigh} I wish that I had that precious coat right now when it’s so… so cold around here. My classic look feels incomplete without it.

But I know myself. I know what’s behind the handsome shell that is my body, and it is not pretty inside. Everything is broken within. I hate it. Everything has gone awfully wrong for me, and it’s probably all my fault.

*Stop, stop, stop, stop…*

I like my attire to be dark and slightly intimidating. I dislike showing vulnerability. Unfortunately, I am weapon-less now and therefore utterly defenceless and vulnerable to whatever life throws at me. Perhaps I would feel more secure if I had at least my sword with me, as much as it brings me dark thoughts. Thinking of the lack of my two belongings makes me think of… Lelondell.

Ah right. Lelondell. Such a beautiful name befitting such a proud kingdom. One part of me wishes to go back there but another part, well, not so much. It’s the place in which should be called ‘my home’ but it really doesn’t feel like it. I wish I never ended up feeling this way.

My mind dwells a bit on the two people that I have been one of the few invisible anchors tying me to Lelondell.

Mom and Dad. That’s all. No sister to annoy, no brother to play with.

My father, Eastern Statenson, is a six-foot man in his early-forties. His attire is simple yet practical, and he once said ‘practicality equals ease and intelligence’. {Yes, really. Or maybe I heard it wrong.} A dark green tunic, a black belt, and a pair of a sturdy dark brown pants plus boots is enough for him. His muscular build welding a sword at all times sort of makes him more like a soldier than a farmer. One look at him would be enough to know that he is not the sort of person you would really want to mess with.

My mother, Héidie Néedelinne, is ten years younger than my father; but, she looks younger than that. Once I joked about her being Dad’s daughter instead of his wife, and then I got scolded for it. I am cringing now just thinking of that stupid remark of mine.

Well, Mom does somewhat have a young girlish appearance, but she is an organised, demure but proper woman. When she is not working in our barn, she’ll always be tidying *something* around our cramped one-story house. And that *something* is usually caused by Dad and me.

Another thing that I miss is my bedroom. Its safety, its comfort.
I try to picture in my mind the house in which I have grown up in. If I walk in through the front door, I’ll find myself in a narrow interior with the fireplace, the narrow ‘meal table’, and the relatively large cooking area. If I turn left, I’ll enter my room, which is one of the two separate rooms on the left part of the rather elongated house.

Ah my room. The enclosed space where I used to hide myself from the harsh confusing world, is now a reminder of my absence from the Statenson family.

My parents have probably found my sword stuck on the wall of my room, and I can almost see them going insane with worry on my whereabouts. They would never guess that I am far far away at sea against my will. And I will never see them again. It’s all in the past.

I would love to believe that I will somehow be able to meet them all again in the future but right now, my future looks bleak.

I think of the time in my early childhood when I was sick constantly and had to cling to my mother like a pathetic mama’s boy. I only remember sketches — although vivid ones — of those moments in my memory.

I think of the mornings I would experience in Lelondell. They are always something special, especially when it is still dark outside, and the coolness of the night is still present. I could smell the dampness and chilliness of the thick slightly foggy air and hear the strange noises of the crickets. I could run through the air of the morning, over the long grassy meadows where the cows grazed… that would give my body chills. I remember feeling cold quite often even with my long-sleeved dark blue tunic and long dark black trousers, shirt with thick woollen layers, and thick long socks. Despite the freezing cold, some of the poorer Lelondells like me do not usually wear heavy furry overcoats except for when it gets really cold, like in the winter, or perhaps autumn, or the savage rainy weather season. My family and I would usually have our breakfast later in the morning when it wasn’t that dark outside, and some of the dawn chores had been done around the house and around the barn. Come to think of it, the house is actually quite small compared to the size of the barn and the meadows.

I think of the time…

On and on and on my mind goes, exploring the past…

—<>—

BACK IN TIME,

ABOUT 7 YEARS AGO...
INTRODUCTION AND DISCLAIMER

This is a work of fanfiction, borrowing characters, themes, and settings from the *How to Train Your Dragon* world. The film is produced by *DreamWorks Animation* and it is based on the books written by Cressida Cowell. Images, links, etc belonging to their respective owners belong to their respective owners. With that said, there are some original characters and additions to the canon universe of *HTTYD*, that I have created, and these original characters and additions all belong to me. Any coincidental ties to real life events, people, objects, or entities are just… coincidences.

This story is mainly written in English, and it is the « translation » of a fictional dialect of Old Icelandic West Norse. This Norse dialect is most probably the language of the world of *How to Train Your Dragon*.

The dialogues of the characters may not be perfect in grammar, spelling, or pronunciation. If a character misspells a word, the misspelling is not always highlighted.

« *Eastern Statenson* » is pronounced « 'læstɜrn 'stætənsən » or « 'læstɜ:n 'stætənsən » (in IPA phonetic symbols).
« less-tern stay-ten-suhn »

« *Héidie Néedelinne* » is pronounced by many Lelondells (including Lastern and Rodène) as «'hejdi 'eɪdəlɪn » (IPA symbols)
« hey-dee ney-de-leen »

Héidie says her own name as « 'éi-di néd(ə)-linn » with the « H » silent (h aspiré) ; and other times, as « héi-di néd(ə)-linn », with the « H » pronounced (h aspiré *prononcé*)

*Rodène* pronounces his name as « ro.dən » or « ro.dən » (IPA symbols)
« Rodenn » or « ro-den ». The last letter « e » is silent.

*Not* pronounced Row-deen or Raw-dean or Roh-dee-nee.

(Note that the typographical style will be continually revised and perfected throughout the novel. Therefore, some of the details provided below do not apply for the SCEF 2.1 style introduced in chapter 9. Prior to chapter 9 is SEF 2.0)

I write my novel in my own style, which I call the *SEF Style*. It is based on Swiss, English, and French typographical styles.

I tried to fix the inconsistencies and issues with the SEF 1.0 by creating a new universal style that will look beautiful anywhere regardless if it’s for a novel or for a quick reply in an online forum, but apparently if I do that, some types of quotation marks will be overused, reducing clarity, while others will not be used at all.

Therefore, I have decided to split the style into two versions: one solely for novels and any long text with a lot of quoted dialogue; and the other more simplified one for everything else.
**NORMAL VERSION**

**Quotation marks** « ‹ “ ’

**Quoting anything** :

first level : « … » (French double angle guillemets, with non-breaking spaces)
second level : ‹…› (Swiss single angle guillemets)
third level : “…” (English double curly quote marks)

I use this style outside of my novel. Note that the [« »] can be used both for quoting normal speech and presenting irony and for anything else (which is bad for a novel because there is a lot of dialogue already enclosed in [« »]. [‹›] are used within [« »] and [“”] are used within [‹›].

The use of different quotation marks for each level is to avoid a quotation mark being repeated in a manner that reduces clarity.

By the way, the word *guillemet* — not to be confused with *guillemot* — is pronounced as « gheey-mè » [ɡij.me] in French without an « l » or a « t » sound. In English we can pronounce it as « gheey-meh » and in the plural, « gheey-mess ».

Or you can anglicise it and say « gheel(Ə) mett(s) » or simply call them double angle quote marks.

**VERSION FOR NOVELS**

**Quotation marks** « ‹ “ ’

**Quoting real-time speech or dialogue (in this story)** :

first level : « … » (French double angle guillemets, with non-breaking spaces)
second level : ‹…› (Swiss single angle guillemets)
third level : “…” (English double curly quote marks)

**Quoting anything else** :

first level : ‹…› (Swiss single angle guillemets)
second level : “…” (English double curly quote marks)
third level : ‘…’ (English single curly quote marks)
any level : […] (Not quotation marks. Sometimes brackets are clearer than any kind of quotation marks)

Most of the time only the first and second levels will be used.

Using this version outside of novels you are writing can be confusing, because [‹›] will be used for reported speech. Because, unlike in novels, most dialogue in real life are not quoted *at the moment* they appear ; this makes the [« »] rare in real-life usage…?

In novels the [« »] are reserved for enclosing dialogue that is *spoken* at the *same* place in which
the [« »] appear; therefore, I call them real-time quotation marks.

However, [‹›] will be used for a real-time quotation within a real-time quotation, or for an unspoken quotation, and basically everything else. That means that within this story, they are the new main scare/irony quote marks.

As for the « hierarchy »: [“”] are used within [‹›]… and [‹›] are used within [« »]. There is no fourth level for obvious reasons.

The use of different quotation marks for each level is solely to avoid a quotation mark being repeated in a manner that reduces clarity.

This distinction between dialogue and other quotations also exists in French novels. Quotations are enclosed within [« »] which is according to French typographical rules. Oddly, dialogue in novels is not clearly set apart from the main text with the use of em dashes [—] with no closing quote mark. Outside of French novels, dialogue is enclosed within [« »], or if they are unavailable (like on an AZERTY keyboard), [“”] or [“”].

SEF style (BOTH NORMAL VERSION & VERSION FOR NOVELS)

**Font styling**

Words may also be *italicised* or be in **bold** or CAPITAL letters, to show emphasis, intensity, clarity or level of politeness, etc. Thought is often in *italics*.

**Spacing**

*Non-breaking space*

(This is used instead of the narrow non-breaking space — which I recently learned that it is poorly supported in most software and even in fonts. It also tends to be confused with the *thin space*; that one is a different thing entirely. Not only that, narrow non-breaking spaces also give a rather imbalanced and asymmetrical look.)

With a *non-breaking space*, the colon « : » now sits exactly in the middle between two letters or characters. This also means that the question mark or exclamation mark is right in the middle as well.

« The dragons ? They destroyed everything ! »

(The degree sign [°] is temporarily used here below to represent the invisible non-breaking space in its place. The middle dot [·] represents the normal space)

«°The·dragons°?·They·destroyed·everything°!°»

- Within the double angle guillemets: «°like this°»
- No spaces within the single angle guillemets: ‹like this›

However, sometimes non-breaking spaces (or hair spaces) may be added if the [‹›] are used to enclose a letter like ū, like this:

‹ū› (no spaces)

‹ū› (with hair spaces)
Before a colon °:
a semicolon °;
a question mark °?
and an exclamation mark °!.
• Exception: no spaces between an interrobang ; and no spaces between an ellipsis and a
question mark/exclamation mark ; and no spaces between a repeated question mark/exclamation mark.
So, it's like this: ...?! And this: !!!
• Example of a word ending with [??] enclosed in double angle guillemets:
«°Hello°??°»
• Occasionally added in certain places to improve clarity and to avoid text being broken off
into another line.
• Sometimes, three consecutive non-breaking spaces or three consecutive normal spaces may
be used to improve clarity.

Hair spaces (which are non-breaking)
• No longer used on either side of a slash [/].
• No longer used on either side of an em dash [—]. See the section concerning the em dashes.
• Now optionally used within the curly quotation marks: “like this” and ‘like this’, so that they
clash less with apostrophes (even though they are almost never used in this way in English).
“hsp…hsp” and ‘hsp…hsp’
hsp = hair space

Indentation
I now put six consecutive normal spaces before the second paragraph of a new section to indent it
(because it’s easy for me to do so on my improved QWERTY and BÉPO keyboard layouts).

Apostrophe
I previously preferred the straight typewriter apostrophe [‘] rather than the curved one [’], because
the curly apostrophes tend to conflict with the single curly quotation marks [‘’]

But then, we often have apostrophes at the very beginning of a word, or at the very end. For
example, the sentence « 'Y a un garçon » (the proper contracted form of « Il y a un garçon »,
meaning « There is a boy ») ; and « the boys' game » (plural) ; and « rock 'n' roll ».

With the curly apostrophe — which is recommended anyway in English and French typography —
they become:

« 'Y a un garçon »
« the boys’ game »
« rock 'n’ roll » (the apostrophes replace the « a » and « d »)

They resemble commas, but in mid-air.

Dashes and hyphens
hyphens [-]
Most hyphens are normal hyphens (and not non-breaking ones)

en dash [-]
- Follows the normal grammatical rules for the en dash
  - To indicate stuttering (a part of a word being repeated due to the speaker’s nervousness or due to other reasons)
  - For a word deliberately broken down into syllables by the speaker
  - For a hyphenated phrase that is not normally hyphenated

em dash [—] no spaces
- To indicate stammering (a word being repeated due to the speaker’s nervousness or due to other reasons)

em dash [ — ] with a non-breaking space before an em dash and a normal space after it (so it’s [°—·])
- Follows the normal grammatical rules for the em dash
  - To indicate interruption. If part of a word is interrupted halfway, then there is no space between the em dash and the word
    eg. : I thi—
    (I think)
  - If it ends with a [°»] or an exclamation mark [°!], then it should be [°—°»] and [°—°!] and not [°—°»] or [°—°!]

The rules for the en dashes and em dashes might be changed in the future.

But what if non-breaking spaces are not allowed or not available?
In that case, you can either replace the non-breaking spaces with normal spaces to preserve the « spaced » look, or you can remove them entirely, or you can use narrow non-breaking spaces instead.
Dairyland

Author’s note :

✻ DISCLAIMER
I do not own How to Train Your Dragon. Original characters and additions to the HTTYD universe, however, belong to me.

✻ This chapter has a few drawings ; one of them is a map of Lelondell.
Link nº1 (Rodène’s house)

Link nº2 (Map of Lelondell)

✻ These images are only for this chapter. The same image might be in another chapter and it might be different.

✻ Drawings :
Rodène Statenson (15 y. o.)
Image 1
Image 2

Lastern Statenson (43 y. o.)
Image

BACK IN TIME (Predominantly FIRST-PERSON POINT OF VIEW & PAST TENSE) when Rodène was 9 years old ↓
A delicious-looking dish was set onto the light wooden uneven table, beside a bowl of clear soup.

« Food is ready ! », a young woman’s voice called out from the kitchen.

Mom’s cooking is ready ! Smiling all over, I skipped eagerly towards the meal table; and squeezed through the table and the narrow fireplace to get a better look. It was a dish of scrambled eggs, bacon, cheese, and with some herbs.

I glanced at my young mom who hurried back to the cooking area while reminding me that the soup was hot. I was about to sit down when a low-pitched voice said that the chair was his.

Oops, I kept forgetting where I was supposed to sit. Dad’s rules. A very tall Lelondell gestured me to my designated chair while I quickly squeezed between the narrow fireplace and the table and had a seat.

« A meal without vegetables, it’s incomplete », said Mom. The lady stood there in her usual light green attire, a spatula in her hand, and Dad and I were both seated.

The moment her back was turned, my father attacked most of the meat and eggs and his vegetables were untouched. Untouched by him, yes. But not me, as I happily accepted his unwanted greens and a big cube of his favourite cheddar cheese. In popped the yellowish-white cheddar into my mouth and it tasted like milk — in a tasty solid form.

« Lastern! Why you are not eating the vegetables!? »

Ha. I was actually waiting for that to happen. My mother was now on her nagging mood.

Dad said coolly: « I’m an adult, Hédie, and I eat what I want. We’ve been over this. Now if you’d let me eat in peace and avoid those mushy greens… »

« T’es vraiment têtu comme toujours… [You are really stubborn, as always…] », she muttered in Cœunettian. « Tu sais bien que les légumes sont bons pour la santé! [You know very well that vegetables are good for health!] »

« When you start speaking in Cœunettian, that’s when I know you are losing your cool », said my dad.

I half-listened to their argument, while delighting in my mom’s cooking. Unlike my fast-eating dad, I liked to take my time to savour the flavours of each ingredient, or at least tried to. The creaminess of the cheeses and…

Cheese. It happened to be the official favourite food of the Lelondells, aside from salmon. Some Lelondells call our island The Land of Cheese because many villagers including my family owned barns and farms that covered almost entirely the north-eastern part of the island. Hmm… Maybe that was why the windy, raised plateau/cliff along the northern edge of Lelondell starting from Vee and Ell Towers on the west was called Milky Cliff. That Cliff went on until it met Milky Beach, which was located at, err… in the very east of the island. That beach went all the way south
until it met Dairy Tower. Going even further south would be Sadder’s Horn, the busy harbour. That was a natural land spit that stuck far out of the oval-shaped island, its tip ending at the very southwest — a place that I had never been to, becau…

An annoying sound of a chair dragging its legs across the rough floor interrupted my thoughts.

I looked left and right quickly, afraid that my mother had disappeared into some chore-doing again. Mom had stood up. « I go to check on our cows », she said.

« But what about your food ? Mom ? », I called out, then realised that she had already eaten. She usually took her time with her food. I wonder…

The front door was opened, and my mom went out of the house greeting our neighbour, Mr Whean. He was a jolly and slightly overweight man who worked together with us on our farm. His brother, Mr Stheen, was a baker who shared a wheat, barley, and rye field with other Lelondish Vikings.

I stared at my empty wooden plate on the family table. I stared at Mom’s empty stool on my right. I watched Dad, sitting at the short end of the table, gobbling down his bacon strips.

« Luckily we live in a barn », I said to Dad. Uh, I should have said « on a barn ». My dad seemed to not have caught the mistake at all. Maybe I was too soft, as usual. Oh — whatever. I helped myself to a slice of fresh bread with some strong-smelling cheese having weird bluish-green stripes: blue cheese. Munching my food, I examined closely in wonder at this seemingly rotten but edible food that seemed to send a sharp spike of a salty and creamy flavour directly into the nostrils, and then I spoke — a little louder this time — to my father :

« Dad. Um… you know — can I ask you, do you know… how did blue cheese start ? Weird right ? That someone one day looked at this mouldy-looking stuff and said, ‘Yummy, this looks delicious !’? »

Ugh, I was always very nervous and clumsy with my speech, especially with Dad.

The swordsman looked up from his plate. « You are always full of questions [slight chortle] … for a nine-year-old », he said. « Why don’t you ask Mr Whean directly ? »

The tall black-haired Viking suddenly stood up and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and wiped his hands on the coarse fabric of his dark brown trousers. He went out to the densely cool outdoors, with me following behind slightly reluctantly. Time to do some hard work.

…

I was helping my parents doing chores around our dairy farm. It involved cleaning up the mess the cattle and sheep made in the stables (while trying to bear the stench), making sure they had enough to eat and drink, and… Okay, actually the « making sure they had enough to eat » part was the fun part. I loved running through the dense cold air across the sunlit green meadow pastures where the animals grazed, chasing after them, and then… err… getting chased by them. I remembered how terrified I was when a particularly large cow tried to chase me. So, I was always made sure to stay far away from the pen of the bad-tempered neighbour’s bull, with the odd name of Bigly.

My short little legs went hurrying towards my mother. Resting, I watched her milking a dark brown-and-white cow. Sometimes I would call her the « dairy lady » (it rhymed !) because she seemed to know what she was doing when it came to her job. She looked like one anyway, with the
typical white-apron-over-a-light-green-skirt type of lady…

A bucket was passed to my hands.

« You can carry this to the storehouse for me, s’il te plaît ? »

I groaned at Mom’s order, though polite. These buckets are so heavy. And I needed to carry them almost every day, without spilling a drop, of course.

So I struggled back and forth, trudging to the little well nearby and to the house itself as I carried buckets of milk from the ever-hungry cows, and served water and bread for the ever-thirsty adults and cows.

Exhausted, I sat down with my back against the cold irregular stones of the well, and rested, watching Mr Whean and my father getting themselves busy in the butter and cheese making process.

After some time, not willing to be thought on as a person who ‘idles for too long’ — as what Dad would sometimes say — I got up and went right towards them in the cheese-making shelter/centre.

« Um, Mr Whean, I was wondering… », I paused nervously and repeated my question, « … whether you can tell me how exactly did blue cheese start ? I mean, at first, when you… at first glance, it isn’t exactly appetising, right ? »

The rather plump and stout Viking stopped his work. His brownish beard was kept neatly in weird braids, unlike Dad who preferred to shave them off. As for his moustache, let’s just say it was very weird.

« You mean to ask how one started making and eating blue cheese ? »

« Yeah… »

« Nobody would have created it if it was that ugly » — he started, in his heavy Cœunettian accent — « But it became the most marvellous cheese in the Archipelago ! »

He took a container of rennet which he had earlier extracted from a baby calf’s stomach (yuck). After pouring the rennet into a container of sheep milk, he continued in his typical expressive way of speaking:

« It was ah, actually discovered sort of by accident. When the Lelondells settled here… » — he said, stirring the liquid — « on this island a long, long time ago, they brought over the traditional Cœunettian cheeses including… Roquert blue cheese ».  

He hurried over to a large container where the milk was already curdled and poured some powdery greenish mould all over it. I followed the bumbling and slightly clumsy man, who continued again:

« There exists an old Cœunettian legend… The Isle of Cœunette was famous for her dairy farms and cheese ; but unhappily the dragons did not stop stealing the cows, they did not stop destroying whole storehouses of cheese. »

Eyeing upwards he said, « One day, a Cœunettian named Roquert got enough of it and he stored his bread and sheep milk, underground in the damp caves around the… euh… hm… Attend, c’est quoi le nom de cet étang… ? »
Struggling to remember the name, he muttered in a string of Cœunettian words all of which I did not understand. Then there was a long pause. « Never mind », he said. Then he gave a little toothy smirk. « You can guess what happened to the cheese ? »

« They went bad ? », I answered stupidly. « Uh, they exploded and died ? » I answered even more stupidly and acted as stupid as possible. Cheeky me.

« Bien sûr que non ! Of course not ! » Roquert soon discovered that mixing bread mould with milk from, euh, sheep would create — blue cheese ! So, Roquert blue cheese is born. And this cheese, it somehow made its way to Lelondell. Today we even have caves named after them — the Blue Caves ! »

« The Blue Caves ? Where… Can you tell me where exactly please ? » I continued asking that friendly and (obviously talkative) man.

He replied, « The Forest of Lilianity is on the left and euh, Mont Point is at the south of it. And the Great Pond of Eau surrounds the Caves ».

I laughed to myself. Great Pond of Eau… such a funny name as it really means ‘Great Pond of Water’.

I asked Dad, who had his eyes closely inspecting into a bucket of curded milk, « Mount Point, is it that it is the mountain in the centre of the island ? ».

« No, it’s not », went his casual reply. « The Palace of Argent is. Mount Point is more to the west… Hey ! Shouldn’t you be helping instead of distracting us ? If not, then you should uh… perhaps go away and play. »

I smiled at my father’s focused busy look, which also seemed to have annoyance and amusement at the same time, and I watched him walking over to the other side of the table. He began shaping the spore-covered lumpy curdled milk into cylindrical buckets, where he left them to drip-dry.

« We salt them later, leave them to ripen, then we send them to the Caves where Old McLell and family will handle the rest », said a Cœunettian lady out of nowhere.

I was too immersed in my observation to notice Mom suddenly appearing from behind me. Apparently, she had been talking to me.

She smiled and sang, « The lunch is ready ! ».

« Yay ! », I cried as I hurried for the house. I always enjoyed her blue cheese sandwiches.

After lunch, Dad went into his bedroom and appeared later with a little brown sack of coins. I knew what that meant. That meant buying or trading in the local market nearby, usually to replenish our supply of fish. (The Market was at the eastern part of the island, just west of Milky Beach.)

We walked almost directly south ; and passing by two of the many wooden village houses, we walked towards a huge arc with a sign that stated ‘MARKET OF LELONDELL’.

My neck craned upwards and around as I walked underneath the arc, seeing that the runes were carved on both sides on the board… and Dad was already ahead. His large strides were never easy
to keep up with.

I hurried nearer towards the six-foot man who was waiting impatiently for me. We turned left and entered the unsurprisingly chaotic atmosphere of the Market. Horses and cattle were pulling carts left and right. Vikings were shouting at one another. Another was advertising his wares — loudly.

_Yep, it’s definitely a noisy market._

I looked around the crowds, slightly nervously. Then, from the corner of my left eye, I caught something moving that stood out from the blurred crowd rushing all around. Oh, it was someone: a little girl with brown hair — walking quickly together with someone. Hmm… I thought saw her somewhere before. But I never did get to talk to her. She always seemed to be avoiding everyone. She was….

« RODÊNE !? » a man’s voice raised over the crowd.

Oh, it was Dad. I then realised that I had been left behind, with him already with Mr Balansen the fishmonger. I then ran straight over to them, and suddenly —

{Splehsssh !} My face met with the cold and slimy and slippery and — Oh it really stunk. I guessed that I had just fallen right into some stinking pile of raw, fresh fish.

The snickering of two girls could be heard. Oh, they were Illy and Nillie Tylens: the two daughters of Mr Tylens the fisherman, or the _gossiping girls_. And then I heard three boys laughing. Not them again.

« Rodène loves cod so much that he actually kissed it ! », teased Malcost Nailekkten.

« Ha ha ! Told you I’m an expert in trippin’ someone up so that they fall flat on their face ! », said Kindt Lapis (the oldest) to Nork Nailekkten (the youngest), both with mischievous grins.

I was standing up and brushing myself, annoyed at the two idiotic sons of Mr Nailekkten and the very idiotic spiky-haired blond Lapis. Red with embarrassment, I looked sheepishly at the fishmonger, and said in a voice that barely rose above the chattering and taunting around me, « I—err… You know they… Ss-sorry, Mr Balansen. They tripped me up ».

« Ah, don’t worry about them. Those mischievous brats just can’t get enough fun ». The ragged-bearded stout man leant closer to me. « […] you know the secret of […] outsmarted pranksters […] my younger days ? », he said with a slight twinkle in his eyes. I couldn’t hear much because of the boys’ loud and annoying laughter plus the busy noises of the market.

« Er, okay…? » I timidly replied, and leaned a little closer from the noises behind me while _straining_ my ear.

« …[L]ike I already said ; you outsmart them back ! […] prank them back at their own little game ! [The boys : « Rodène, ha ha ! » « Look at me ! »] If they fight you, you fight them back. »

« But… » I began to protest.

The fishmonger interrupted me with a « No buts. That’s just the way it is ; unless, you wish to be bullied all the time ».

Surprising, Dad agreed, and said in a manner both serious and reluctant, « Unfortunately, that’s the truth ». 
**Author’s note:**
[31 December 2018]
[13 May 2019]

* Modern French text in this story represents the language the Cœunettians speak on the isle of Cœunette (pronounced « kuh-nett »)

* Modern English = a fictional dialect of Old Icelandic West Norse, or the language of HTTYD (How to Train Your Dragon)
Modern French = a fictional dialect of Old French/Frankish

* Roquert cheese (pronounced « roh-kerh » or « Rɔkɛʁ ») is based on a real French blue cheese, Roquefort (pronounced « rohk-forh » or « Rɔk-fɔʁ »)

* The French word « eau » [IPA : o] is nearly similar in pronunciation to the English interjection « oh » [IPA : əʋ].

* Text in |vertical bars + superscript| is the translation of the Cœunettian (represented by French) text, and it is not considered to be part of the story.

* *Lapis* is pronounced leh-pees (læ.ps)
  * Nailekkten = naɪ-lek-tuhn
  * Tylens = tʰu-luhn
  * Malcost = mel-kawst
  * Balansen = bel-luhn-suhn
The Viking runes «» are actually English letters replaced by Lelondish futhark/futhorc runes.
3. Fiery
“What’s that?”, I asked.

“Oh–ah!... just a minute” went a somewhat nervous reply. Dad glanced down from his right, at me, his ten-year-old son. I had just entered his room.

The six-foot tall lean but muscular Viking started pushing some parchment papers around on his study table, as if he was in a hurry. The strongly built man in his early-forties then took out a long, large parchment paper and leaned to his right, his black eyes meeting mine. “Want to have a look at this map?”, he said with a weird hint of cheerfulness to me, in his usual deep but sharp voice. He slid the map across the huge wooden table neared to my left. He pushed his other parchment papers away.

“Wowww...!” I said with interest as the man with rolled up the sleeves of his dark green tunic in his typical style and started to clear his messy parchment paper-ridden table and stack some documents. I dragged my finger across an empty space in the middle with the words ‘Sea of Freedom’. I rotated the map and read, “Sea… of… Notting — Nothingness?.”

My finger ‘hovered’ over islands, seas, and names that I could not read. But I could not find it. “Okay, where is Lelondell?”, I sighed in defeat.

“Never mind”, my father assured me, probably noticing my frustration. “It’s here”. He pointed to a quite tiny island at the top and started to give me a little lesson: “Lelondell is an island also known as the ‘Land of Power’. I still think that name is a little exaggerated.”

“A little what?”, I asked.

After spelling out the word for me, he explained, “Exaggerated. Too much. Overdone. More than what is actual. Let me give you an example”. The usually stern-and-no-nonsense man then copied the voice and actions of an egoistic Viking who said he could break a metal axe into two with only his bare hands. He rested both of his hands onto his black belt and ‘overdid’ that certain man’s face and gestures even further.

“That’s Mr Balansen!”. I burst out laughing. Somehow Dad always made seemingly boring stuff such as reading and writing much more... fun. I always enjoyed learning new words from my personal tutor, especially when that stern man was in this kind of a mood.

“Actually all these funny names”, I said, “…on the map look… I mean, also look a bit err… exaguh… exag–zzer–ay–ted ». Oh what a hard word to learn.

“Exaggerated! Exactly! Well, anyway, our island is located between two mountain ranges that pop out of nowhere. The Mountains of Vanity at the east of the Kingdom of Lelondell; the Forest of Vivianity at the west, and… and…”

“The Long Mountains?” I finished his sentence.

“Correct. But even further west lies the —”

We both read together: “LAND OF NO RETURN.”

“Whoa…” I exclaimed. “But why was it… is it called… that?”

“Anyone who dared to venture into that freezing land of ice rarely did return. The same goes for seafaring explorers who thought that there’s still something in that Sea of Nothingness. West they went and… you know...”
« They reach the end of the earth ? », I asked. « Err... ‹reached› ? »

« Heh ! », he said, chuckling. « Well, something like that. You actually remind me of someone who asked that before — »

« Who ? »

« Erm... I’ve forgotten. »

I twitched my eyebrows comically. That doesn’t make any sense. How can you get reminded of someone that you had forgotten about ?

I brushed that aside and continued with curiosity, « Why didn’t they explore the east ? The explorers... »

« The east ? ». Dad seemed to think of what to say, frowning slightly. « Ahh... Nobody wants to go there. It’s surrounded by thick fog... and... danger ». Another brief moment of silence came about as I tried to guess why my father suddenly had that weird... unprepared... look of his.

« Danger ? », I said. « Someone told me that the further east one goes, the more dragons there are. »

« Uh–Yeah... ». He mixed two words together, pushed the topic away with repeated waves of his hand, and continued the lesson. « If one—If one goes further north over the Long Mountains, he’ll meet the Ice Sheet of Doom ». The tip of his finger rested on the runes.

« How about going even further north ? », I asked.

« That’s the end of the parchment paper », he replied a little sharply. « And it’s ‹north›. Don’t follow Mom’s funny pronunciation... »

« I mea–mean south. Going south », I said quickly, not understanding what he meant about the pronunci—

« [...] Isles. In other words, our Viking ancestors... sort of. »

He had just answered my question about too quickly and directly. I nodded my head as if I had heard and digested the information ; when in fact I was actually trying to remember and guess what he said at the first part. I took the courage to clarify and asked, « So the south has the ancestors... ». I trailed off at the last part, hoping he would...« ...of our Vikings. »

Yup, he did finish my sentence, although it did not help me one bit. What ‹our Vikings› ? I decided to clarify again by using the word ‹they›.

« How can ‹they› be our ancestors ? », I asked again while walking over to Mom’s bed. « Maybe they have influenced some of — some parts of our culture ? ». I sat down and my tired legs instantly felt relief.

« You know why, some people like your mom and Mr Whean speak Cœunettian here ? »

I shook my head, not knowing a single thing about it. Also, I did not consider myself a Cœunettian speaker.

My eyes were facing the rough wooden floorboards. So the Cœunettians were our ancestors ? I
heard from somebody before that there are Cœunettians in our day as well. *I just don’t know much on this stuff.*

« I’ll explain it later. We’ll focus on our island first », said Dad suddenly, as if he knew that I was confused. My eyes were staring at his while I struggled slightly to keep my impatient self in check.

« The first thing that you should know is that Lelondell is sort of in the middle of nowhere. »

Talk about confusing. Still seated, I leaned back a little and almost wanted to simply lie back onto Mom’s relatively inviting bed (because Dad would not want me lying on his bed). I felt my already puzzled head getting heavier as there was too much information to learn at one go, to contain. With my furrowed forehead, I said, « I thought… erm… » — I was not looking directly at him — « Lelondell seems to be in the middle of somewhere to me ».

« It is. I mean… we don’t really have political ties to anywhere else — except for trading. Traders from Iceland sometimes arrive at our ports to trade, and that’s it. »

My eyes were towards the left, staring around the messy bed of my father. A little clearing of the throat from him hurriedly made my eyes refocus, as if they were supposed to glued to his eyes at all times. « Look at the map again so that you can understand », said Dad.

Secretly reluctantly, I sprang out of the comfy bed and walked towards the man. With a little stretching of the hands, I reached for the map lying annoyingly far away on the table just behind him. « Iceland ? I don’t see it. »

« That’s because it is off the map, *much* further south ». His finger pointed at the bottom edge of the map as I held it.

« Hold it *properly* », went his voice when I nearly dropped it.

With clumsy fingers fumbling with the edges and corners of the map that simply loved springing back into curls, I took a closer look at the arrow and a word that stated ‘Iceland’.

« Why don’t our traders… trade with, uh, how to read this ? ». I struggled in vain to read words that seemed to be of a different language. With weird little symbols on top of what looked like letters.

« The Isle of Cœunette ? Well, few reasons. One : They speak a different language, Cœunettian. Two : They do not like us, and we do not like them. So we try to avoid them as possible. »

« Ohh… kayyy… This is getting weirder… ». I continued in a sarcastic manner : « So our ancestors are now our enemies. And Mom is our enemy. If it is a joke, it’s in poor taste ».

Dad did not seem to like that I had just stolen his phrase. He countered in an arguing manner, « It’s not a joke. I’m teaching you history ». There was a pause in our little conversation as I swept off my disbelief hurriedly and the man softened his annoyed black eyebrows.

« Speaking of history, how did a Cœunettian like Mom end up here in Lelondell ? »

« I think I’ve told you before… She was an orphan who met me, who went on a voyage to Lelondell to seek better fortune. »

His tone seemed a little stiff.
« Why did you marry her then ? You don’t seem to like to speak Cœunettian for some reason. »

« I… », he said getting annoyed at my bluntness. « What do you mean I don’t seem to like to speak Cœunettian ? I can’t speak it ; I’m not good at learning such a complicated language. In any case, almost nobody speaks Cœunettian here nowadays. Everyone speaks Lelondish Norse. »

« But I wish I could speak better Cœunettian because many times I don’t understand Mom when she talks to herself or to Mr Whean. »

There was an awkward pause.

« Well, if you want to learn the language, ask Mom », he said.

« But I feel like you didn’t let her teach me enough when I was younger… so now it’s harder for me. »

« Yes, it’s true that I preferred you to speak Lelondish because we live in Lelondell, but that is not to say that I prevented you from learning your mother’s language. So stop saying that, okay ? »

« Okay », I said defeatedly.

« Coming back to the topic of Lelondell… », he said. « We haven’t suffered an invasion ever since the end of the Great War with the… Cœunettians of the south. No human invasion — that’s the good part. The bad ? Well, like Cœunette, we have dragon problems. More, actually. »

« Yeah », I acknowledged. « Sometimes they attack our island many times a month, and other times they… do not appear for months. »

« Weeks, not months. », Dad corrected. He gave a huff. « But these mindless beasts are too stubborn to stop raiding our well-fortified island. Our expert archers and giant catapults would take down most of them anyway. And that’s why I think Lelondell should be called ‹the Land of Dead Dragons›. »

« I told you. »

My right ear had picked up a feminine voice.

« I wanted to speak more Cœunettian to Rodêne a long time ago when he was much younger, but you convinced me to teach him Lelondish just because we live in Lelondell. And by the way, it is pronounced ‹Le-lon-dell›, not ‹Lel-lawn-dell›. »

I already knew who it was. Entering the bedroom, a woman in her early-thirties walked past the metal door frame nearer towards us, with one hand on her hip. She wore her blonde hair in a slightly messy bun of large, loose braids, all under a light blue headdress, which seemed to contrast with her light green attire, and white apron.

Dad sighed. « Héidie. Not this again. And you know that saying ‹Lelondell› isn’t natural for me. »

« The ‹lond› part, it’s not pronounced like that », she pointed back.

« Yes as far as I am concerned it’s pronounced like that. »

« Non. Listen. ‹Lelondell› has the same sound as ‹non›… the word ‹non›. Simple ? »

« I’d prefer a ‹yes›, Héidie Neédelinne », said Dad in a slight teasing tone while I laugh quietly
at his comment despite the growing tension.

« Hé ! I am now Héidie Statenson, Lastern. »

I watched in amusement as these two assumingly grown-up adults continued bickering like childish little kids. Then my amusement turned into something else when the tension became toxic and they started attacking each other.

Not again.

« [...]search for ‹better fortune› ? I do not think that this is my better fortune ! »

« Héidie, recently you’ve been making me more annoyed than usual by complaining a lot. »

« I am usually quiet but I usually complain when I believe it can change things. »

« There you go again, not making sense. Trying to have the last say, again. »

Finally, I had enough of it. I left the room, the voices of the conflict behind me. If this is what it means by marriage, then I won’t get married when I grow up.

—<>—

« NO !… You ! [...] How dare you ! GO AWAY !! Get AWAY from… »

The yells of my father jerked me out of bed. My eleven-year-old self was now sitting up on the straw bed — stiffly.

I blinked my eyes in the darkness.

I eyed to my left and then faced into the general direction of my study table. Whatever was going on in my parents’ room behind that wall ? I tiptoed out from the darkness of my bedroom, curiosity overcoming my fear of the dark. A clumsy bump into Dad’s armchair in the middle of the darkness sent me backwards for a while, and with my back to the wall —

« WHY ?! »

I jerked sideways. That was Dad again.

As I fumbled through the narrow walkway to the kitchen, my left ear picked up more screaming and yelling, and muffled noises as if the room inside was being messed about. I heard a distraught word that sounded like… « chilly ».

Mom was screaming as though she was struggling to quiet him down. Dad said something like « [...]lk » as the emotional storm began to subside. Then there was silence. Suddenly sobbing sounds could faintly be heard.

« This must be serious », I said to myself.

The door creaked open. Mom bumped right into me. She was too shocked to even say anything.

« Mom what… what is happening ? », I cried. There were already shivers in my pounding heart.

« Un cauchemar. Nightmare », she weakly replied and she went straight to the kitchen for a drink.
The next morning…

My dad had a sour and moody face. He seemed depressed and he did not talk much. If he did, there was hint of coldness to almost anyone. Everyone suddenly became a little wary of him.

Also, it seemed that one of the indications that my father may not be in a good mood was him still having his helmet on at the family table. Usually, when we got together for meals, he would take it off and place it down at the little table behind his seat. It was a simple, rounded off head cap that did not really cover the face, unlike the traditional and stylish Lelondish ones that left only slits for the eyes. But to wear any form of headgear at the table when there was supposed to be family conversation? Mom really disliked that.

« You should be going to the smithy to learn some crucial blacksmithing skills from Mr Stonberg », Dad said to me after breakfast. « And don’t give me any excuses. You’re already ten. No, eleven. »

I groaned. I hated being an apprentice to that quick tempered burly Viking, who never seemed to understand the word ‘patience’. But there was another reason why I dreaded being in the forge.

The secret: I was terrified of any weapon, especially swords. These blades of death had tasted the blood of dragons and humans alike. Weapons had the power to take away life in an instant. But at the same time, they had also protected me from countless attacks from the insane winged reptiles. It was a topic I was thinking a lot about recently.

Closing the door of the house behind me reluctantly, I paused for a while and walked straight with an even more reluctant attitude, passing by Mr Whean’s house on my left, until I reached an iron shed. Tools of all sorts were strewn all over the place. Weapons of all sorts were hanging on a wall. And they all had one thing in common: they were sharp, black, dirty, dusty, and… Oh, there was the blacksmith already working furiously.

« Er… good morning, Mr Stonberg », I greeted the greyish-haired Viking politely.

« Mornin’… Enough with the formalities. Time to start workin’ », bluntly replied the muscular man. « Gather the charcoals — quickly! »

I rushed to behind his back to a ‘charcoal cart’ with wheels. I wheeled it hurriedly to the impatient man, who was hammering away at a white-hot iron on the anvil. Unluckily for me, the cart rolled over a large stone and toppled, sending the charcoals all over the place.

« What took you so long? », he grumbled gruffly.

I started to explain what happened but he cut me off mid-sentence: « No time. Break up the charcoals pieces with the axe. »

The axe? Which axe was it, I couldn’t remember. I grabbed a small axe with my right hand (I was right-handed), and began to attack the charcoal, sending immense amounts of black dust and soot all over the place. Coughing and wheezing, I realised that the charcoal was still…

« Hey, you idiot! You’re doin’ it all wrong! », he growled then grabbed my axe, « This one’s blunt. Needs to be sharpened later. Get another one ». He pointed to a larger axe hanging on the wall.

Rather than going for that heavier axe that I hated to carry, I went for a very sturdy sword instead. It did the job perfectly until…
« Why you can’t follow the simplest orders? I told you to get an axe and you got a sword ». He glared at me.

« But it did the job », I protested.

« Just get the axe… rrrRgh — Never mind ». He grabbed an axe and started chopping the charcoal while grumbling, « Rrghh, must I do everything myself? ...Hey, don’t just stand there ! Pump the bellows ! ».

My hands braced themselves before pushing down the two heavy handles of the bellows, and I watched him working like an insane craftsman, his greyish black long hair all over his heavily perspiring face. He was one of the many in Lelondell that had shoulder-length hair; but this one… neat was never a word to describe him. Not even his 'O-shaped' relatively short beard…

A sudden rising of smoke directly attacked my sensitive nose. {choking slightly} Well luckily, I did not need to learn to make a sword until when I was older. After a long while, the grumpy Viking then told me to get him a drink and take a little rest if I want. Phew !

What a relief !

« DRAGON ALERT ! »

No relief for me, it seemed. I was heading towards my home when the all-too-familiar warring cry was sounded.

—«Shift in POV»—

Trumpets and horns blared. A moving cloud could be seen coming from the east and north. A hundred arrows whizzed past and over the jagged cliffs of the Land of Lelondell to the tiny dots approaching from across the sea. And dozens of tiny dots fell from the sky to the waters.

But there were more of them this time.

Men, soldiers and citizens alike, shouted at one another. All along the temporal safety of the high cliffs, one by one the catapults were fired by the armoured soldiers, hurling huge rocks towards the reptilian winged beasts. One after another the spear-shooters fired. One after another the giant arrow shooters fired.

A spiky sadder was hit by a rock hurled from a giant catapult on Dairy Tower at the east. But a dozen more sadders came tearing down the village, along with several two-headeds and ronkies. Fires appeared, followed by Vikings struggling to put them out.

Chaos erupted when the fire drakes appeared. They crushed the spear shooter and the catapult on Dairy Tower into fiery ashes and bits. They destroyed the fences that surrounded the sheep and cattle, sending them all over the place. The animals did not last long as they were snatched up by the dragons. The Vikings retaliated with their swords, spears, axes, and everything sharp. But many others were told to « Stay indoors ! ».

Normally the dragons would manage to steal some livestock and fish and retreat afterwards when they were overloaded. But this was a major dragon attack, and it seemed to have broken Lelondell’s strong line of defences.

—«Shift in POV»—

A string of words left my panting mouth, « Luckily there are no blue fire drakes this time ». I
struggled frantically to the direction of my home. Lelondell had not seen one in decades — or so I heard, and I personally didn’t want to meet one common fire drake either.

I shouldn’t have thought that as fire appeared from the sky to the ground closer than I would like. Then another blasted right beside me!

Oh no! I screamed inwardly. My right boot was on fire! I ran faster and faster, hoping the air would put it out. But as I ran, my foot could feel the heat more and more. I stopped, hands shaking frantically as I tried to think. Think, think, think — The well!

« Water water where’s water? » I mumbled frantically. Maybe I could drench it wet or something! Or something. I had just remembered about the rubbing/rolling on the ground thingy. I rubbed my flaming boot onto some grass and it seemed to rub off the fire —

**ABLAZE!**

Bright red fiery flames had set the row of windmills all ablaze! The five windmills next to Mr Stheen’s are all engulfed with fiery flames, near the barley and wheat fields surrounding my house. *Wait, what field? Oh there they are, burning all over.* In fear, I ran towards Dad and we both rushed for the house. A common fire drake along with other fire drakes were chasing the cattle on our dairy farm. One dragon flew down and swooped low enough over our heads — missing us barely.

We slammed the door behind us, thinking we are safer, but the door blew up, letting in the bright daylight and the even brighter fire. A fire drake had blasted it open! The dragon squeezed through the narrow walls and attacked the furniture of the house and came straight… for me.

« Dad! Fire… Drehh! Fire! 'ELP! », I yelled in a panic incoherent frenzy with my back pressed against the breakfast table. I was trapped; its fiery snarling head was just three feet from me.

But quick as a flash was the sound of the swing of Dad’s sword. The beast’s neck had been cut clean off its head. The lifeless head with its tongue dangling out landed right in front of my boots. The headless body collapsed onto the floor. Blood was everywhere. I was too shocked to move, too horrified to even shout. I was so upset at everything. Everything, including at how the dragon died. But I couldn’t even cry. I rushed off to hide in my room.

And that was just one of the many typical dragon days in Lelondell, «The Land of Dangerous Dragons». That is, if they got past our island kingdom’s tight security measures.

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With the door of my bedroom opened I peeped out of my room timidly and scared; and was relieved to see that the dead dragon was no longer there. But red stains were still all over the place. A slight sense of dizziness made me cover my mouth just in case I would vomit. Also weak and tired from having overslept, head heavy and spinning, I walked quietly while carefully avoiding the dark blood stains on the wooden floorboards. It was so sickening.

« Why do they have to die? », I asked my father. I nearly tripped over his completely wrecked armchair that had been pushed to the side of the charred wall. Mom was outside; not sure what she was doing; couldn’t see properly. Perhaps she wanted to clean up the mess near our front entrance.

The Viking adult, helmet-cap on his head, was fixing a new door. He was completely taken back by surprise — literally. Then hammer in hand, he stood still and silent. « You mean the
dragons ? »

« Yeah… », I replied. This is turning out to be a little weird...

« Because they kill us ? », he continued bluntly. « What do you mean ? They raided us, deprived us of our food… and tried to kill us yesterday. »

« But they are trying to survive. Why is it that they attack us when it’s dangerous, I—I mean, for their survival ? », I timidly forced out a string of questions.

« We Vikings are trying to survive too », he argued.

These reasons were just too… too negative to make sense. Placing a knuckle onto my chin, I said, « Something just doesn’t make sense. I don’t understand — I mean, why would they raid us…? The fish… They catch… they can catch the fish themselves in the sea, right ? ».

« Because they are mindless animals, that’s why. And these mindless creatures make us suffer, so we kill them ! ». Dad’s voice was becoming one of emotional hatred.

« Animals have instincts to avoid getting into trouble », I argued back. « Same with dragons, right ?! It’s like they are being forced to raid us ! »

« YOU are going to get into trouble soon if you continue talking like this to me. I got this door to fix — »

« But it just doesn’t make sense », I said, while the man faced the half-finished door again. « Maybe if someone can study them to learn more about them, to find out what they’re really doing… »

« STOP trying to make sense ! » he turned around and exploded. « You always ask too many questions ! Just follow along the norm, and you’ll stay out of trouble ! ». His black eyebrows turned into fiery angry ones as he gave one of his stern glares. He continued in a calmer but still stern voice, « In fact you’ll already in trouble. No snacks, desserts, or cheese for you for a week ! …For four days ». When he was in this kind of a mood, nothing could change his mind. And also, the punishment was obviously influenced by Mom.

« If it weren’t for your mother, I would punish you my way », said Dad. I looked downwards. Obviously done with the conversation, he finished with a « Now go to your room ». I felt pain everywhere in my chest as I walked mindlessly into my bedroom and calmly closed the door behind me. Somehow I felt emotionless and empty as well. I turned from the door and quickly hurled myself into the softness of my bed, finally able to be as unhappy as I could.

« Fine. I’ll keep my questions to myself… »

✿ — «<<>>» —— ✿
Author’s note:

✶ In the actual map that Rodène was trying to read, the Norse islands were written in Viking runes, and the Cœunettian isles were written in Cœunettian.

✶ Rodène pronounces « Lelondell » as « lêll-lawn-dell » [IPA : lɛlɔːndɛl] while his father pronounces it the same way.

✶ Actual Viking and modern Icelandic family names work differently than the ones mentioned here in this story and in How to Train Your Dragon. Rodène Statenson’s family name, for example, should be Lasternson meaning « son of Lastern ».

✶ They simply called it Norse and Cœunettian because it was not « Old Norse » or « Old Cœunettian » at that time. They were the current languages in their time.

✶ Even at an early age, Rodène loved rhymes. However, his rhymes would have been in his language, Old Icelandic Norse, not English.

✶ In this generally 1st-person story, the 3rd-person or Omniscient point of view (POV) is indicated by

—‹‹Shift in POV››—

which is usually a normal scene break

—‹‹››—

To clarify, Rodène is limited in his 1st-person POV, and he is therefore unable to know the thoughts of others and see outside of his 1st-person POV.

✶ Dragons
Lelondish names of dragon species :
- spiky sadder
- two-headed or two-headed snake-dragon
- ronkie
- fire drake or common fire drake
(In Lelondell, names of dragon species are not proper names and are therefore not capitalised. A « drake » is simply another word for « dragon ».)

✶ blue fire drake or blue drake
A dragon that is dark blue in colour. It is an original dragon imagined by me, and so it does not
exist in the original universe of *How to Train Your Dragon*. It is not part of canon.

✶ I genuinely feel sad writing the dragon death scene, but this incident represents the Dragon–Viking war

✶ Here are some images of the dragons commonly encountered in Lelondell:

  - spiky sadder
  - two-headed
  - ronkie
  - common fire drake
Mr Unpopular. That was what I found myself to be among my friends, and even my family occasionally. This realisation of mine occurred during the year of my twelfth birthday.

My birthday had been a disaster. Mom’s attempt to teach me how to bake a birthday cake failed miserably. A promised dinner at the Hink ’n’ Jelind Inn didn’t happen. Everybody was too stirred up about someone committing suicide; he was apparently distraught over the death of his son due to a dragon attack in the poor quarters around the shipbuilding area and the Market. Some say the reason he took his life was not about his son at all. Some were even claiming that there was an <undeniable conspiracy>. And funeral? There was no funeral at all, which made me wonder why. No mourning period to mourn over the collapse of an entire family, no hmm… royal consolation? There was so much unrest in the public places that the king and queen had to send an army of soldiers to quieten the crowds in the open space outside the Stadium near the Library of Lelondell. I didn’t even get to see the whole show because Mom had forbidden me to even have a look, much to Dad’s annoyance. I was starting to become the reason of my parents’ arguments, so it seemed. I wondered what next year’s September 5 would be like...

As for my unpopularity among my peers, well, it all came down to one word: Thustle. I hated him. I really did. That son of Mr Tilton, a super-rich nobleman, was absolutely spoilt rotten. Always acting high and mighty, the tall and muscular boy had an extremely egoistic character. His long-sleeved shirt would sometimes be folded up — probably to show off his muscular beefy arms. Also, he constantly wore a different coloured shirt every day to show off his wealth. Not surprising, actually.

On the other hand, his elder sister Jessyllka Tilton seemed to be a standoffish aristocrat who, according to Illy, was one whole year older than me. She never seemed to be interested in people. In fact, she never seemed to be interested in anything, not that I really cared anyway. She was probably only interested in things that didn’t involve getting her fashionable clothes dirty.

One time I tried to play <Answer the Riddle> one time with Thustle. Let’s just say that I shouldn’t have tried. That blond-haired bully had no sense of humour whatsoever. The only sense of humour he had was to humiliate the weaker Viking children — like me. The same age as me, that boy especially liked to ridicule me as a twelve-year-old being quite short and thin, and as a <softie boy who can’t kill a fly>. The fact that I had a Cœunettian parent didn’t make it easier for me to fit in.

The worst part? Ever since he made friends with Kindt, Malcost, and Nork, he became more and more of a problem. I tried mixing with them several times to test out the saying <If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em!>, but my honesty would always get me and them into trouble. They barely understood my jokes, to the extent that they took the phrase <killing two birds with one stone> — literally.
Because I constantly refused to join in their dishonest and crude ways (like stealing), those four eventually ganged up on me. One time they kicked me into the mud. Another time they tripped me up so that I fell right towards Nillie. She pushed me away so that I fell backwards. It became evident to me that I was relatively weaker than most people my age.

Still another time they made me take a ‘milk shower’, or at least that was what they called it (I ended up with a bucket on my head).

They would also insult my slightly Cœunettian-like accent, which gradually became a sensitive point for me.Hmm, maybe the reason why I can’t really learn the language is because I keep being ridiculed for it?

Anyway, I had longed stopped complaining to my parents since it made matters worse. Mr Nailekkten would punish his three naughty boys, and that just made them hate me even more. They often called me a ‘mama’s boy’ (which admittedly, I was).

There was one incident where I was talking to Illy. The bullies teased that we had ‘a thing for each other’ (not sure what they were talking about), and they knocked both of our heads together with a clunk so hard that she almost passed out. And the girl blamed me for it and told me off for crying and being such a pushover. It was a complete disaster.

—–<>—

It was evening time and it had been a long day at the barn. I was retiring my tired legs on one of the rocks of Fallen Rocks. With the grassy plains behind me and the chaos of the Market some distance away, I overlooked the soft-sand Milky Beach and the reddening sea, while admiring in my hand a little metal toy that the blacksmith had given to me. He said that it had been given to him by Mr Nosten’s father. It was a tiny old metal masterpiece of an armoured swordsman riding on a horse. He even held a tiny shield.

« Whee ! Mr Knight can ride his horse on the water », I said playfully. With a squinting of an eye, I tried to ‘land’ the duo in mid-air onto the blurred horizon.

« BOO ! », a collective shout made me jump out of my skin. Almost. The bully and the other three rough n’ ragged boys had crept up behind me. Those four again. Disaster.

« Ha ! Rodène’s still a baby, playing baby things ! I thought he’s already twelve years old », Thustle Tilton taunted. But…But I was simply trying to relax after a hard day’s work ! He grabbed my favourite work of craftsmanship and teased with an evil smirk, « It’s mine now ».

« No !! It’s not a toy at all ! It’s a historical work of art ! ». I desperately tried to snatch it back as they tossed it around to one other. Then Thustle ‘accidentally’ dropped it.

« Whoops ! There goes your ‘work of art’ », he taunted. « I’m sor-reee ! » he sang, with a mocking face. Kindt stomped on it. That was the last straw. Anger boiled within me. I shrieked loudly and punched him right in the face.

« Oh, playing dirty are you ? », threatened Malcost.

The four ganged up on me with Nork hitting me in the face with his little hands. (I couldn’t believe it, even someone younger than me had been taught to disrespect and hate me.) Kindt kicked me from behind. I tried in vain to fight back. Again, I shouldn’t have tried. Malcost punched me in the face and I winced.

« There goes your ‘historical’ work of art ! » spat Thustle in my face and the comparatively
muscular boy demonstrated his strength by throwing the toy as far as he could — over the Milky Cliff nearby and towards the sea. « It’s now part of the ‹history› of Milky Cliff! Aha hah haw ha! ». They laughed and ran away, racing with each other as if nothing had happened.

I walked slowly, my legs bruised, towards the edge of the cliff and looked down towards the jagged watery rocks below. The sea was getting dark and it offered no consolation as it seemed to add to the unfriendliness. I turned my defeated self away from the scene and collapsed in a puddle of tears. « No… » I said weakly and then wailed loudly. My little favourite was gone. That antique could never, ever be replaced. I played with it ever since my childhood and now it was… gone.

By the time I approached the house, I was in a horrible mess. Mom gasped loudly and I felt her arms carrying me into the house, where she treated my wounds and my bleeding nose near the main fireplace.

« They took my little horsey and {sob}… threw it over the Cliff », I said chokingly through tears. Sitting on a stool in front of the unlit fireplace, I then told her all that had happened, not leaving out any details.

« Come here. Je te fais un câlin, okay? [Let me give you a hug, okay?] », said my mother, knowing how much this has affected me. With one arm wrapped around me, she took a cloth and gently wiped my tears away.

« Voilà. No tears », she said, then added a few gentle-sounding Cœunettian words that I couldn’t catch. I continued crying for some time, and she tightened the hug. « Remember Rodène, you do not deserve this… I have the impression that you are too obedient, too soft-spoken, and too honest for your own good. That is why you get hurt. »

The door opened. I turned my head to my right. In walked my tall father, with his helmet and all. After hearing what had happened, I felt a heavy hand placed on my shoulder.

He said, « Rodène, you need to toughen up. And it doesn’t help that Thustle’s father is a nobleman. I have… I have no say in this ».

« Why? »

« In Lelondell, unfortunately, peasants can’t stand up to nobles. Your mom can explain further. Remember son, one day you’ll be able to… defend yourself ». With that, he closed the door and went off. I sighed. I knew I was his son, but whenever he addressed me as son, he would seem too serious and it gave me an impression that he expected big things from me.

There was a weird silence for a while. I was actually hoping he would say more and give me some more advice (which would usually be unpleasant advice).

« Rodène, much times you have to deal this people such as these. People who look down on others. People who do not like us even if we not do nothing », Mom began, in a slightly hesitant manner. So, even Mom was now giving me unpleasant advice.

« You see, there are four class… of Viking… classes of Vikings. We belong in the common middle class. Below us are the poor thralls or the servants who are sometimes oppressed. Above us are the noblemen. And the king and the queen of the Palace of Argent is… are over all. You know that everyone must bow before the royal officials or else… », she tried to explain, and at the last part, seemed reluctant to continue.

« It’s not fair! » I cried out loud, still angry at the recent incident. And I didn’t like this topic.
« La vie, elle n’est pas juste. Life is not fair. », she reminded me in a calm voice. « But I tell you something: our Lelondish Law of Human Equality. It says that the children of the noblemen are supposed to be of the same status as the children of the middle class… until they get old at eighteen years old… and then their place in the society becomes more fixed. »

I gave a silent huff at the weird information and muttered sulkily, « But that does not help my problem ».

« It does. One day you will be strong enough », she said and kissed my cheek. With a closing of the main door of the house she went off, leaving me staring into the dark fireplace for a moment.

Then shuffles of my unstable feet led me into my bedroom, and I collapsed onto my bed muttering « Rich people are so poor in character ».

I did have one friend whom I talked to quite often. He was Garend Nosten, the son of a librarian. A few months younger than me, he was a slightly plump boy as tall as my pre-teen skinny body. Unlike me who usually did not wear any form of a coat, preferring to wear thick woollen fabrics underneath my tunic instead, he wore a light brown furry coat that looked a little too small for him.

Trouble was... he sometimes could be quite an annoying chatterbox, who couldn’t stop spitting out facts, stories, histories, and legends. No wonder he did not fit easily in with the rougher boys. (And no wonder he made friends with me). {Sigh} I was so unpopular that my only friend was that guy.

Nevertheless, we two would spend much time in the Library of Lelondell. The stone-built sturdy building was located at the south... in err... in the south of the island, together with the Prisons. The Prisons both sat on a high cliff facing the southern sea, with Mont Point Beach at the foot of the cliff.

Since quite some time ago, Garend and I had been attending his father’s optional «Basic Norse class» where we learned the Viking runic alphabets and all about how to use them. I discovered that although my Norse grammar was hit and miss, my spelling was quite good. As for the other boys, well, they rarely visited the Library, which was good for me, as it became sort of like a safe space for me.

The mansion of Thustle’s wealthy father and the broken-down house of Kindt’s were behind me; I had already quickly walked past them. Now I was standing on the cracks of the grey stony floor of a spacious area that could resemble a triangle.

« Hmm... I think this is where the crowd... the king sent soldiers to quieten the crowd here that time », I mumbled over my words. Staring for a moment ahead of me at the magnificent Palace of Argent that loomed over some lower buildings, I squinted against the bright sunshine in the background and swept my eyes left across to the entrance of the Dragon Stadium and then the Library, slowly taking in the interesting change of views.

« Ah! I like this open space. It’s like the centre, the heart of the town », I said taking in breaths. When I had been younger, I would always stick dependently to Mom when we took strolls around the island. At least now walking alone was getting less frightening for me. It was even fun
I walked straight down to the stony-looking ancient Library. My knocks on the heavy dark oaken door were timid and simply not forceful enough. Even I could barely hear them myself. But before I could try again, an elderly man with a long beard down to his waist opened the door.

« Oh, greetings Rodène », Mr Nosten said politely. « If you’re looking for my boy Garend, come in. »

I smiled politely and walked into the huge room. Immediately the smell of old books and old stuffy furniture engulfed my annoyingly sensitive nose. Garend, as usual, was reading a book at the very long table that stretched all the way to my right, and to where the shelves were. And also, as usual, he was muttering to himself as he read.

« …the Soldiers of Liberty began to protest against King Âgel of the Kingdom of Cœunette (pronounced as ‹kuh-net› or roughly, ‹connect›). »

The nerd paused his reading. « Hmm… not sure how to pronounce this… », he said. « Hmm, and this king… ahl-jjay… ahl… djay… In any case, let’s move on… »

He continued his reading : « They sent a letter to the king that exposed the wickedness and shrewdness of the royal officials. They condemned them as greedy shrewd men who withheld the riches of the land from the common people, who were poor and oppressed. Unfortunately, there was a traitor among the Soldiers of Liberty who added false accusations in the letter against the king. As a result… »

I walked to a few feet behind him. « Hi Garend !! », I said cheerfully.

The timid boy jumped up in a fright. He began babbling : « Oh I didn’t see you back there. I mean, you were as stealthy as the wind. Did you knock ? I thought I heard a knock. My, I was too engrossed with this stuff that I didn’t see you, or in this case, hear… »

My eyes rolled as he continued on and on. I wasn’t even trying to scare him. He was the complete opposite of his elder brother, Laurem who was probably seventeen. That silent and serious-faced teen hated reading. Instead, he preferred to help out the shipbuilders at the harbour, earning quick wages for the Nosten family.

« OK ! …You’re reading what now ? ». (I had learned that I couldn’t stop him from talking, but at least I could change the subject.)

« […]The Settlement of Lelondell », he said, in a magical and mysterious sort of tone. « Well, look at all this knowledge ! »

Garend read while I clumsily tumbled after with my tongue :

« …As a result, the king sent an army that attempted to crush the rising rebellion. The Soldiers of Liberty retaliated…
« …the Great War of Equality. It was a long and bloody battle that never seemed to end…
« …the sophisticated machinery of King Âgel’s castle clashed with the hordes of common desperate people…
« …Soldiers of Liberty left their homeland and went on a northern voyage in search of freedom and equality…
« …the Sea of Liberty…
« …settlers met barbaric villagers on the Isle of Lelondell…
"…peace and equality living among the people who called themselves Norse or Vikings… ».

I took a breath. Wow. That had been an interesting history read. I looked at my friend. He was still going non-stop and was completely oblivious that I had already left in search of another book.

"…years ago, the new king of Cœunette, King Halgeint, sent an armada to Lelondell…
"…the Great War with the Cœunettians… »

"Garend, may I know… », I said suddenly. "Do you know where is it? I’m looking for… »

Without looking at me the bookworm answered (unhelpfully): "…Where is it? The Isle of Lelondell’s located in the Sea of Liberty, with the Forest of — »

"No! I mean anything about the… blue fire drake », I interrupted him mid-sentence, annoyed.

The plump boy sprang up. He took out a book, shaking slightly as if it was some sort of a fragile ancient artefact. "Although unfinished, this book tells a lot about the legendary blue fire drake », the freckled-faced boy said, with his blue eyes gleaming excitedly. Well, let’s see whether his excitement was exaggerated or not.

We explored around the book:

"…It has been debated for decades whether this rare fire drake is a variant of the regular and larger fire drake, or whether it is an entirely new species. Legend has it that these highly aggressive dragons did not originate from here, but from the south near the Cœunettian Isles, or perhaps from faraway lands east of the Mountains of Vanity. Those little-explored eastern lands…
"…dangerous dragons and dangerous barbaric tribes…
"…although smaller in size compared to other fully-grown common fire drakes, they appear to be much more intelligent and cunning…
"…they spit out bright-blue fireballs with deadly results. Their flames are of a bright and fiery blue. Occasionally, their dark blue skin glows to an eerie blue. And in a similar fashion to common fire drakes, a blue fire drake has the uncanny ability to set itself on fire…
"…the battle was thought to have been won until the blue fire drakes came…
"…a blue fire drake along with many other dragons once completely destroyed the Towers of Vee and Ell…
"…indeed a variant of the common drake although some, like the Cœunettians, still disagree on this matter…
"…It was rumoured that a blue fire drake was responsible for the death of Princess Âgélia…
"…There have been countless attempts to eliminate these despicable reptiles from the land for good. One such attempt that failed was…
"…most successfully attempt is called the Blue Extermination Program. Eggs that could have resembled common fire drakes were found in the Blue Caves, except that they were glowing blue…
"…Since then, the number of blue fire drakes had drastically decreased. It was thought by most that this rare variant had been extinct for decades until a blue fire drake…
"…this particular fire drake was thought to be the last one for a number of reasons. However,…
"…can also be called the Dragon of Revenge…
"…Never engage any blue fire drakes directly. Your only hope is to hide, and pray that you are not in its line of revenge. »

Revenge…

…V…
…V…
The word kept ringing in my head as I said goodbye to Garend and left for home.

—‹‹››—

My family and I, and the rest of the villagers, scrambled to put out the fires left by an army of Two-Headed dragons. We were in luck, as most of the fields were untouched, only the wooden houses were burnt to the ground. Fortunately, we lost only a few cattle and the barn was intact. Soon the fires were all extinguished.

But before I could escape through the door of the house for a real refresh indoors…

« It’s time, son… »

That was my father. He stood tall and serious, without so much of a gesture of hands. And uh oh, he had just addressed me as son. *Something big is up, something serious is up* ranged in my head. Going slowly backwards and away from the main door, I asked timidly, « …Time for what ? ». This was most probably going to go bad for me, although it may be for my own good. Sigh.

« This ». The swordsman with his simple-looking helmet on continued, « Sword training ». He drew out his sword. « Officially. »

Noticing that he also had in one hand my drab-looking helmet, I stopped myself from shuddering with my eyes looking away slowly. *Worse than I thought… uh oh…*

« Rodène, you need to start this *sometime*. May as well start it *now* », he stated. « And you’re already twelve years ol— »

« Not now… Dad », I said weakly, with a little fear of him probably knowing how many times I had postponed this. « I… I n-need to res— »

« Do you have anything *else* far more important than learning how to protect your own *life* ? », went a firm sharp voice.

Oh, I shouldn’t have interrupted. « N-no… » went my weak reply. I had always thought Dad was scary. But sometimes, he was… would be scarier than a dragon. Okay, maybe that was an exaggera—

« Good. Let’s start. With — »

« The metal *sword* !? ». I fearfully pointed at that scarily-sharp long object that seemed ready to stab the damp, cold earth.

The tall man rolled his eyes. « No, let’s start by feeling the *real* thing, then we train with *wooden* ones ». He had sternly emphasised the word *wooden*, leaning scarily close to me.

Yes, wooden, but… time for pain. Wonderful.

Then he said with a frustrated sigh, « And for the last time, it’s *sword*, not *swwadd* ! It’s time to learn to use a sword properly as well as say the word properly ! »

After an awkward, tense procedure of us preparing — mentally for my part — for our first formal weapon-and-self-defence training…
« Now follow after me. »

The experienced swordsman drew his sword from his scabbard (or holder for sword) with his right hand, followed by me.

« One ». He swung his metal sword from the left.

« One ». I swung my wooden sword from the left.

« Two ». He swung his metal sword from the right.

« Two... ». I swung my wooden sword from the right quite clumsily. And I felt so dumb wearing a dumb-looking helmet…

« Wait. No, it’s like this », said Dad. He guided my hand and repeated, « Two… ». He dramatically raised his handle so that the tip of the sword was pointing downwards at an angle.

« Two… » I said, trying my best to follow him exactly, but failed. I felt that wearing that odd thingy made me look like a brainless soldier, robbed of personality, and only controlled by the orders of his superiors. If anyone saw me, I would feel very embarrassed…

« Okay, never mind. Now three… ». He positioned his sword vertically in front of his face.

« Three ! ». I swung my wooden my sword too fast and….

[CloOnk !] The wooden sword hit me squarely on the forehead and helmet. I heard my father’s booming laughter.


If there was one thing I was weak in, it was this : I was always too sensitive to what anyone else said or thought about me. And with Dad laughing at me, it was far more hurting.

The rest of the training did not go particularly well. I did more ‹stupid suicidal› moves unintentionally. And each time I would either be laughed at or criticised. What were the moves ? If you insist, they were :

I swung my sword around, but the sword flew away. Stupid slippery handle.

I kept fumbling with my helmet, inwardly complaining about how ridiculous it probably looked on me. Then I tried to draw my sword, only to realise that it wasn’t there.

After swinging my sword, I tried to put it back into the sheath, but my sheath was attached to my other side.

I drew my sword out dramatically and then put it back into its sheath also dramatically ; yes, but dangerously too. (I nearly stabbed my left arm.)

I accidentally stuck my sword into the ground and I couldn’t pull it out.

I couldn’t copy his moves properly while I was told ‹a normal person would be able to copy these simple moves perfectly›. So therefore, I wasn’t normal…?

I made three not-bad moves, but the fourth one managed to hit me back somehow.
I thought I did all the moves correctly; until I tripped and fell just beside my sword.

My father was disappointed.

And then I started crying, and he got more disappointed.

And then when we got back in the house, my mother came along and comforted me, and the look on his face was of disapproval.

« I think you are too difficult on him », she said.

Dad looked at Mom, who was wrapping her hands over my skinny frame.

« Really… », he said unbelievably. « As if Rod needs those womanly touches now… »

« Oui, he needs it now, you cannot see that ? », she said firmly, a slight tone of anger in her voice.

The towering Viking man sighed and shook his head slowly. « As a young lad, I used to be that skinny and I never needed all that that pampering stuff. »

« But he, he’s not you… and you, you are not him…! »

« Rod […] », my father said something to me directly. His black eyes stern; his voice firm. My mind was suddenly jerked away from trying to understand whatever they were saying. Wait, I didn’t fully catch what Dad had just said! {panicking} Except for room. His index finger pointed to my room and I understood.

My hands pushing away my mother’s in a manner more roughly than I would like, I quickly stumbled towards my little bedroom. I felt invisible arrows of fire shooting into my back because I knew they were both staring at me. I swiftly closed the door behind me and immediately pressed my ear against the rough wooden door. Their voices were difficult to hear. My father grumbled something like:

« […]s too timid […] one time… couldn’t even k[…] tiny terror. »

I guessed he was talking about that incident. A tiny terror is still a scary dragon, okay ?!

« […] steali[…] bread […] best swordsman in my… […]rk… killing dragons[…] […] everyth[…] arou[…]there ! Now […]ately… […]is peaceful land […] hi[…] SOFT ! »

« Sh… […]uiet ! …might hear you… »

That was Mom, with her softer Cœunettian accent that was always very distinguishable. And I heard some incomprehensible whispering.

Then I heard Mom distinctively said, « Maybe he, he has a different talent ». 

One of them now seemed to be going out of the house, in a manner definitely rougher and noisier than usual.

Several minutes later…

I was lying sideways on my bed, a pillow covering my face. Disappointed. Defeated.

« Rodêne…? »
That was the soft voice of my mother’s. But I buried my face deeper into my pillow.

« I’m—I’m useless », I muttered while she approached me nearer.

Mom sat down on my bed beside me on my left and said, with her voice continuing the calm tone from just now : « Shh… Rodène… You are not useless. You are just different. It is okay, you see ? He is just frustrated ».

Different. {sigh} Different useless.

« What about the part where he used to be somewhere else ? », I suddenly spat out, with me still facing away to the pillow.

There was a sudden jab of silence and I thought I heard an opening and closing of her mouth.

« You… were eavesdropping just now ? »

Instead of answering her directly I sat up straight and asked not daring to look at her, « Where was my father actually born ? Am I more than just a despised foreign Cœunettian ? ».

The golden-haired lady turned away her head and said, « Sorry, I cannot tell you ». She abruptly brushed away the topic and switched it to that of food by saying, « Why not you eat this ? », and she proceeded to feed me a slice of bread, and soup, which used to give me comfort but now it only served to give me memories of my sickly years during early childhood.

I pushed her hand from reaching my mouth.

« Allez, ne sois pas comme ça… |Come on, don’t be like that…|»

« No ». I ignored her offer of lingonberry jam toast, despite that being my favourite, and blasted off.

« Rodène ! »

« I don’t want to eat it, okay ?! »

« Reviens ! |Come back !| »

…

I was walking outside my house with my arms behind my back. « So I’m a half-Cœunettian who doesn’t really speak Cœunettian, and now Dad may not even be a Lelondell at all ?? », I muttered to myself, « So in that case, I’m not a Lelondell at all ; I’m a total foreigner ».

Wait, ‹myself› ? I thought there was nobody around until I noticed two-pairs of blue and hazel eyes were staring right at me. Of all people ! They were Nillie and Illy. Oh no. Already defeated, I waited for them to walk nearer towards me.

Eyes shifting awkwardly here and there I started to question them, « You just now… err… Did you hear anything ? ». My tone was both annoyed and timid at the same time.

« No… You’re funny, Rodène », the brown-haired Illy said, giggling away. Nillie looked away, her blue eyes shifting around playfully.

Yep, they definitely heard that. And by ‹funny› she meant ‹stupid›. And that was not a
compliment at all. The gossiping girls had struck again — at Mr Unpopular. *Just great... Hope that the damage won’t be too bad* was all that my mind could think of.

Author’s note :
[3 January 2019]
[13 May 2019]

❖ This is a work of fanfiction. Full DISCLAIMER on the first chapter.

❖ **Thustle**’s name is pronounced as « 'θʌs(ə)l », as in « castle ».

*thahss-ul*

❖ **Jessyllka**’s name is pronounced with the English « j » sound, or for some Lelondells, a French « j » sound ; never the Icelandic/Norwegian « y » sound. The middle syllable in her name is stressed.
Jessyllka pronounces her name with pronunciation n°1, so it’s « Jessyllka ».

Unlike Jessyllka’s name, the common name « Jessica » is pronounced with the stress on the first syllable, and the middle syllable unstressed with no « l » sound : « jess-see-kuh »

(Try saying « Jessyllka » with an English, American, French, or even Swedish accent and upload your pronunciation on the free audio dictionary Forvo.com !)

The French « j » sound does not sound like the first letter of the English word « joy ». Instead, it is found in the word « measure ».

I have changed some of the actual facts of the Vikings having four classes of people.

Here’s an image of a tiny terror dragon.

Pronunciation of « Cœunette »
This name looks complicated, with the « odd » ligature of O + E). You might want to listen to the French audio pronunciation in Google Translate. But it is actually very easy to pronounce. The « œu » part makes a single vowel sound (uh). The whole name roughly sounds like the word « connect » without the « k » sound. You just substitute the « nect » part with « net ».
kuh-net
œu-nètt(e)
kœ.nɛt (IPA symbols)

A written text read aloud, seen, or read silently by the characters in the story is often italicised, displayed in quotation marks (if read aloud), or aligned in the center, sometimes in all caps.

Rodène pronounces the word « sword » like this :
« swɔd » (with an incorrect « w » sound like in the word « swift »). Lastern correctly says it as « sɔrd » (without the « w » sound).

« oui » in French means « yes ». It is pronounced « wee ». 

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« oui » in French means « yes ». It is pronounced « wee ».
« non » in French means « no ». It is pronounced « nɔ̃ » with a nasal vowel sound and a silent last letter « n ».
Author’s note:

[31 Dec 2018]
[13 May 2019]

★ This is a work of fanfiction.

★ If you notice, things are looking pretty down for Rodène ; that’s why I’m going to give you this chapter. Let the rollercoaster rides begin!

A big gaping hole on Mr Whean’s house roof was the handiwork of spiky sadders — the aftermath of another dragon attack. Dad was on a ladder fixing it, while I was helping to get rid of dozens of the deadly spines left by the sadders. (One nearly pricked my finger). We were working diligently
from early morning. After some time, the roof was completely repaired, and it was my day off. I was now thirteen years old.

The first thought that I had was to immediately set off for Garend’s, and to take my lunch with me. Unfortunately for me, the four gangsters were already waiting for me. Again. They halted me on the way somewhere on the grassy plains near the Market.

« Heh-heh heh... », Kindt chuckled evilly as he stood tall and menacingly before me, his arms crossed. « Where’s our lousy little half-blood running off to ? »

« It better not be the bookworm’s cave », said Nork.

« Of course he’s going to the Gary the sissy », said Malcost.

My bag of boiled veggies and two slices of bread was snatched… by Thustle. He yelled out loud, « Now who’s hungry ? I sure am ».

« Hey ! But that’s my brunch ! », I cried.

Malcost smirked darkly as he blocked me from reaching for it. « Now it’s ours », he said. Then began a ‹game› of them tossing the bag to each other and me stumbling around in vain to catch it. Not this stale, old, ‹*Don’t let the dragon catch the egg*› game again.

« Can you give it back !? », I asked loudly. « Give it back now… » I said, exhausted with hands on both knees.

Nork laughed loudly. « I’m more younger than him and he’s weaker than me ! », he yelled.

« You and your redundant words, again. It’s supposed to be just ‹I’m younger›, Nork. Why can’t you — », said Malcost who immediately got cut off by his equally spiteful brother.

Thustle came closer to me, his smelly mouth uncomfortably close to me. « Hmm… You seem like a nice kid », he said with fake sympathy. « Now, tell you what, you’ll get half of it back if you… bow down before me, you bloody Cœunettian cat. After all, we Lelondells are superior ! Oh wait, you’re actually a half-Cœunettian. Details, details. »

« Bow down to me too, cat ! » yelled Malcost.

« Hah ha ! » laughed Kindt.

« Wait, bow ? », I asked dumbly in disbelief. « But… »

They all burst out into more taunting and laughter. I was speechless that they could go so low to force this self-disrespect on me as a person. *Is this the meaning of discrimination ?* Hoping that they were secretly joking, I distrusted my ears and tried not to take it literally. Unluckily for me, it had been confirmed a few weeks ago that my father was indeed *not* from Lelondell originally, but from a far unknown land that he absolutely refused me tell more about. Thanks to Illy and Nillie gossiping all over in our small little Lelondish kingdom, eventually Thustle knew about it.

*And are Cœunettians really that hated in Lelondell ?*

I found it hard to even assume that they deserved this level of scorn. Oh wait. We had fought wars with them before.

Brushing passed their hands ; I barely escaped as I ran as fast as I can. They tore madly after
me across the overgrown grasses and weeds. And ugh, I couldn’t help but have flashes in my mind of how the girls could have gossiped around the Market:

“Say, you know what? That odd boy Rodène Statenson from the dairy farms could probably be a complete foreigner in disguise! And we’re not talking about his Ceunettian roots! He was talking to himself and we happened to hear it of course and...”

So typical. Panting heavily, I reached the paved roads. Suddenly the boys disappeared. Apparently, they have spied Laurem, the elder brother of Garend. He seemed to be carrying something... oh, two buckets from the Well of Eau. Quite afraid of him too, I forced my always-aching legs to painfully run all the way across the paved roads to the direction of my parents’ barn.

—◊—

“Some day off”, I muttered sulkily as I slowly turned away from my closed bedroom door. This was getting more and more depressing. I couldn’t even fight them. How lousy. These incidents had been slowly tearing me apart for years. And being a "foreigner" was not doing any justice to my already low self-esteem.

“Why did my dad hide this fact from me?”, my parched lips muttered with confusion and anger as I lay face down onto my bed to ramble over my angry thoughts... “Was it probably to protect me from the scorn these stupid Lelondells have for people who simply had different backgrounds?”

Still lying on my bed with my dirty boots on, I had been speaking away my thoughts with myself for some time, brainstorming on how to outsmart the gangsters, as their bullying was becoming more and more unbearable. (Yes, I called them gangsters because they ganged up on me.)

The boredom eventually made me give up and I went outside to around the back of the house. My eyes hurt slightly with the bright sunshine shining down, and something was moving just across the paved road. Wait, what? Something liked a medium-brown dress... that quickly hid behind a tree.

Wait, isn’t she that mysterious girl that I saw in the Market a long time ago? Oh, I can’t believe it; even a girl’s playing tricks on me. Me, being spied upon! This is... actually going to be fun. Heh.

“If I can’t outsmart anyone, at least I can outsmart that one”, I whispered determinedly to myself, feeling an uncontrollable smile creeping on my face. Maybe I could surprise her and say ‘Boo! There you are!’ or something. I started to walk stealthily across the road to follow her and... my clumsy footsteps were making me like an overweight ronkie dragon chasing a rabbit. Clik, clok, clik, clok, then [thud!] went my stiff boot against an upturned stone. Urgh. Now she had seen me and there she went, running away. All right, time for Plan B: chase after her.

“I didn’t think she could move so fast...”, I exclaimed while panting as I chased her with heavy and noisy footsteps, zigzagging all over between the wooden houses of the village.

I came to some sort of crossroad and stopped, eyes searching around for her, who had suddenly disappeared. “…and so silently…”, I said breathlessly. I saw a fleeting glimpse of her.

“Huh? Straight, left, or right? Oh there!”

This is getting a bit frustrating!
She was already off into the distance where the Market was.

She’s slippery…!

Not that I couldn’t run fast enough. She was just too smart and cunning, like her going around behind me out of nowhere. That swiftly running girl was now in the direction of my parent’s dairy farm.

Aha! Time to —

My foot tripped over something. My body fell forward and missed bumping into someone by two inches; I ended up crashing into some wooden barrels stacked against a wall.

«Hey! Watch where you are going!», grumbled the Viking man who I had just avoided colliding into. And he had a stormy attitude. «You’re so clumsy that even four dragons can always spot your whereabouts! Kids these days! Terrible…!»

«S–ssorry sir…[pant][pant]I—I am — I admit that I can be quite clumsy», I shamefully apologized, my eyes looking downwards at my messed-up painful legs.

«Hnmphf!», The bearded man stormed off with a muttering of some rather hurtful phrases such as kids being noisier and lousier, undisciplined…et cetera.

Thoroughly exhausted and quite upset, I got up and rubbed my sore shoulder. «Stupid shoe», I grumbled to myself. I kept tripping over stuff. Whatever was wrong with me? It was as if my very own black boots couldn’t agree with me. «As if they couldn’t fit me!», I complained out loud.

Then a candle lit up. «Wait, that’s it!»

At the smithy…

«Err, excuse me Mr Stonberg, uh… can you… I—I was wondering if… you can help me with…», I began nervously, eyeing around and seeing that it was really messy everywhere.

«Just say it», said the impatient blacksmith bluntly after a dull clank of his hammer.

«Shoes. Can you please teach… or err…?»

«Can’t you ever say a proper sentence!?»

«Shoe sh–show me…how to make shoes… I mean… for myself?». My eyes were shifting around shyly, avoiding the fierce man’s gaze.

«What kind of shoes? Yours aren’t good enough?», the grey-bearded man asked suspiciously.

«Mine isn’t good enough. Aren’t good enough. Surely you can, you know, err… make excellent shoes that are… as silent as they are strong?»

I thought I saw the ever-grumpy man actually smiled a little. He pushed aside his hammer. «You mean my soft-soled shoes? Ha! Of course, Rodène!»

So, for the next few moments, he taught me step-by-step how to make a leather brown shoe that was strong, tough, lightweight, comfortable, and most importantly of all — stealthy.

The end result? A handsome pair of sturdy, dark brown leather shoes, with simple and clean
masculine lines held together with an unfussy lace fastening, and with a high heel cap that made
them look like boots.

I tried them on immediately and felt very pleased with it. Until Mr Stonberg told me that my
feet would eventually « grow out of them in no time ».

Great. Just great.

...

The idea to start practicing my «stealth-walking» first was pushed aside when I spied a certain
mischievous black-haired boy in the distance. So Malcost was at my favourite spot in Fallen Rocks
just across the grassy plains near Mr Stonberg’s. With a hint of angry determination, I thought out
loud : *Forget about the testing procedure, it’s time to get my brunch back !* I still had not properly
eaten my afternoon meal, ever since the gangsters stole it just before noon.

I walked silently, finding my new footwear much better in this regard, and crept up behind
Malcost. He was sitting on a rock. I heard him say something like : « I hate these […] veggies…
should give them to my silly useless brother ».

Good. So, he hadn’t touched my delicious vegetables yet. Suddenly I sprang forward, snatched
the bag out of his hand and darted off. I heard his voice behind me yelling for Thustle.

« Now ! Time to play catch the cat », I said to myself.

In an experimental attempt to imitate how that slippery girl outsmarted me earlier, I ran
stealthily all over the village. Thustle and Malcost tumbled after me. I zigzagged here and there,
and went behind them by attempting a sly — and sharp — «V-turn» — which was a term just
created by me, of course. While they probably thought that I had gone straight to the Market, I hid
behind trees, corners, and stuff until I reached my home. Ha ! *A cat is sneaky and fast, so thanks
for calling me that.* Moments later, I heard the two boys cursing outside, from the window of my
room. Wow, who taught them all that language ? How terrible, disgusting. How undignified for a
nobleman’s son to stain his mouth like that.

« Ah, let’s forget about them », I said and finally sat down onto my bed to enjoy my delicious
meal of those delicious vegetables my mother had cooked.

I felt a new surge of confidence, and I had been missing feeling something positive for some
time.

« À table ! », Mom called from outside my door.

Lunch time ? Good. Now, it was…

« …even better. »

———–———

One sun-lit cool day…

Walking on the paved brick road that was parallel to and in-between the village and the Palace,
I headed to Garend’s library while taking a little scenic detour with trees and… Err, actually…
Garend’s *home*. His home was *in* the Library, not the other way around.

Suddenly I spied Malcost and Nork scrambling to hide behind a tree. Obviously, they were up
to no good. Trying a new way to trick them, I pretended to walk noisily towards them, and then I tiptoed silently away into another direction for a little while. I then continued walking along the road and further away from the direction of my home until it was out of sight, and I skipped stealthily northwards.

A large vegetable farm was approaching towards me as I walked around aimlessly, and then I stopped abruptly. Hmm... I had rarely been in this part of the island. « Forget about rarely », I said to myself. « I’ve obviously never been here before. »

As I didn’t want to enter the farm, I walked past it, gradually losing my quite poor sense of direction. « This place is... really very beautiful ! ...with vegetable crops, and plants, and trees, and flowers, and... and... ».

And I realized that I was talking quite loudly to myself as I examined the colour-rich scenery around me.

« Hi. »

That one single word stopped me flat. A sudden spark of curiosity made me turn around and hunt for the location of a shy, feminine voice.

A brown-eyed girl stood in front of me. She wore a light brown blouse under a dark brown coat that extended a long way down, and a dark brown long skirt that covered her waist all the way to her socks. And her hair was brown... with a hint of blonde or red. Hmm... Everything brown — except her shoulder sleeves that were in a shade of —

I just found out that we had both been staring directly at each other. She shyly looked away and I awkwardly turned my head away while fiddling with my dark hair.

« Sorry... I... err... », I began very nervously. With my eyes glancing around unconfidently and my head down slightly, I continued, « I’m sorry, it’s just that you’re—I mean... this place... this whole place is really very—err... nice... ? ». I mentally slapped myself. Hopefully she didn’t get that I nearly told her that she looked beautiful.

Unfortunately, it looked like she got that. She seemed to suppress a giggle, and she smiled shyly instead. That sweet smile...

Mustering all of my courage (if I even had any), I tried to introduce myself. « I—I’m Rodène... Can you... I mean... », I paused, stretched out my hand and said quickly, « I—I want to be your friend ». Urrgh. As usual, what a horrible introduction. Probably the worst ever.

She continued to smile while saying one word. Or two.

Then she bolted off. Again. And I didn’t even get what she said. Yes, again.

*Girls are so weird.*

My legs feeling stiff from not moving, I had been standing for a little while. Then my curiosity again getting the better of me, I decided to follow that walking — or running — «Miss Mystery».

« Psst ! Follow me ! Quick ! » a voice suddenly whispered loudly.

« Where are you — Oh ! ». She seemed to be hiding behind some bushes. I went after her a little noisily, but she shushed me.
« Shhh ! »

And that was quickly followed by her beckoning to me. I propelled myself to tumble along after her. We moved quickly and silently between some small trees until we reached what I thought looked like a little garden.

Oh, it’s not a little garden at all ! It is amaz—

« Quick ! » she whispered, and gestured after me again. « Hide… over here ! » We went behind a large wooden wall that suddenly stood out of the green, and leaned against it, panting slightly.

The girl turned around and peeped into a hole in the wall and muttered breathlessly, « We’re now [pant] we’re now a safe distance from him ».

« Who’s ‹ him › ? », I asked her curiously.

« Guess who », she replied.

« Err… Thustle ? »

« Yup », she nodded. « Thustle. »

« Oh, the bully… He’s a real bully… One time he take my… took my — » I started.

« Lunch, I know », she interrupted. « I know the four always gang up on you ; and Garend too. »

« Huh ? What ?! », I exclaimed. « And you know Garend ? »

« Yes I do. »

With wide open eyes, I stared at her confident expression. She looked like a little bright girl smarter than me. Either that or I was too dumb and ignorant to explore around the island kingdom.

And I didn’t even know her name. « Uh… just now I… I was too… » I began shyly and stopped halfway, unsure on how to continue. Patiently waiting for me to say something, she stared right into my eyes. Nervous, nervous.

In the end, she asked softly, « Go on, what are you trying to tell me ? ». Wow. Her question had a sort of sing-song ring to it.

« I did not get your name just now sorry », I voiced out a quick reply that had been prepared carefully in my mind.

« Oh, I’m terribly sorry about just now », she apologised politely. « I’m […] », she re-introduced herself.

« Keuh-dee-lah…? », I asked in a soft polite voice. Outwardly I tried to appear calm, but inwardly, I was getting a bit frustrated at my inability to catch her name.

She shook her head. « No, kuh-dil-luh. »

« Kuh-deell-luh, right ? », I say slowly, making sure I grasp the sounds properly.

« Yes, that’s my name », she said, with a faint shy smile that seemed a bit suppressed. Apparently, her way of speaking was different from the people I knew.
Looking closely at the wall, I mindlessly touched its rough wooden surface with my index finger. So… *Kedila*. *What an interesting name. Still, I think something’s off*. My fingers pinched a tiny splinter of wood, and I pushed myself to ask another question:

« May I… err… Can I know the spelling of your name ? ». The little piece of wood dropped from my fingers and landed silently onto the green and grassy forest floor. I turned to look at the girl, expecting her to be a little surprised by my probably clumsy question.

But she wasn’t surprised at all and started to spell out her name, *« C–A–D– […]? […] »*

*Argh*, it was too quick for me and I *still* didn’t get her name.

« Err… sorry but can you… spell again slower ? », I asked, getting afraid of her being impatient with me.

Instead of rolling her eyes like I expected she said, « Maybe I was too quick. It’s C… A… D… I… L–L–A ».


« Yup, you got it », the girl said casually.

« Hmm… Double ‹L›’s »; I muttered to myself. *So… instead of a ‹K›, it’s a ‹C› in front*… I stood there still pondering over her name. *Cadilla* sounded softer with an elegant letter in front. It reminded me of something but I simply couldn’t form the thought in my head. *Funny* how a different spelling of the same name seemed to convey a different feeling…

« And you are ? », she continued in a friendly tone, interrupting my chain of thoughts, and making me feel really silly for muttering and pondering to myself in front of someone.

Somewhat copying a bit of her style, I said with a smile, « I’m Rodêne… Statenson ».

She blinked her eyes. « Ho-denn ? »

« No, Rodêne », I said slowly, suddenly growing afraid of what she would think of me being a half-Cœunettian having a Cœunettian name.

« Ro–dên…? », she said slowly. Surprisingly, unlike most Lelondells, she managed to pronounce that sometimes beautiful, sometimes harsh-sounding guttural sound that happened to be in my Cœunettian name that my mom had given me — much to the annoyance of my dad who preferred the name ‹Roden› with a different R sound. Or even ‹Rognar› which would be… eww.

I nodded and smiled at her. She smiled back.

*{smiling} It’s a pleasure meeting you… Rodêne ».*

« I… err… pleasure ? », I asked in an awkward manner. So… *this* was another way to introduce yourself, other than boring old ‹Delighted›. And unlike some people, she really seemed to mean it when she said it.

« No offence, but why are you stammering ? », asked Cadilla. Okay… The way she spoke Norse was so *perfect*; it didn’t even have a hint of an accent at all.

« I… stammering ? I don’t understand…? ».  

*Great, this is getting embarrassing. Now there’s a communication barrier.*
Then suddenly I realised another embarrassing fact. She was actually slightly _taller_ than me. I thought my shoulders started to feel as though there were weaker than usual. « Excuse me », I began a little (_too ?_) politely and slightly nervously and asked quickly : « May I know... how old you are exactly ? ».

« Guess ». She walked away from the wooden wall and deeper into the splendidly beautiful forest.

*What ?* Guess again ? Okay fine.

Knowing that my timid voice could not travel too far a distance, I walked nearer towards her and answered a little unsurely, « Err… twelve ? ».

« Close », she simply stated in a slightly coolly manner, her eyes focused on something else.

« Um... fourteen ? »

« Nope. »

« Eleven ? », I guessed again.

The girl turned around and raised her voice playfully, « _Hey_ , I’m not _that_ young ! ».

« Oh… sorry. I’m a… you know… I’m a terrible guesser… who is… terrible at guessing ». I said, with my eyes away, also looking around the colourful natural scenery, but in a slightly nervous manner.

« I’m actually thirteen. »

« What !? ». A little ashamed of myself, I sighed and said in a slightly comical manner, « This is terrible. I’m also twelve, err no, _thirteen_ years old and I’m… much much shorter than you ».

« Yes, you’re one head shorter… », she said and she covered her mouth and went giggling childishy, while I tried to laugh along — although awkwardly — adding :

« One year shorter, maybe…? »

« Cadilla !… CADILLA ! », a lady’s voice could be heard calling from quite a distance.

« Oh, that’s my mother… I better g— »

« Hey–err… Cay… I mean, Cadilla, can I meet your parents ? » I asked excitedly, cutting her off.

« No ! ». The girl looked downwards, followed by a weak « …I mean… perhaps… maybe… ». Then not a word after that.

« I err... anything wrong…? », I asked timidly, concerned over her sudden change in mood. « Are you—are you okay ? ». For the first time, she looked much more nervous than I was.

« Nothing… I… I’ll tell you tomorrow », she paused, and said, « Meet me at that wooden wall after lunch ».

« Err… It’s a pleasure meeting you… Cadilla. »

And we both darted off in different directions.
My mother, sitting beside me, frowned at me. I was rushing over my breakfast at the family table, of course she was frowning. My father was munching on his sandwich quietly, his eyes looking downwards as if deep in thought. (If he did look upwards, he would look straight ahead to where the front door was). Ever since he and I argued over the revelation of him being a stranger in the land, he was sort of being like that.

« Mind your table manners, Rodène. Why is it that you seem to be in a hurry today? », asked Mom, in a voice both firm and suspicious.

« Err—nothing, I just [chomp] [gobble] I’m just excited about today. »

« Oh really? » she said still suspiciously, but with a playful tone and a slight tilt of the head.

« Yeah… ». I attempted to control myself from rudely gobbling up my toast, lingonberry jam dripping from the sides. The last thing I want was a scolding/nagging from the prim-and-proper golden-blonde lady, who, for some reason, was not wearing her striking blue headdress now.

Upon finishing my mug of milk impatiently, I bolted off for the door, yelling, « Bye Mom!… Dad! »

Mom allowed me to go without my barn chores today, which I was very glad about, and I set off for The Garden/Forest. Taking my usual cheese sandwiches and veggies with me, I intended to have lunch together with Cadilla. I ran along the paved roads, past the vegetable farms, and all the way through the green foliage, never stopping until I saw ‹The Wooden Wall› (yes, that’s what I named it) in the distance. Smiling a little, I silently went closer and closer to the right of the Wall. I then quickly went behind it to find… nothing.

« It’s nice of you to show up. »

Looking around revealed Cadilla behind me. Apparently, she already knew I was coming and she had hidden herself. Surprised, I asked her, « How did you know that I was coming? ».

She smirked and said: « That wall has eyes, you see ».

« Huh? »

« It has a peephole, silly », she teased, giggling at my dumbness. Normally I would be embarrassed, but I wasn’t upset one bit. I looked away and smiled shyly.

« You really need to teach me all about… your Art of Stealth », I remarked with a hint of cheekiness.

« My Art of Stealth? ». She raised an eyebrow, then seemed to notice that I was holding a bag.

« Yeah… err… anyway, I brought something for us… ». I raised my bag of lunch — or lunch bag — and walked nearer to a small, flat-topped rock.

She walked towards me. « Is that what you’ve brought? », she asked, pointing at the bag. « Can I see it? »

« Yeah… ». I simply liked the way she asked questions, stressing certain parts of words, making
the whole sentence sounding up-and-down. It was unlike the typical way where I rushed over a sentence and clumped strings of words into groups.

I sat down on the flat-topped rock. Opening my bag of lunch revealed a vegetarian blue cheese sandwich neatly cut in half. I looked at her and with a little shy smile I asked, « Can we…? Let’s share it…? ».

« No », said Cadilla suddenly. « Please, Rodène. I can’t. I’m afraid I’d be unfair, for me to take food from you. »

I was taken aback. « W–why ? »

« Because, because… » she started. The girl walked further between the trees, gesturing me to follow her.

Surprised and curious, I followed Cadilla until… we reached a vegetable farm. Hmmm…That looked like the same vegetable farm that I had passed by just now.

« So you’re… »

She did not wait for me to finish and instead grabbed my wrist to walk back into the heavy foliage. We walked until we reached a clearing, and a magnificent stone-and-wood building could be seen nearby, shaded slightly by the greenery.

Her finger pointed at the house. « That belongs to my parents… Kent and Cella… Fluh–strome. The Kettlons work for us around the house ». She dropped her arm. « Most of the farmers work for us. »

I was completely taken aback this time — literally. I took two steps backward in surprise, shock, and awe. So Cadilla was the daughter of one of the richest noblemen in Lelondell. Perhaps even the richest. She may as well be a princess for all I knew. Uh oh did I say anything wrong or impolite ? Too casual ? Oh no. She was probably disgusted by my clumsy way of speaking. Worse, what if she knew that I was actually not Lelondish at all ?

« Sorry, I–I didn’t know—I didn’t know who you are », I said fearfully, stumbling over my words and my grammar went out the window. I couldn’t believe it. No wonder she…

« Oh, don’t go away, please ». Her voice seemed to quiver. « Don’t be afraid of me. »

« I—I won’t », I said as firmly as I could. But I was nervous, and still trying catch up with my own emotions. « S–so y–you’re Miss Cadilla … Flerr—Flerrstrom–strome… », I stammered, with an uneasy, slight downward respectful tilt of my head.

She nodded her head and looked away. There was an invisible tense atmosphere… I could feel it.

« Don’t, Rodène. Just call me Cadilla ». She glanced at me. « I’m the one — I should have told you earlier ». Unsure how to react next, the girl looked down at the ground, her long strands of hair and her two long locks covering her face. We both stood in silence for a while, each not daring to look at each other’s eyes.

« So, all these… lands around here… », I clarified slowly, « They belong to you and your parents, right ? ». I gestured to the whole area.

« That is true… », she replied reluctantly, still with her hair, her orangey, reddish-brown hair,
covering her face.

*Now, should I tell her about my lack of Lelondishness, or what?*

Ah maybe later, or not at all. I desperately tried to change the subject by offering her a share of my lunch. « I think it’s lunchtime… Please—err… Cadilla. Please try some of my mother’s sandwiches… »

Not daring to meet my eyes, the girl said something even quieter than normal, something like: « No thanks… you may have it all. I can even hear your stomach growling by now ».

Oh no, she could hear that?

« Wait here… err… or hide if you wish… I’ll be right back », she said suddenly.

Hide? What did she mean by that?

« Um… Where’re you going? », I called out.

« Just enjoy your food! ». And she bolted off.

« How many times must she run off like that? », I muttered as my eyes followed the running girl. I went back to the rock that I had sat on earlier, completely puzzled.

—«POV shift»—

Cadilla ran towards the south wing of her house. She could guess how hard it was for the boy and his family to obtain their food. Possibly that was the reason why he was rather short and skinny. And he was offering her, a girl who could just laze around all day and yet have plenty of delicious food on the table, more than half of his own lunch? *Boys are so weird and silly. Especially that one.*

The little girl silently went around the corner to the rear part of her house. She crouched low behind the neat row of her favourite plants when she saw Alker ahead of her. That thirty-year-old man with the moustache was humming loudly as usual and he was wheeling a wheelbarrow to where the vegetable farms would be, in front of her house. Now, all that she needed to do was to wait for the man to go into the nearest farm; so that she could go around the north wing of the house and sneak into the shed.

—«POV shift»—

With a hesitant last bite of a lettuce, I finished my sandwich. Cadilla was still not back yet. What she was doing…? Feeling a little bored, I got up, stretched, and peeked at the surroundings of the forest.

« Magic… », I whispered. My eyes went up and down the tall trees of… now what were their names? « Birch? Beech? Uh… never mind », I muttered to myself. Never good at this stuff.

My ears picked up something rustling somewhere from the behind the trees. And then I saw the bright orange sleeves of a girl partially hidden by the greenery. Oh, it was Cadilla, dragging something to near where I was standing.

« Here, err… Rodêne. Please take this home », she began. She was glancing around in a nervous manner, and then she opened a sack.
I peeked into the sack to find peas, beans, cabbages, and onions.

« Wow ! » I exclaimed. « I mean, thanks. Err… are these from your parents ? », I asked. « I really want to thank them, you know—err, personally… yeah ? »

She suddenly seemed to hide a strong feeling, but all I could tell was that she was very afraid of something. I looked directly into her brown eyes… She was definitely hiding something. But what ?

And then it struck me that she may be stealing them from somewhere.

« Did you steal these ? », I asked her softly. She did not answer. « …Taking them without permission ? », I calmly continued my question. She appeared to answer but closed her mouth and looked downwards instead. What was she thinking ?

The girl, still looking downwards, finally admitted, « Yes… from my father, or Mr Kettlon… ».

With a hint of disappointment, I questioned her firmly, « Why are you doing this to me ? ». Cadilla, the rich girl, a thief ?

She looked as though guilt had overcome her. « I’m s—sorry, I just… I know that… you work quite hard for a living, so I — »

« So we need to put them back », I finished.

« Cadilla ! », an adult’s voice called. « Oh there you… aRE ? »

Cadilla and I stopped looking at each other and turned around. There was a nobleman, who looked over thirty years old, and he seemed surprised to see me. And he started to stare intently at the sack that I was holding.

All over inside me was trembling with fright as the tall man grabbed the sack and turned to face me directly. « Tell me boy, where did you get these vegetables ? ». His hazel eyes and his grey eyebrows were growing sterner as ever.

« I—I… ». I could not get my words out and instead gave a split-second glance at Cadilla, who looked as if she was about to cry.

I tilted my head towards to the ground with my hands clasped together nervously. « I—I — sorry, my lord. Forgi—I… we stole them from you… »

« We ? »

To see his reaction, my eyes looked up to his. His eyebrows had turned into surprised and suspicious ones.

« Yes, err… we ». I could have completely lied and put the blame on myself, but I wanted to teach that girl a lesson.

Cadilla appeared bewildered, standing as still as a branch. I looked at her, and she attempted to avoid my eyes, but then gave in and started staring.

« Cadilla », went a soft, firm voice from the man.
The girl kept staring at me, maybe even through me.

« Cadilla, look at me when I’m talking to you »,

The girl shook her head slightly as if she was just being brought back into the present, and she turned to look at the man.

« Is that true, Cadilla ? », he asked her.

« Y–yes… Father », she replied, then appeared to want to add something more, but stopped herself.

Realisation hit me senseless. « Father »? So that nobleman was indeed Cadilla’s father ?! I clamped my closed mouth tighter, while I dared to read the man’s facial expressions, but then I saw that he seemed to have relaxed his mood.

« For your honesty, you two can decide on your own punishment. »

I did not know what to reply to him. All over in my mind the possibilities circled. Then I blurted out : « Garden ».

« What ? », he sharply replied with seemingly annoyed eyebrows.

« I wish to ask your permission to help out in your… beautiful garden », I requested as politely as possible.

« O… kay ! That will be so », he agreed. « Cadilla would love to help you. It’s her garden, anyway ». The smartly dressed man then beamed at me unexpectedly and continued, « You can start today, or tomorrow ».

Nodding my head respectfully all along, I then forced out a timid, « Thank–you–ma–lord ».

« What’s your name, boy ? », he asked. So, he was becoming a little friendlier by now.

« Rodène… Statenson…? »

« Hmmm… Statenson… », went a deeper voice than just now. « Aren’t you the boy who works on one of the many dairy farms ? »

Weird, he seems to know me ? With a (failed) attempt to lighten up the mood, I replied with a very unsure and slow « Yee–e–yeah–ss…? ».

He smiled again, probably at my awkward attempt of a smile, and turned to face his daughter. « Next time ask my permission, Cadilla ». Then he left, taking the sack of vegetables with him.

I stared at Cadilla simply nodding her head stiffly as the figure of her father disappeared away into the shades of green.

My eyes turned away. I stretched my stiff body, breathing a loud sigh of relief. « That was… »

« Why… why did you lie for me ? », asked the girl on my left. She was still standing there not moving…

Her brown eyes were still wide with shock, and they appeared watery a bit. The incident seemed to be harsh on her. Only problem now was how to cheer her up. « You know actually, I didn’t completely lie, I said we, not you. »
« I was trying to help you but I… », she said weakly, « I’m a wretch… »

Now that was hard for me to handle. Normally, I was the emotional one who would say that, but now…

« You’re not a wretch », I stated softly.

« Yes I am… »

Okay, that didn’t work. I searched into my mind for something else. « Okay. You were », I said even more softly, « But let us get over this, can we? ». I offered her a handshake.

She shook my hand without saying a word.

Then I remembered something. Something that struck me just now.

« Does that garden really belong to you? » — my hand gestured over ahead — « It has so many beautiful flowers ». Hopefully this attempt would work. There were not many helpful ideas left in my mind.

« Yes, »

And just the word ‘flowers’ was enough to make her smile, it seemed.


Author’s note:

✶ Cadilla pronounces her name « kuh-deel-luh » [kəˈdɪlə].

Some may pronounce it « kuh-deel-lah » [kəˈdila], however.
« kay-deel-luh » [ˈketdilə] is a mispronunciation.

The middle syllable is stressed, similar to Jessyllka’s name.

Here’s an awesome picture of a forest that looks just like the forest where Rodène and Cadilla met in Lelondell.
My Google Drive link: Lelondish forest
Or you can search « Fenséges Erdő Háttérkép » on Google.

It’s probably a beech tree.
Fun Times

Author’s note:

[31 Dec 2018]
[13 May 2019]

The below instrumentals have been three of my musical inspirations for the whole of chapter 6, *Fun Times*, and for playful parts of other later chapters:


11 Secret Garden, *Forever Wild*, *Narada Collection Series (disc 1)* seems to picture Cadilla’s garden very well.

6. Fun Times
I smiled at Cadilla. I smiled to myself, finding myself suddenly in the company of a rich Lelondish girl in her beautiful, indescribable garden. Lord Flerrstrome’s punishment of ordering me to aid his daughter in accompanying her and caring for her garden suddenly felt like a gift. Here I was, face to face with a member of the upper class I feared and disliked, and she never showed me any signs of disrespecting me just because of my lowly place in society. She could have easily said mean things that others were so quick to point out about me, but she chose to see me as a...

Gardener boy?

Yeah, how funny.

« So Rodène, do you like gardening? »

Um… I froze, wondering why that this was the first thing she chose to say, instead of immediately telling me what to do. I couldn’t tell her that I did not really have an interest to gardening because I have never really thought about it, but…

Oh great. What should I say?

« Sorry, I… don’t know much about gardening, so I’m basically a gardening dummy ». I gave her a little laugh, hoping that I had not disappointed her.

She brought her hand to her lips and snickered. « It’s okay, I’ll teach you. »

« Okay. Tell me what to do, and I’ll do it », I said, and wondered why I said that. Not that I would mind being ordered around by such a beautiful girl.

« Oh you don’t have to be so formal with me. You wanted to befriend me, didn’t you? »

I turned my gaze sharply away from her gentle smile. I struggled to control the joy in my chest that was threatening to reveal itself in the form of an overly wide smile.

She’s being so nice to me already.

I turned to look at her again, and for some reason I gave her a cheeky smile. « Alright then I’ll try and loosen up a little. What’s your first task you have for me as your gardener boy? »

She rolled her eyes cutely, presenting herself as unamused when I could clearly see that she was.

« Weeds. Let’s get rid of these pesky little weeds ». The girl bent down and began to pull at a small little plant to the right of her soft-and-furry-looking dark purple boots. « You see, when you pull a weed out, you need to pull it completely out. »

« Including the root? », I asked. I tried to remember some basic tips that my father had taught me a long time ago.

« Yep. »

As we worked together, the backbreaking job of uprooting weeds became much easier, with twice the speed and half the effort. I watched intently as the patient Cadilla guided me, a beginner, step-by-step on which were weeds and which were not.

« Careful not to damage my plants while pulling the weeds », she said.
I wrote a note in my mind: *They are her beautiful plants that must never be damaged.* I remarked, « It’s like telling the difference between friend and… foe. The weeds are usually uglier-looking ».

« Ha ha! Well, you can say that. »

...

« So, these weeds… » I pointed at a box piled full of weeds. « …should we burn them later? »

« No, we’ll put them into the compost pile, so that they and their seeds with rot back into… », Cadilla explained and paused at the last part.


« Correct! Hey, I thought you said that you were a gardening dummy…? », she accused me cheekily with a quick jab of a finger in mid-air. « Turns out you’re ly–ing », she sang.

« No, I’m a gardening dummy compared… to you ». Oh, I simply liked the way how she spoke; it had a distinguishable accent. Mine was so dull and boring.

« Oh, now you’re teasing me, you naughty boy ». She pretended to feel upset and crossed her arms.

« Nope ». (I had copied her word). « It’s a compliment. »

« Ha–ha… » she replied dryly.

I then spied a spot of land crawling with weeds. « Oh–no… what to do with this one?… Uproot them one by one? That’s going be… going to take a while. »

« Nah, just get a shovel and shovel them up. »

« Mass destruction method… », I quipped, with both of my hands in a manner like an evil psycho maniac.

« Exactly! », said Cadilla with a laugh.

I never thought gardening was ever interesting, or even fun in the least. It was all just all about messing around with earth and dirt. Now, maybe it was even... amusing.

After some hard work, most of the weeds were now gone. I stretched myself, looking forward to Cadilla’s next ‘lesson’.


« Pruning the plants: my favourite part. »

« In other words, giving them a haircut », I quickly commented in a dry manner.

She suppressed a giggle. « Why must you make everything so silly!? You laugh more than you work, mister. »

« Actually I am the one joking, you are the one laughing! », I pointed out (imitating her quick jab-of-a-finger, with my own little twist on it).
Sitting at the square dining table indoors, with a teacup clutched in his fingers, Lord Fleurstrom thought he heard some children laughing and snickering. He got up from the chair and peeked out the window letting in the bright sunshine on his right nearby. No, they cannot be seen from the south wing here, he thought. He headed for the kitchen where the back door was.

Slowly opening the back door of the house a little, the nobleman peeked out and around at his cheerful garden. He gave an almost silent « Hmm ». Somehow that poor peasant boy was making his quiet Cadilla smile and laugh more than ever. Funny that she never seemed to enjoy the company of others. His attempts to get the girl to be more sociable only resulted in her running off all the time.

The gentleman shrugged his shoulders, closed the door, and headed back to the dining room.

« Wow ! » I exclaimed. « What kind of flower’s this ? ». I bent down to my left and faced a very short little plant loosely attached with flowers, flowers that looked like tiny white skirts having a bluish-purple tint.

« Oh, that’s a perennial herb : alpine milkvetch. »

« So soft… so purple », I observed, studying the gradual shift in colour of the flowers from white, to purple at the ends. And she said something about perry–perryniel… What’s it anyway ? Never mind. Too lazy to ask.

Standing slightly taller and steadier than me, she stated, « And by the way, purple’s my favourite colour ». 

« Really ? » I stood up. Sweeping my eyes around and locating the infinite number of purple dots, I said, « No wonder, I… see so much purple around. »

« Oh yes, but I also try to make my garden more colourful, by adding a little blue here, and a little red there… ». While she was saying that, Cadilla danced a little and gestured around. She skipped ahead, between the narrow, neat row of plants.

« Hmm, red… ». I turned to my right and looked down at a bush-like plant. « Like this one ? »

« Yeah. Cowberry », she replied without looking behind.

« What ? Cow ? » I asked, surprised. Smiling all away, I suppressed a sudden tingle inside. « Aww, now you’re insulting me » — I crossed my arms and pretended to be angry — « You do realise that I work at a dairy… on a dairy farm, right ? »

Cadilla simply gave me a cheeky smile. « Also known as lingonberry. And before you accuse me, I didn’t name them, okay ? »


That caused both of us to explode into laughter.

« Stop calling my flowers names ! »
“Stop calling my favourite jam a cow.”

“Stop making me laugh!”. But she burst out laughing again.

“Stop stopping me from laughing!», I teased back.

She walked a few steps away, struggling to compose herself. Weak and teary with laughter, the Lelondish girl desperately tried to look away from me… just to stop laughing.

« Mercy… Enough laughter… », she pleaded, with clasped hands. « I can hardly catch my breath. »

The way the girl clasped those hands was cute and funny at the same. My heart tickled a little. « All right, all right, all right… » I walked away too and tried to examine the other flowering plants. Well, other than Cowber… Urgh! I really should stop right now. My throat was already hoarse from laughter anyway.

Suddenly Cadilla’s father appeared out of nowhere and we both jerked our heads up nervously. But he gave a friendly smile and handed me the same sack of vegetables that Cadilla stole that day.

« You can have them boy. »

« I… err… Thank you my lord », I said, forcing myself to say a stiff polite phrase because I was so nervous.

« You may just call me Mr Flerrstrome. », said the man quickly and he walked away.

Cadilla broke a moment of silence by saying, « So apparently, my father was the one who rescued me from laughter. No thanks to you. And yet you get your reward. Hmmph! » She was still in a cheeky mood.

« I… ». That was all I said. I was still a bit shocked with the generous gift; and that Cadilla had completely got over the stealing-veggies incident. So, next time when she’s upset, say ‘flowers’, I reminded myself.

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Cadilla told me that the Flerrstromes’ house was located at the northern edge of the island, right at Milky Cliff. Like the front door of my house which was facing east to Milky Beach; their house was also facing east, and to where farmers worked in their vegetable farms. The south of her house would be a magically forested area that supported naturally occurring fruit trees all around. Why hadn’t I known all this before?

I simply… liked the way she would talk in her very melodic way of speaking then suddenly pronounce Lelondell and other Cœunettian words in a very Cœunettian sort of way, just like Mom. She made the languages sound so… magical. Her style and accent seemed to somewhat resemble more of the polished, upper classes of Lelondish society. (Well, not always, she usually talked quite casual when she was with me.) Anyway, it was different from the speaking style of my parents and the people I commonly knew around me since young.

My Norse accent? Definitely low to middle-class. Whenever I was with Cadilla with her saying the same words, my clumsy mispronunciations would suddenly become more apparent—and obvious. I was starting to make a bit of effort to improve my Norse ever since I met Cadilla, at least, more effort than last time. Since young I had been trying not to follow Mom’s constant mispronunciations—or ‘weird way of speaking’ like what Dad would say.
I found myself always looking forward to seeing Cadilla and her garden every day. She truly had a passion for all living things, especially beautiful ones. Not just flowers; but herbs, shrubs, and trees; and... err... even cute little sparrows. The problem was, I didn’t have much free time to go to Cadilla’s garden. When I was at the barn, I always had to juggle my boring chores and my free time.

One day, when we were busy getting ourselves lost in the lovely maze that was Cadilla’s garden...

« Um, Rodène can I ask you a question? », asked Cadilla out of a sudden.

« Sure...? »

« Do you speak Cœunettian? »

I froze, feeling anxious, still afraid that an upper-class member of society might look down on my foreign heritage. « What if I said yes? »

I did not except her to smile widely. Then her smile faltered. « You don’t speak Cœunettian? »

I sighed loudly and shook my head. « My mom came from Cœunette a long time ago. She occasionally speaks some Cœunettian words that I do understand; but due to my dad’s influence, I can’t pick up the language from her and so I can’t read or speak Cœunettian. »

I checked her reaction and all I got seemed to be of utter disappointment and none of disapproval or scorn.

« How... sad », she said, her words quiet.

« Do you... speak it? », I asked her, feeling hopeful that she might teach it to me.

« No... unfortunately I don’t », she replied very stiffly.

Looking quite unhappy, Cadilla walked away from me and out of my sight, as she had gone behind some flowering bushes neatly trimmed to form a particularly tall wall.

I approached her and positioned myself beside her shoulder, tentatively.

« I’m sorry to have brought this up », she said finally after a long period of silence. « Let’s talk about something else. Have you been to the little pond nearby? »

« You mean the Little Pond of Eau? »

« Yes, that pond », she said.

« No. I’ve never... I don’t remember being there. »

She gave me a look that could have said « I’m surprised that you’ve never been there. Are you kidding me? », and then she asked me with a smile, « Well then, shall we go there and explore a little? »

I felt bad as my answer would be a disappointing one again. « Sorry, Cadilla, but my parents want me at the barn today. I must say that it sounds interesting, though. »
“I can help you, you know”, the girl said quickly.

I looked at her with complete amazement. *She*, a nobleman’s daughter, voluntarily helping *me*, a common barn lad? How weird.

“But your father will —” I protested.

“She doesn’t care”, she softly interrupted. “As long as I am happy.”

So, her dad seemed to give his daughter quite a lot of freedom. Still, I put on a look of unconvinced suspicion. “Really”, I said dryly. “I’m not getting in trouble the second time for you.” I was firm, but I decided against crossing my arms.

“Yes, it’s true”, she said, her eyes appearing truthful. “But my mother, well, that’s another story.”

I thought I saw her not smiling so brilliantly anymore. With curiosity, I said, “I—can you…”

I paused for a long time. “…tell me the story, then?”

“Sorry, but I simply can’t tell you.” She paused for a long while, and finished with one word: “Secret…”

Judging by how unreluctant she appeared, with her boots even pointing away slightly, I decided not to push her further, at least not yet. After I finally agreed to let her visit my parents, we started to walk away from the Flerrstromes’ using a pathway not far from the Wooden Wall.

But out of a sudden, Cadilla who was ahead of me whispered frantically, “Oh no! Hide, run! It’s…Thustle!”

“Thustle!?” I exaggerated a gasp and brought my hand to cover my mouth. *That brute over here!?!* I panicked. “Oh great.”

We hurriedly but quietly made ourselves disappear into the forest. Unluckily for Cadilla, it seemed Thustle had spotted her trying to hide, so he started chasing after her. Then seeing me, he started chasing after us. Zigzagging madly between the trees, Cadilla and I soon split up.

He could be seen in the distance coming straight for me! Finding nowhere to run, I suddenly tried to scramble — with grunts of clumsiness — up a tree. *Ow. Ow! The bark’s so sharp.* No, I couldn’t climb it at all; placing my hands on that bark was painful enough. But Thustle was getting closer behind me! My legs moved faster as I ran, and I sharply disappeared left and behind a tree — one with a smoother bark this time. The big boy noisily headed into some bushy area while I scrambled up the tree. Unsteadily perched on a rough tree branch, I stabilised myself by resting my bare palm against the rough broken surface of the tree’s bark. From the cover of leaves and the rough branches, I spied the figure of that obnoxious boy from a stone’s throw away, coming out from the thick green bushes, spitting and cursing.

Thustle paused, stood for a while, stared around at the silent, still trees, and then grumbled, “Now where did that asshole of a Cœunettian cat go?”. 

*Wow, such strong language.*

He appeared to give up searching for me and I watched him disappear off my line of sight.

“Now where did she go?!” I heard him yell loudly in frustration.
A few moments later, I heard noises coming from behind the clearing. Curiosity took hold of me, but I dared not climb down to investigate.

Somebody rushed into the clearing, in a rather hasty fashion.

I peeked down from the cover of the leaves of my tree.

Thustle’s hair.

His head was just right under me.

If I could just…

Drop something.

With seconds I had collected a bunch of leaves and branches.

I threw the whole lot directly downwards, resulting in a shocked voice from below:

« Hey ! »

The boy looked at me for a moment, only to experience another mini-autumn covering his face.

« Not again !! Ah, my eyes ! ». Thustle started cursing and sputtering as he struggled to rid himself of the mess of tiny little leaves and twigs all over on his neck.

Suddenly something hit the boy’s back. The object bounced off and fell to the forest floor.

A red apple?

« AaH ! », he cried, and tore away in complete madness. « YOU’RE GOING TO PAY FOR THIS, YOU HEAR ME ?! »

With the bully gone, I finally allowed myself to climb down from the tree. I cautiously peeked from behind the tree, eyes fixed on the bushy area where the apple had flown out from. I took a step and walked out —

And somebody jumped right in front of me. It was a girl, arm in catapult position and hand clutching a round something — an apple ready to be launched right at me.

« Wait, Cadilla, it’s me !! ». I frantically raised both of my hands. « I’m on your side, don’t attack me ! »

Cadilla relaxed her fierce look and let her arm drop to her side. Then she smirked.

« Of course you are on my side, silly. Now where were you ? »

I pointed up to the tree.

« So was I ! », she said. « Up in another tree, that is. »

« And you threw the apple at him ? »

« Oh no, apples. »

« Whoa, tell me what happened », I said, curious.
The girl gave me an amused look that could have said ‘You’re going to like what I’m about to tell you’.

She tossed me the apple she was holding and gestured me to follow her. We walked to another clearing of the forest, a bigger one this time, and there were a few apple trees.

‘So Thustle was chasing me and he couldn’t find me at first as I had scrambled up this tree right over there. But then he spotted me up in the tree and he walked right underneath, yelling at me. ‘Come down here, you cowardly girl’, he said, and then I saw an apple hanging on a branch near me. I looked at it and I looked at him, and he looked at me. He was like, oh know you don’t.’

‘Oh yes…!’, I added.

Cadilla giggled a bit and continued. ‘I threw it and it hit right at his nose! Bam!’

I laughed. ‘On the first try? Wow.’

‘Come on, nobody could miss such a big fat nose like his!’, she said exaggerating.

‘And then?’

‘And then I proceeded to shoot him with delicious apples…’, Cadilla said, and for a moment I had an impression that this girl was not to be taken lightly. Imagine if I was her enemy!

The girl started collecting the apples on the forest floor. ‘It was so easy, you know, he was just right there, like a sitting duck!’

‘When you had a selection of weapons right here. Edible weapons.’

We started laughing.

‘Edible weapons, now that’s a good one!’, she said, ‘And then… and then…’

She composed herself, struggling to stop her amusement.

‘And then what?’

‘Never mind’, she said dismissively with a wave of her hand. ‘Did you get him as well? Or…’

‘Oh yeah. He ran over to where I was, up in the tree, and I made him experience ‘autumn’! ‘

‘Let me guess, let me guess’, said Cadilla, waving a finger. ‘With failing leaves?’

‘And possibly bugs on the leaves… And twigs!’

‘Imagine the itchiness he must be having now’, she said shaking her head. ‘Oh my, aren’t we cruel?’

‘Well, he started it… ever since I was… little.’

Cadilla and I spent some time picking and choosing apples.

‘Ugh, this one is rotten on one side’, exclaimed the girl at the apple she held in her hand. She aimed at the tree trunk far away and the rotten fruit hit the target.
« Wow, your aim is really accurate! No wonder you hit Thustle’s nose on the first try! »

The girl simply gave a proud huff and smiled cheekily. « Well, it needs to be accurate, doesn’t it? He needs a taste of his own medicine, anyway. »

« Yup. The bully being bullied », I remarked.

« Yeah hah ha! », she laughed. « Totally ». Cadilla began to break off a nibble of the fruit’s juicy interior with her teeth. « {crunch} Mmm! I must say, these apples are really delicious and sweet {chomp}. »

« Sweet revenge », I said and followed suit, biting my apple. My ears prepared for her inevitable contagious giggles.

...

Soon we were done with our fill of juicy apples, and Cadilla reminded me that she still wanted to visit my parents.

As I walked side by side with her on our way out of the forest, I couldn’t help but notice her apparent contrast in personality. Now she appeared like a proper, beautifully dressed girl with long skirt and all, with a demeanour beyond her age, but a few minutes ago she was laughing along and teasing and acting all childish.

« Is there something on my face? », asked the girl.

I quickly checked her face to see if it was clean. « Err no… ». Then I realised she might be asking me why I kept staring at her so much. « It’s just that… I’ve never seen a girl like you before. »

« What? You have never seen a girl laugh before? »

« No, don’t take offense, okay? You’re not afraid to have fun, to laugh, to climb trees, and fight off bullies. I… I wouldn’t want to be your enemy. »

« I… see », she said, looking deep in thought. « So um… Do you think I’m scary? »

I blinked my eyes at the bizarre question. « No », I said, lying. « I think you’re interesting. »

I avoided the pretty brown spheres staring at me, and stared at her lips instead which crooked into a smile.

« Liar », she said. « I saw the way you looked at me when I ‹attacked› you. It was hilarious. »

« Okay fine, fine…! », I exclaimed defeatedly. « You were really scary okay? »

« BOO! ». She pretended to lung at me.

« AH! »

« Oh my… I really am frightening to you », said Cadilla.

« Oh stop it. »

Shortly afterwards…
"Mom! We have a visitor!!"

My mother was carrying a bucket of milk to the cheese storehouse. So, she did not seem to have noticed me creeping up behind her. "Hellooo?", I sang, imitating her occasional sing-song tone.

The milkmaid stopped, and turning around, she began quizzically, "Visitor…?".

She stood speechless for a while at Cadilla who was standing beside me. "Who is this…?". Mom looked at me with wide eyes.

"Oh! I… euh… pardon… miss…?", the lady with her light blue shawl began nervously.

That was unsurprising for me. Although Mom was already thirty-seven years old (or thirty-eight…?), she never seemed to be comfortable talking to any stranger. Especially when the stranger happened to be the daughter of the wealthy Flerrstromes.

The thirteen-year-old girl beside me interrupted with a respectful curtsy. "Hello, my name is Cadilla", she said with a sweet smile, and addressed my mother, "Mrs Statenson".

My mother curtsied. "Hello. Miss Cadilla, what is it that brings you to our humble barn?", she said as politely and properly as possible — in a manner that was clearly not hers. I forced down a chuckle.

By the way, Mom, that is not how you say her name. I made a mental note to tell her later that 'Kédila' sounded cute, but it wasn’t right.

"Rodène said I could help you", the girl with reddish-brown hair shyly explained with a half-glance to me.

"Euh… with what?", went an uneasy reply from the blonde lady.

"With barn work on our barn", I finished with a please-say-yes smile. Cadilla shyly nodded.

"Okay… euh… of course!", Mom quickly agreed, confused.

—–<>—

With Cadilla helping me many a day, even my boring barn work became much more… err… flowery. Wildflowers such as red clovers, meadow vetchling, buttercups, cow parsley, and harebells; they all adorned the meadows that the cattle graze. Yes, I then realised that there was so much beauty around that I used to skip along; and that there was no such a thing as being too busy to enjoy nature. (I still remembered exactly the way she put it.)

Although she struggled with that overly long rake when she helped me clean the dirty stalls together, although she struggled with carrying the heavy buckets of milk and water, although she soiled her dress often with mud, she never got tired of it or gave up. I could see that she cheerfully helped along with her heart, saying, 'Hey, this isn’t that difficult as I’ve previously thought!'.

My parents also seemed a little touched by Cadilla who had introduced a sudden heart-warming break in our monotonous daily cycle. One evening Dad told me to persuade her to join us for dinner. He said he was feeling quite guilty that a rich girl tore her hands out—quite literally—and went off just like that, always refusing any reward.

But I never really managed to do that. Once I did, but she simply out-talked me to change my mind… that stubborn girl. It was really hard to firmly look into those confident brown eyes and
One day, we had our chance.

« Please, Miss Cadilla, please join us for dinner, we… owe you one. »

My father had politely persuaded the girl as she was about to escape out of the main door of the house — again. Cadilla looked up at my father, and then she glanced at me standing beside him… I hoped that she would accept our invitation this time.

« Thank you », she said, and she shyly looked away from both Dad and me. We gestured her to come inside. She complied, but with a little uneasy looking around of the sparse furniture of our narrow, cramped house.

« It’s not much… I—err… anyway… », I said humbly and awkwardly with downward clasped hands and sat down beside Mom. Cadilla sat down silently at the short end of the table opposite Dad’s chair.

The girl took a sip of a hearty, steaming-hot pea soup. « Wait. »

« Err…yeah ? », I said, seeing her suspending an empty spoon just above her bowl.

« May I know if this is vegetable soup ? », she asked. I looked to my right and my mother suddenly appeared a little nervous.

I watched Mom rising from her seat stiffly. « Yes. I am sorry, I can give you something else if… », she began an incomplete sentence…

« I love it ! », exclaimed the beautifully long-haired girl with a smile. « It’s simply the best I’ve ever tasted and it’s definitely better than Mrs Kettlon’s ». She went on sipping from her spoon, obviously immersed in the soup by now.

« Yes, thank you », said my mother, who suddenly seemed very pleased with herself. She sat down again, relieved.

Cadilla took a few more sips. « Pity that it’s missing herbs such as thyme. »

« Yeah… err… » I started, and realised that I had not even tasted any of my food. I had been busy looking up at Mom on my right and at Cadilla on my left. (And my delicious soup was in front all the while). I was about to take a little sip from my spoon when...

« I could ask Mr Kettlon to give you some. »

« Wait, give ? » I said, with Mom with wide open eyes. [A clumsy tip of my spoon spilt the soup onto the table.] Even my very silent father was now staring straight at her. We were not used to any forms of generosity, it seemed.

The noble girl didn’t answer and instead finished her soup. Then she suddenly appeared nervous and got up from her seat hurriedly. « I… I’ve got to leave. My mother is expecting me for dinner. Thank you, Mr and Mrs Statenson, I really appreciated it. »

It turned out to be her own dinner at her own house. I went quickly past her who was already walking towards the door up front. Then the door handle decided to become harder to use for some
reason.

« [fumbling with the handle] Sorr–ee… » I finally opened it for her — and my hand was blocking her way. After another apologetic gesture, I followed her going out of the house but she turned around and said:

« You know, I don’t need escorting. »

« But... it’s uh getting a little dark and—and… », I went on talking — until I saw an amused look on her face. *Oops, I was probably over-worrying myself silly again.*

« But your food will get cold ». With that, she disappeared into the dimming light of the evening sun.

Author’s note:

∗ Cadilla tends to pronounce the word « *little* » as « *littil* » (ˈlɪtɪl)
If this story were set in modern times, Cadilla’s accent would be English, with a hint of Norwegian/Swedish and French; while Rodène would have an unstable mix of everything.

A few images of flora that I particularly like included in this story:

- alpine milkvetch
- lingonberry/cowberry
- hare bells/tiny blue bells
- red clover (trifolium medium) and meadow vetchling (lathyrus pratensis)
- buttercups and cow parsley
The Three Friends

"Um… Cadilla? Can I ask you something? Let's visit the Library, err — can we?", I called out. It was a sunny afternoon. We were done exploring the grassy plains just between my parents’ barn and Fallen Rocks. The blades of grasses rustle around, being pushed by the wind. And there was the girl, her arms stretched upwards as if she was taking in the fresh cool wind as much as she could.

Cadilla turned around. She walked closer to me and stared with amused twinkling eyes. « No offense, but the way you say certain words is particularly… funny, you know ». She hid a smile at the last part.

« Err… » I began, confused. My eyes glanced into hers for a while. « What’s that… that you are trying to say? »

« It’s <that>… not <dat>… » she emphasized slowly, with a wide-open mouth.

« Dhat », I repeated.

« No, not <dhat>. It’s pronounced with your teeth… like, you know… » She pointed at her front upper teeth.

« Like? », I asked, eyes intently focused on her shiny white teeth.

« Now, stick your tongue out… and… »

« And what? » I choked out a laugh.

She forced down a smile and tried to act serious with a « Now pay attention mister ». 

« Okay », I timidly replied.

« Basically, you just stick your tongue out — »

« When you are not happy with your parents and trying to be disrespectful and… » I interrupted.

Cadilla suddenly covered her mouth and giggled a little. « …to say… » She tried supressing her giggles while failing miserably to continue her serious lesson. « I mean… {giggling} »

I went on with my cheekiness: « Okay, okay, please continue on, Miss Cadilla ». 

« Don’t you ever call me that! » she cried out in a mix of annoyance and laughter.

« Okay », I said in a serious tone.
« Good », she said in a serious tone. She looked away, probably to hide her laughing face from me. « Oh, my stomach hurts… after all that laughing ». The girl sharply looked back to me — with a serious face this time. « Now pay attention you joker, and repeat after me, okay ? »

« Okay… »

*How many times must I say ‘Okay’?*

« That… », she said clearly and slowly with her facing me closely. She pointed to her tongue that stuck out between her upper and lower teeth. « Notice my tongue ? Now follow — »

« Yeah » I stuck my tongue out.

« No, no, that’s too far… too far out. It needs to be just between… »

« Like this ? Thhpppt !! »

What had come out was worse than a snowball right in the face.

« Oh ! You’ve got some of your saliva in my eye ! », the girl cried, wiping her face.

« Sorry… Uh oh. Time to run. »

Yes, she was still laughing, but still… the scary girl was probably going to get me. Help ! I tumbled backwards then took to my heels across the grassy, windy plains.

« Come back here ! You’re not going to get away from this ! »

« Oh, I’m going to get away just — »

{Splochhh !} My face met with some mud. Eww.

I got my face out of that sticky mud. Pfttt ! Disgusting ! Spitting and sputtering, I sat down and tried (in vain) to wipe my face with the back of my hand.

Cadilla caught up with me from behind. An arm raised, I asked defeatedly while putting on the best begging eyes that I could imagine. « Um… Some help, please, can you ? »

The reddish-haired girl crossed her arms and smirked triumphantly. « No, I’m not interested lending a helping hand only to be pulled into a mud bath. Not going to get myself tricked. »

« Aww… I’ll never trick you [tried wiping face again] ugh, this mud », I assured her. « You have a cloth — Do you have a handkerchief ? »

« Well, yes. But… »

« But ? »

« You have to apologise to me first », she said firmly, but her eyes had a teasing glow to them.

I stared downwards at her soft fuzzy-textured purple boots. « Sorry for accidentally spitting at your face. »

« Good. And now you must kiss my boots. »

« What ?! », I exclaimed, a weird feeling rising in my chest.
Before I could decide whether to go along with her wishes, I heard a low giggle. « I’m just messing with you! ». She smiled cheekily and handed me a light blue handkerchief.

We sat on the green grass for a while as I cleaned myself with a too-beautiful handkerchief that seemed « too perfect » to be used. I felt bad about that too but didn’t say anything.

« You know », said Cadilla, « Maybe I’m not a very good teacher ».

« Well… I’m not a very good student », I replied.

She smiled. « It’s because you try to make me laugh all the time. »

« I’ve read that laughter is the best medicine. »

She stared at me. « You can read? »

I gave an unsurprised reply. « Yes, and I read quite a lot. In Norse. My dad taught me how to read. »

Focusing her eyes on a little strand of grass between her fingers, she looked confused in thought. « I thought most people can’t read, other than the noble class of course ». She played with the strand, twisting it around and around.

Reading made me remember something that I had tried to ask Cadilla earlier.

« So, err… Maybe we can go to the Library? »

« Of course! » she chirped.

Along the way Cadilla tried to teach me again. « The Library. », she said, slowly and carefully.

« De Library », I repeated, while almost tripping myself.

« The. »

« Zzhe — »

The girl shielded herself with her arms. « No, no! Don’t you dare spit into my face again!! »

Soon afterwards… after a « little light trip round the fields of green » — as Cadilla had put it, we children approached the great oaken door of « the dusty ol’ abode of knowledge » — as I had said it. We were trying to be artistic and poetic, with a vast vocabulary of beautifully descriptive words and symbolic meanings.

A knuckle of mine went timidly against the solid wooden surface.

« That simply won’t do », said Cadilla. She brought out her fist and gave two firm knocks.

Our ears heard the shuffling footsteps of someone inside, followed by a muttering and a struggling with the heavy door : « [grunt]Eergh… Is that you Rodène? Huh? »

So it was Garend, and he seemed overly surprised to see a girl of the same age as me, standing just beside me.

« Why, hello Cadilla », he began. Standing at the entrance and holding back the door, the chubby-face boy gestured both of us inside the dimly lit interior while chattering away excitedly.
« It’s always a pleasure to see you [still facing Cadilla]. And I was wondering what has become of you, Rodène. Too busy ? Perhaps — Have you come to borrow a book ? — Of course you have. I have plenty on dragons, history, flowers, and… »

We rolled our eyes. That chatterbox again. I said with arms shaking about, « Whoa-whoa-whoa, whoa. Calm down Garend ».

« Yeah sorry, anyway, err… [closed the door hurriedly but quietly] have you two done the official Lelondish handshake ? »

Cadilla and I looked at each other blankly. And we were all still standing near the dim entrance. Nice hospitality skills, Garend. And you’re talking about a handshake. I laughed inwardly.

« The official what ? », asked the girl.

« The official Lelondish handshake. Don’t tell me you haven’t. Real friendships start with an official beginning. I — »

« You do realise… » — I said barely stopping his chain of high-pitched words — « …that even you and I have not… haven’t even done any sort of a handshaking whatsoever ? » I pointed out addressing the freckled-faced boy.

« Well yes… but that’s why I was going to tell you. I just read about that a few days ago. Problem is, nowadays people don’t know or even care about this sort of thing, thinking that it’s — »

« Well, Garend, just show us where you’ve read that ». (With that, Cadilla had effortlessly interrupted Garend while not being too rude. I felt a little jealous. I had to use so much effort just to politely interrupt that chatterbox.)

« Come on then… » said Garend with a few quick waves of his rather short arm and he hurried off.

The girl and I walked deeper in, and eyed around the candle-lit cavernous room that expanded even deeper into the right. Even more candle stands lined up the stony, cold-looking walls. And there was a huge, tall candlestick right on top of an elongated table, all surrounded by several shelves of books. We quickly walked over, seeing the nerd already seated comfortably on one of the two long benches. A book could be seen laying open on the dark wooden surface.

« Wow ! …Quite a pretty drawing. Do you know who drew this ? » exclaimed Cadilla referring the relatively bright and colourful page on the left.

As I sat down on Garend’s right resting my tired legs (after just now’s much running, standing, and teasing), I heard him say :

« Unfortunately, it was by an unknown painter… » Garend looked disappointed. Then his blue eyes gleamed. « But pay close attention to this. You see this handshake ? »

Pushing the old dusty book nearer towards myself, I leaned forward and strained my eyes against the distracting, flickering yellow light to focus on the picture. « That doesn’t look like a normal handshake », I remarked.

« Well of course, because it’s a very special type of handshake. It says here that anyone who performed this friendly gesture will be friends for life, including brothers-in-arms. What are
brothers-in-arms? Oh — A fellow soldier or comrade in a shared struggle. I learned that from this book… » He started to get up but —

« Okay, so how does one perform this? », I cut him off (while trying to remain patient).

He sat down. « You mean brothers-in-arms? Why, performing that? No… it — »

« No, we mean the handshake », Cadilla interrupted while she just refrained from face-palming herself. She sat down on the sturdy bench, a little further away from us.

« Oh it’s stated here that — »

« Waiiiittt! Demonstrate; don’t talk! », I interrupted the nerd hurriedly.

Garend suddenly got up and stood. He stuck out his chubby hand to me, and shook my unsuspecting hand while saying, « Hi, I am Garend Nosten ». He grasped my also unsuspecting wrist and told me to grasp his wrist. With our hands firmly clutching each other’s wrists, he said, « G–A–R–E–N–D. Garend. N–O–S–T–E–N. Garend Nosten. Now it’s your turn ».


We let go of our hands, and that was then I saw Cadilla staring at me in a funny sort of way. She looked silly, as if she had just realised something.

« Err… Cadilla, are you… anything wrong? ».

« Well, let’s just say that I’ve been imagining your name completely wrong », was her reply.

« Like? », I asked her in a curious and teasing tone.

She whispered something to herself awkwardly.

I looked at her dumbly. « Huh? »

« Nothing » she said quickly.

Garend cut me off with an « Aha! Now you see why this is important? Now it’s your turn ».« Our turn? » Cadilla and I said in unison.

« Come on. Don’t be shy. »

Shy? Of all… Stiffening out of a sudden, I rolled my eyes slightly and started the shaking hand ritual, while getting ready to say it with a much smoother pronunciation this time (hopefully).


So it’s Fleurstrom, eh? Not Flerrstrome?! It looked like two words joined together. The first word fleur seemed familiar to me… What a beautiful family name belonging to one of the richest noble families in Lelondell.
Suddenly Garend asked slowly, « Do you feel it? ».

« Feel what? », asked Cadilla, with a mix of annoyed eyebrows and a suppressed smile.

If anything, I felt that Garend’s voice was slightly creepy.

A comical frown with my eyes upwards, I began, « I just feel… a bit stupid… »

Cadilla and I abruptly broke our contact. She immediately took a large step from me. I immediately took a large step from her. I spied her failing in trying to stop an awkward smile. Thanks to that Garend, we both now had weird feelings.

« Hohahoaheheh! » went the high-pitched chuckle of Garend Nosten. « You’re the one with the awkward face, Rodêne. »

« Urggh », I grumbled. « Not that annoying laugh again. »

« Okay, maybe now it’s you and me Cadilla, to do the handsha— », said Garend suddenly with a silly smile.

« No! »

« Okay… maybe not », the nerd said weakly. Ha. He looked a little frightened.

—‹›—

We children would spend much of our free time exploring the many books from the antique Library. Well, not just reading in the Library, but reading also at my house, my parents’ barn, Cadilla’s garden, and once, even on a vegetable farm. We simply found the old building a little too dark and simply stuffy to be fun. Adventurous reading, one might say.

The only problem? Garend had trouble keeping up with our stealthy and quick navigating around the island, while of course, at the same time avoiding Thustle and his gang.

I still remember the time when Garend was describing about his new game of Clue Hunt.

—‹›—

« These scraps of papers can be all over the island », said Garend with excited arm gestures as he walked around in his library-house. « A paper hint (with hints and clues of course) would lead to another paper hint and that would lead to another » — he nearly tripped over the rug on the floor — « paper hint in a different place which will lead to another paper hint… »

« We get the idea, Garend », said Cadilla and I in unison, arms crossed, with impatient just get on with it! faces.

It was just a game where there was one Clue Master and he or she would hide a treasure, leaving paper scraps and hints all around the island for the treasure hunters to figure out.

One bright afternoon, it was my turn to hide the treasure…

« Shhh! Can’t you stop talking for say… two minutes? », whispered Cadilla to Garend.

He looked dumbly surprised. « Why? »

« [annoyed] ErGH! Because of Kindt and Malcost », I explained. Slowly raising both my arms
I said in an evil threatening tone: « They are trying to… come for you ». I hoped scaring him would shut him up.

Unfortunately, that only served to frighten him into a chattering frenzy.

« Oh no ! Kindt’s cold blue eyes ! Malcost’s evil smirk ! And Thustle will definitely pour rotten fish soup on me again — ! »

Having enough, I covered up that annoying chatterbox’s mouth with my hand. So! That effectively shut him up apparently. Distraction problem solved.

« Ok! On to the next clue… », said Cadilla. Holding a tiny piece of paper in her hands, she read aloud:

« Without me, good bread cannot be made. Improper behaviour may result if I am mixed with honey and drunk too much. Go to the man who might say the above sentence. The man’s name rhymes with mean. »

Cadilla and Garend looked at each other quizzically.

« This is a hard one », she muttered. Then she saw me smirking. With comically annoyed eyebrows, she snapped, « Wipe that little smirk out of that little face of yours mister ».


« It’s a name you dummy », said Cadilla quickly.

« Oh. »

« Without me, good bread can’t be made », she repeated the riddle. With a finger resting on her lips, she began brainstorming then said after a while, « Hmm… Wheat, right? ». The girl looked hopefully at me.

« Nearly right, but still not », I replied cheekily, not caring about doing something to my little-smirk-on-my-face. By the way, the way she said littil was a little cute. Was a littil cute. I wondered whether it was on purpose…

« Nearly right? », asked Cadilla, with confused eyebrows as if they were saying I’m unfamiliar with this expression. « So am I close or what? », she asked again.

« Close…? », I said, also confused. Close to what? Guessing that the only thing she was probably close to was the answer, I replied, « Yes, I think you’re close, but anyway, moving on — »


« Improper behaviour if I am mixed with… that’s vague. Please, Rodène, one clue? », pleaded Cadilla.

My heart went soft. She really had the softest brown eyebrows… « That something rhymes with… err… mist. »

« That’s a terrible clue! » She snapped, and twisted her lips in a half-state of annoyance and amusement. A short little « Hmmphf! Not another rhyme, all right? » went out.
« All right... It’s... a fermented substance mixed into a drink », I said. *Shouldn’t push her too much, ha.*

« Mr Whean ! », said Garend suddenly.

Cadilla looked confused. « Mr Whean is fermented ?! », she exclaimed making everyone laugh. Then she said with realisation, « But Mr Whean doesn’t grow wheat. It’s Mr Stheen ! ».

Moments later, after a long trip through the crowded village houses and farms from west to east... and past a chain of four windmills... Ah ! The fifth one.

We ran (or tumbled, for Garend’s case) nearer towards a neatly bearded man, who stood up from his brightly painted yellow armchair.

With a broad beaming smile, he asked, « You are cracking your head with Rodène’s crazy riddles ? » He had a mild Cœunettian accent, or at least that was what I noticed.

« Yeahhh », said Garend. « What sort of drink causes improper behaviour if misused ? »

« Oh I am surprised that you do not know. Something... alcoholic. That makes you drunk. »

« Alcoholic... Like mead ? », asked Cadilla.

« That’s it ! But read me the riddle first. »

I watched as Cadilla read the piece of paper again.

The man gave a little smirk. I thought I saw his blond-yellow eyebrows twinkled a little. « For your information, mead is a fermented alcoholic drink that requires honey, water, and yeast. As for the password, it has five letters. It starts with the letter [waved index finger] ...‹Y›. »


« Yeast ! », Cadilla suddenly realised.

« Yes ! », I said. Then I clapped my hands and said, « Correct ! ». 

My two friends breathed sighs of relief — with Garend gasping for air.

« Eum by the way, do not drink alcohol, okay ? You are not yet sixteen. »

We nodded in acknowledgement. I handed Cadilla and Garend a simple piece of paper that stated: The treasure will be at the dairy boy’s house.

Cadilla teased me cheekily, « Ha ! [pointed finger at me] That’s you, Mister Dairy Boy ». 

At my house...

Cadilla and Garend followed me walking into my room.

« Where on earth is the treasure !? », asked Garend impatiently. « It shouldn’t be — »

« Oh it’s on the table », said Cadilla casually and she picked up a folded piece of paper.

« ...too hard to find », finished the nerd stupidly.

I picked up another piece of paper from the table and handed it to him. « A poem for you,
« Wow… You conjured this yourself? », asked Garend.

« Well… sort of… », I said, glancing at Cadilla who was holding the paper and staring at it intently. « Sorry Cadilla, but the hardest part for me was thinking what your ‘treasure’ would be ». (Also, I secretly feared of a criticism of my imperfect handwriting.)

« It’s okay, Rodène. [glancing at me] Cracking my head with your silly riddles was the fun part {smiling} ». Her eyes glanced at me again, making me a bit nervous. While I held my own painstakingly handwritten copy of the poem, Cadilla asked me whether she could read it aloud. I gladly said yes, knowing how frustrated I had been last night trying to properly pronounce the many ‘th’ sounds in the poem.

« Okay, let’s begin the poem! », said the girl cheerfully, and she began to read:

« The Three Friends

Three friends join hands;
The south houses one,  
The east houses one, And the north houses one.  
Three friends shake wrists;

[Cadilla smirked at the deliberate use of ‘wrists’ instead of ‘hands’.]

« Old ancient books he likes,  
Great-tasting foods he likes,  
The flowery woods she likes.

[Cadilla smiled sweetly.]

« Two friends say their names:  
Garend Nosten,  
And Rodène Statenson.  
But one friend’s name is not the same,  
What is it?

[Cadilla paused, eyes staring at the paper intently, anticipating her name but…]

« It’s up to you to guess her name. »

I watched as her eyebrows frowned comically. Then she burst out laughing. « Ahhaaahahahahaha ! ». She continued playfully: « I hate you ».

« I know », I said, and gave the cheesiest smirk in response to her funny look that seemed to say, « All that treasure-hunting trouble for… this !? ».

(Garend had been so immersed in his copy of my poem, that he didn’t catch the joke.)

« In fact I’ll kill you right now, you… you joker ! » She placed down the paper and fiddled her fingers menacingly. Now she was the one smirking all over.

I quickly plopped my paper right into the paper-holding hands of the confused Garend, and slowly inched sideways towards the doorframe. « I’m dead ‘cow meat’. »
« Exactly ! »

One moment : the front door of the house.

The next moment : out blasted us two children…

« No escaping for you ! ». Cadilla started chasing me round and round (and round) the house.

« This is… [pant]… gettihhh {panting} dizzy », I said breathlessly to myself. I ended the merry-go-around chase with a sharp turn to the uneven paved roads…

Her voice went calling from behind me : « Not giving up !! »

We zoomed across the road and past the farmhouses, circled around the Well of Eau two times, and eventually went into the direction of Cadilla’s house.

I stopped abruptly. « Oh-no. I’m stuck ». Time to surrender ?

{SsplASHhh !}

« Mercy, {cough} {sputter} Cadilla ! », I cried. What had happened was that she simply ran and bumped me straight into the transparent Little Pond of Eau.

Now I’m soaking wet.

Standing tall at the grassy edge of the pond, the girl eyed upwards and stared elsewhere, while saying « Fine… » reluctantly. She started to grab me out of the pond but…

« Hehehe… » I smirked and grabbed her wrist and pulled her in !

« Wha — AHHH ! {ssplASHhh}. »

« Now we’re both dead », said Cadilla to me, both with water up to our chins, our feet touching the slippery underwater stones below.

« Yeah… », I agreed. « So conclusion : the water is our ‹real treasure› of the game. »

« It seems like you already planned this watery adventure beforehand », teased Cadilla, seemingly enjoying being in the water.

« No, no — of course not ! » I protested and some pond water managed to seep into my mouth, making me choke and sputter again. « I’m really dead. »

« Still not as dead as ‹cow meat› though », said the girl giggling away and we started to splash each other with pond water as we weren’t ‹dead enough›.

Back home Mom got a nasty shock…

« Your clothes… what happened ? Wet ! All wet ! Tu es trempé ! [You’re soaked through !! […] »

The next day I was in the cold and damp back part of the house, helping her with the laundry…

—››—

Each time we played Clue Hunt, we would take turns to be the Clue Master. Over time, my clues just got harder and harder with tougher and tougher riddles ; even codes. And they got sillier too.
Cadilla’s clues were usually cleverly hidden all over the place (once there was even some digging involved). Garend’s clues were very intellectual and of course, historical. Problem was, he usually blurted out too many hints away so his was easier than it should be.

Clue Hunt turned out to be our favourite game of all time.

Author’s note :

[*] [1 January 2019] Happy New Year and bonne année!
[13 May 2019]

[*] This is a work of fanfiction.

[*] I only pronounce the voiced and unvoiced « th » sounds where I want to emphasize a word containing those sounds, or when I stay a word on its own separately. Because it’s hard for me to do so in normal speech, I just ignore the « th » and substitute with the « d » and « t » sounds which are easier to pronounce. Rodêne has basically the same problem, except that he can’t pronounce the « th » sound at all.

[*] In Lelondell, runes have punctuation due to the influence of Cœunettian.

[*] Names in Lelondish runes:

[ congestion ]

[ congestion ]

[*] *The Three Friends* poem in Lelondish runes: 

________
Maybe I should write in these runes from now on? Just kidding.

_The Three Friends_ poem in Riders of Berk runes:
The Cold and the Warmth

Author’s note :

❄ Here’s a wintry chapter for the wintry season of January 1, 2019 ! (For the northern hemisphere, that is.)
[13 May 2019]

❄ This chapter has two drawings showing the layout of Cadilla’s house :
Drawing nº1
Drawing nº2

❄ 03 Winter

Music album : Winter (by Michael Gettel)

Narada Equinox

I feel that this instrumental, and other pieces in this album, really express winter in its calming, simultaneous mix of happiness and melancholy.

❄ This chapter starts off with Cadilla’s POV.

8. The Cold and the Warmth
—«Shift in POV»—

« Snow fun ! Whoohoooo ! », yelled the fourteen-year-old Cadilla to no one in particular as she gazed out of her bedroom window from the top floor… Soft snowy goodness descending gracefully down to the garden below at the back of the house… What could be better ? What could be prettier ? She hastily went out of her room and stole a glance below through another window ; then dashed through the cold air that filled the clean white hallway.

Upon skipping down the stairs at the end of the hallway, Cadilla spied a certain elegantly dressed lady at the symmetrical end of the house ; who was also descending a flight of stairs, albeit in an undoubtedly more reserved manner.

Mother.

The lady frowned slightly at the girl’s childish demeanour, and said, with a gloved hand on the shiny metal railing, « Cadilla, if you do that too frequently, you would risk tearing up your dress again ». 

All that went out from the young Cadilla was an uninterested « Mhmm… ». She started to open the double front doors of the house letting in a fresh cold breeze… Ah… But her tall mother suddenly loomed over her.

« Now—now—now, now... Don’t you try going out without your breakfast. »

« I’m not going out ; I’m simply looking out », protested Cadilla. However, the girl quickly closed the doors upon seeing the stern face of her mother’s.

…

Cadilla immediately rushed over her meal, anxious to go out. Her father had an amused smile, while her mother, as usual, was devoid of expression.

« Cella, lighten up a little », said Cadilla’s father. « Our girl is going to have so much fun this season. »

« Except that the girl tends to hurt and embarrass herself. Kent, do you remember the time when she fell down and […] »

Cadilla soon finished her meal, not paying attention to her mother’s words, and she left the table. A voice called out from behind her :

« Make sure you put on your winter boots, your coat, and your mittens before you go out. »

No reply.

« Cadilla. I’m talking to you. »

The girl forced back a sigh. « Yes Mother », she replied to the lady who was way back at the breakfast table.

« Remember your winter boots and… » went a distant nagging voice that repeated the previous reminder.

Cadilla sighed.
Well, she already knew that; she was already wearing her winter boots. And she was not the forgetful type anyway.

For the sake of not being too rude, the girl called back with an « O–kayyy…! », and walked towards the coat hanger at the corner of the room, underneath the staircase. She changed her usual long coat to a heavier winter one, grabbed her «bone skates» and her favourite mittens from the big shoe cabinet, and hurried outside into the glistening white scenery.

—«Shift in POV»—

The snow glowed white on the rooftops as the winter sun shined its desolation upon the frozen land of Lelondell. Okay, that was being a little too negative. Well, you see, on one hand, the snow would kill the grassy meadows on my parents’ barn, and Cadilla’s garden; but on the other mitten… I mean… hand, this time of the year would bring…

Ice skating !

Well, the funny thing: This would be the first time I would be going ice skating, as I had never tried it before. And to make sure that I wouldn’t embarrass myself in front of Cadilla, I took it upon myself to create better ice skates.

So here I was… in the smithy of Mr Stonberg’s, and I had been toiling for some time, trying to create my… err… invention/failure. Anyway, by the time I was nearing my teens, I had become quite a skilled shoemaker. With my height steadily increasing, I had made myself a second pair of shoes. Yes, I greatly preferred working with stylish leather rather than with evil, sharp metal.

I heard someone trudging lightly through the snow. A quick glance from the shady interior of my messy workplace to the bright white scenery outside revealed a cheerful young girl: Cadilla.

« You’re looking at something…? », I casually asked with my eyes glued to my work.

« No… err… actually… yes », went her reply, slow unsure pauses in between.

After a pause, I stated nonchalantly, « I just find it weird that someone would care to visit a… boring old smithy in this nice weather ».

« I just find it weird that someone would work in a boring old smithy in this gorgeous weather », repeated Cadilla.

« Oh yeah? Well, my shoes are more gorgeous than the weather », I said sarcastically.

« They are! {laugh} »

« They are? », I tweaked my eyebrows still without looking up.

« Of course! Including these ones. »

« Of course… », I said that with my eyes rolling around in a sarcastic manner. After a short moment, I gave a little choked laughter, and said to her directly in comical defeat, « All right, all right, you win ».

Heavy winter coat and all, I continued with plenty of excited hand gestures. « You see, I try—I’m trying to make—and then test—a special kind of… [index finger up in the air] boot! »

« A… boot? », repeated Cadilla with her quite amusing quizzical eyebrows.
« …That has some bone attached to the bottom, in such a way that it also can be removed easily. This will be my special winter/skate boots », I continued.

« Using bone ? Why not use… metal ? »

I eyed at the smart Cadilla Fleurstrom and realisation hit me.

« Of course ! Normal ice skates have bones tied to the shoe bottoms. If I use metal, I can make a uniquely shaped metal that… » I chattered, and then with my mouth wide open I exclaimed, « Cadilla ! You’re brilliant ! ».

« No, you’re brilliant. »

I grabbed some paper and fumbled around to look for some writing charcoal while muttering, « Then you’re exceptionally brilliant ». I placed the paper back down.

« I’m not going to argue with you there », said Cadilla.

After a short while…

Now I couldn’t find a writing charcoal. With eyes still searching all around (as if that could make a difference), I began, « Cadilla, uh… can you… I mean help me in… »

The girl’s hands were clasped together downwards in a relaxed manner, but she looked as though she was waiting for something… Maybe I should have asked Cadilla to help me in the first place. Things always go missing for me. I grumbled inside. Always. Okay maybe…

« In case you haven’t noticed, charcoal’s right over there » — she pointed at the wall, rolling her eyes — « You’re a horrible searcher ».

« Oh. Heehh ! », I gave a toothy, embarrassed grin ; and I went over back there to pick up one of the little wooden sticks off a wooden shelf. (And some rolled over and fell onto what looked like a metal dish.)

With the writing tools making clankity-clank noises, her voice went from behind me : « I had spied that a while ago ».

Inwardly annoyed with my clumsiness, I bent down to collect up the tools. While placing them back onto the shelf, I began gratefully, « Anyway… thanks for… »

Writing charcoal in hand, I turned around and said, « Wait ». So she already knew all along. I laughed a little embarrassedly along with her cheeky smiles.

Some time later…

« Nice drawing », commented Cadilla.

Muttering while sketching out a diagram of my new «Detachable Skates», I replied, « But I always thought, I mean, think, that my drawing is… meh… I only draw when… I need to… visualise… a design that I’m working on ». I was never used to positive remarks.

« Here, let me help you », went a friendly, chirpy voice.

« Wait, you can draw ? »

Cadilla did not answer as she took off one of her checker-patterned mittens and sat down. She
began copying my design, with incredibly artistic results. I watched in awe as she gracefully expressed my ideas onto a lifeless piece of a paper. When she finished, I was still staring speechless at the drawing on the table.

« Hello ? ». She waved her hands in front of my face.

« Oh ! I… err…Woww ! », I said, still staring at the paper on top of the messy wooden surface with little bits of leather all around.

« Wow what ? »

« Wow your drawing… », I said. With the cold, soft, white snow in the background contrasting with the dark brown, rough, wooden tables of the forge, the paper drawing itself somewhat looked like a real piece of art.

« Actually, this is a sketch, not a drawing », said Cadilla nonchalantly, and she began to sweep away some debris off the rough old wooden surfaces around.

« It’s beautiful… »

« Rodène ? »

« So artistic… »

« Rodène. »

« Exceptional… with style — »

« Rodène ! »

« Oh ! » I jumped out of my awestruck trance to meet some lips twitched comically, disapproving eyes, and a pair of crossed arms. « I’m sorry. It’s just that…I didn’t know that you can draw so well. » I paused, looked at her, and said with pure honesty, « You have talent ».

After dropping her arms, she seemed to freeze, without one word coming out from her lips. « I… err… I — Let’s just concentrate on the project » went a slightly sharp reply from her.

« Oh… ok… sorry », I said and switched my thoughts back to my unfinished concept of my project. But I couldn’t help but look at the girl while doing so, with her unique flowing attire of dark earthly colours, her sleek winter boots which a reddish colour that stood out of the whitish winter, and with her looking away from me for some mysterious reason… And my mind had been successfully distracted.

After a while, I exclaimed suddenly, « I think I got it ! » I then started chattered excitedly with even more hand gestures than before (bordering on comical insanity) :

« Instead of hammering metal into the bottom of the sole, I’ll make large grooves into the sole and place the — also grooved — metal underneath (so that it does not move) and then… strap the metal skate part with leather straps around [twirling finger around finger] the top shoe part ! [voice at highest pitch] »

« Wha.. ? » Cadilla got completely lost in my inventive frenzy. « You’re like Garend now, you know. Demonstration — or in this case, draw ! Skip the talking ! »

« But you draw better than me. »
« All right, then… let’s just put it this way… » suggested Cadilla.

In the end, I was up standing dictating my idea while she was my (temporary) personal artist at my chair drawing and labelling the parts of my new design.

Then…

I went all enthusiastic over the production of my concept, while Cadilla stood leaning against one of the four wooden posts. I thought I saw a smile crept up, but it disappeared the moment I turned to look at her.

« ……{whispering}…[…] »

« Huh ? ». I turned to look at her, wondering what she was whispering about.

« Oh, nothing. »

After walking a long, long way to the Little Pond of Eau, which was located a good way west from Cadilla’s house, and even further west from mine…

« Now ! Time to test my — cone trumpets please — Detachable Skates ! », I said with comical glee. I emphasized the «Detachable Skates» part in my comical imitation of Mr Balansen’s super deep voice.

« Can’t wait for you. See ya ! », Cadilla said cheekily and with her bone skates she zoomed across the frozen Little Pond of Eau. « Wheeeooo ! »

I put on my Detachable Skates and started to chase after her, who was already circling around the frozen icy pond. Unlike her graceful moves, I was sort of a little clumsy. Forget about «sort of»… I was clumsy.

« Catch me if you can ! » she called back, probably seeing that I was skating much slower than her.

As I went skating around and around on the frozen blue surface, I saw that chasing her brought back embarrassing memories of how she outsmarted me in running before. And her graceful carves on the ice were like her artistic drawings on paper. Not willing to be «bullied» by her again, I increased my speed to try to imitate her.

« Not as easy as it looks », I said to myself as that sly girl intelligently run circles around me — literally — while dodging my clumsy hands. My hands were shaking about as I went unstably ; many times I just avoided falling flat on my face.

« Whoa–e–oAh... »

[Creeeshh !] I crashed right into some snowman that probably had been left earlier by some kids. Now who would build this sort of thing over here right on the frozen lake ? And it was c–co…

« Cold ! Brrrrrlr » My nose and mouth were full of snow. « Mmph ! [spit]Pfft ! » Much too cold for my taste.

I shook away the stingingy freezing white fluffy stuff from my hair and turned to look at Cadilla, who was trying to stop herself from giggling away. I tried to get up, and placing my right foot on the ice, I… fell flat on my face with a [Ss…leeePAT !]
By now the girl was already giggling away at my silliness. As for the next few attempts to prove myself to her that I could get up and continue chasing her, well, let’s just say that I had succeeded partially. Oh yes, I had proved myself — that I could be a clown. My clownish attempts only served to make her laugh even more.

Finally, I had enough of falling down; and I sat down to rest onto the icy blue surface. I breathed a vapour of exhaustion and wrapped my arms around my knees. Pressing my unbruised chin against a knee, I hid my face away from her eyes as she failed to control herself from laughing… at me. One thing I was always weak in: being in the centre of a laughing stock. True, I could be crazy and funny, but it was only when I wanted to be… I quite liked her teases and giggles, but I had a limit.

The laughter died down abruptly, followed by the almost-silent carves of skates on the ice…

A pair of bone skates made a swift turn and stopped beside me — still quietly curled up on the shiny wet floor. « Here. Let me help you », went Cadilla’s voice softly and seriously… A hand was stretched out above me, the winter sun in the background.

With a silent grab of her unsteady hand and with my wobbly legs I got up, while avoiding her eyes. I stood standing and facing sideways, not saying a word for a while.

« Sorry that I laughed at you. »

A tiny spark of warmth went inside me. When was the last time I heard a ‹sorry› word other than from Mom? She was indeed feeling bad. But I coldly refused to say a word… Still quite disappointed with myself and a little annoyed with her.

Nobody spoke. Cadilla kept silent, as if waiting for me to speak and end the uncomfortable silence.

« I just can’t take criticism », I said finally.

« I’m sorry for not understanding you », she said. « I… I can teach you, you know, how to skate better. »

« But go slow on me, okay? », I replied a little reluctantly. I forced my eyes to look at her but they dropped down again. Unconfident.

« I will. I will teach you… step by step », said Cadilla.

« Thanks… »

—<>—

In just a short period of time, my skills had improved drastically. Well, thanks to that quiet, patient Cadilla and my Detachable Skates, I finally managed to catch up with her. I even surprised myself by trying out ingenious and different ways to skate.

Skating was just part of the fun. Each day we would keep ourselves busy with new ways to make snow more interesting. We could not form teams in a snowball fight because we only had three people, including Garend. Instead, we would play ‹Every Man for Himself›, or ‹Snow Tag›, or ‹Defenceless Protect the Defenceless›, or ‹Frozen Targets› or…”

Anyway, fun was an understatement. We would usually hang around the Little Pond of Eau nearby the Fleurstroms’ as the Great Pond of Eau would be quite occupied with the many
Lelondells celebrating the only time when the dragons were not attacking. And it was the only time that nobody could work even if he wanted to. Wait, what about women who worked, like Mom…? And it was the only time that nobody could work even if she wanted to, then. Well, in any case, except for Mr Stonberg. For some reason, he decided to work away the cold by constantly being in the forge. Those modifications on the Detachable Skates would have to wait. I really did not want to work in the same area with that grumpy noisy man.

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Winter, it had a different kind of beauty compared to spring — a kind of a bittersweet, melancholic beauty. Unless, of course, if one preferred to think of winter as a time of crazy fun in the form of well-made snowballs hitting their desired targets.

One chilly day late into the afternoon, I was walking on the paved roads which were now buried completely white with snow. « Ah, the Well of Eau in the distance », I said. Going north of the Well would be Cadilla’s house.

I then realised I had forgotten my skates, and my coat.

« Oh stupid », I muttered to myself and started for home. I was sometimes quite forgetful.

Suddenly I spied a blond-haired tall teen standing among the trees some distance away. Oh no. The tall and relatively mature-looking spiky haired Kindt Lapis ?

Great.

I tried to hide but he already saw me. Then the boy ran off and disappeared. Should be good, right ?

Nope. Out of seemingly nowhere three snowballs flew out of the green (not blue). One exploded on my left leg. Another flew above my head. The third one hit the snow. Then out of the blue, one hit my dark blue shirt. Apparently that one was thrown by the blue-eyed Kindt. My mind couldn’t keep track of the sudden string of attacks that had happened. For some reason, all I had noticed were colours here and there. I started to run away.

As he started tearing after me Kindt yelled, « After him !! ».

I spied that all around me were Thustle, Malcost, and Nork ; they were climbing down the trees — or falling, not sure. As I ran, I realised that the snow terrain slowed me down considerably, reducing my pace into heavy clumsy trudges. And it was hard to dodge their snowballs. Oh no.

Yes, oh no. Snowball after snowball knocked me right into some snow. When I got up, four wicked pairs of eyes had already surrounded me.

« Haw haw haw haw haw ! », Thustle Tilton guffawed. « I’ll never forget what you and Cadilla did to me that time. »

« You mean the apple incident ? », the black-haired Malcost asked Thustle stupidly.

« Yeah — OF COURSE it’s the apple incident you dumb wit ! », snapped the relatively muscular Thustle at the thirteen-year-old curly haired boy. « Must I repeat that embarrassing…? »

The boys continued arguing. I just stood there not saying a word because I was trying to think of a way to escape. Then suddenly I dashed past Nork, the youngest of the gang.
« HEY ! », the skinny blond yelled. He tried to grab me with twisted arms here and there but his face ended up on the snow.

Unluckily for me, Kindt tripped me up with an expertly positioned foot. My body landed with a fluffy thud. He said in his usual sharp voice, « Not ! So... Fast ». I quickly got up, only to have myself restrained by Kindt.

As Malcost cupped some snow in his hands and began shaping them, he said with glee, « Let’s shower him with snowballs ! ». He was so childish, along with Nork. As if it were fun.

Fun ? What happened next was horrible. No matter how I defended myself, I was no match for the four bullies. I was not sure which was worse : the snow-shooting, or the kicking, or the punching.

In the end it was the kicking. Kindt kicked me in the shin while I was still on the ground.

« Stop ! » I pleaded. « Stop please ! I’m sorr— can’t take it anymore. » Tears rolled down my face. Tears. Not from the pain, but from the emotional shock inside.

« Hmmph ! » Thustle snorted. « Let’s go ! » But that was not until after he kicked some snow onto my face.

« Crybaby », said Nork.

« Lousy half-blood », said Malcost.

« Lousy stinkin’… » muttered Thustle.

« ... »

Their voices eventually went out of hearing... leaving me, the injured weakling, behind.

Wounded...

Lying down...

Immobile...

The wet coldness was seeping more and more through my shirt and into my back. Drenched with sweat and melted ice, I was laying on the snow... too weak to move in the slightest. How could they do this ? How could they be so cold-hearted ? I wanted to continue laying down for a while until my eyes, dry and sensitive to the cold, spied a snowflake descending down. Oh no. Was it going to snow now ? Lelondell was notorious for her biting-cold snowstorms, which would suddenly strike out of nowhere.

« I must try... » I whispered to myself. I gathered up all my strength to stand up, only to find that even a slightest movement of my body through the cold air shivered me up... only to find that I couldn’t. Ow. My leg hurt far too badly. A portion of my energy abandoned me, getting lost in the soft breeze. I’ll be dead if I don’t get up.

« I’ll be dead if I don’t get up ! », I said in terror. I could feel it getting colder. Panic struck me...

« HELP ! », I started shouting with whatever strength that was left in me. No answer. I yelled again. My body jerked involuntarily as a spike of coldness shot through my veins. I sneezed and
tried in vain to cuddle myself. No reply. I yelled even louder. A shiver again. Nobody. I shrieked loudly for a long time. No use. All that answered was the wind, suddenly getting louder and creepier with unearthly voices. Then silence. All that my half-closed eyes could see was white… white… white.

If only Cadilla could hear me.

« This is how I die… A useless… weakling. » I sniffed at the last part as I gave up and collapsed onto the snow. I grabbed a handful of snow and crushed it in frustration, only to feel a cold shiver down my back again. My body was starting to shiver by now. One weird thing was that it wasn’t dark yet ; faint rays of the sun still shone above.

Suddenly I heard a howl. Or a shriek. A yell.

« What ?! Who ?! » I would prefer the creepy whispers of the wind anytime ! Not this… whatever ! Lifting my shivering body, I fearfully looked around me. And it was suddenly so dark, why…?

<<Aaeaeiaererooooch !>>

That howl again ! A wolf ? A rooster ? It sounded so unnatural. Or…was it a dragon ?! DRAGON !? I started on some blabbering as if to reassure myself, « Dragon, no that’s not… rational. How can a dragon be in this snowstorm ? They definitely don’t come during the winter, right ? [awkward chuckle] Right ? It’s not logical, so I probably shouldn’t say — »

A man’s yell jerked me up. I shivered, this time with fear. Only one thing to do : hide… hide in the snow ! Getting caught by a screaming somebody probably being hunted by a howling <dragon-monster> was decidedly worse than burying my shivering self with this icy-cold white stuff, right ? Taking a deep breath that made me sneeze, I blew warm breaths into my cupped palms and started to dig into the surprisingly soft snow as fast as I could.

I started covering myself. « Wait, is there a shadow ? » I whispered to myself as a black moving something could be seen in the rapidly darkening surroundings. It shot past me with a whoosh. In an instant I completely buried myself but my head. « This is not too bad actually. A bit cold, of course… », I said, cocooned not-too-cosily in snow.

Something knocked hard into me and my eyes were blocked with a heap of snow. I couldn’t see. I could feel only coldness.

Only coldness…

…

For some time, I lay buried and helpless, shivering and not moving. I had only managed to get rid of the snow covering my face. Now my leg was hurting again, maybe because of the collision. Footsteps were approaching… Wait, what ? Yes, I could hear light trudges coming closer. Quick ! I need to get his attention. But fear shot straight into my heart. What if it was the screaming man ? The victim ? Or Thustle ? If it is one of them, I’ll be better freezing in the harshest winter. I decided to not move an inch.

« RODÊNE ! RODÊNE ! », a young feminine voice called.

Cadilla.

To get her attention, I shouted out as much of my lungs could take it.
 « Where are y— Oh{gasp}…R–Rodêne ? Are you… oh no… please no », she replied.

 « Help… » I said weakly.

 « I heard you screaming so horribly. Um why… why are buried ? »

I didn’t answer. She didn’t know that the screaming was somebody else’s. Suddenly, heavy packs of snow were being pushed away from on top my body, and I realised that it was Cadilla’s doing. Eventually my trapped body was free of the snow. I lay motionless on the snow. « Can… can you walk ? », she asked, mouth quivering. She was so frightened. I had never seen her like this.

And I had never seen myself like this.

 « No… My leg… » I said, pointing to my left shin with weak rising and falling of my aching arm.

Cadilla tried to help me onto my feet.

 « No… You can’t carry me… », I protested. « And it’s getting colder. You’ll freeze… You’ll — »

 « Yes I can ! » she snapped determinedly. « Stop being so negative ! »

Oh that’s harsh. But I immediately felt a persistent arm that attempted to help me up. We walked together with me limping and her shouting for help.

 « You should lea–leave m–me… We’ll both freeze to d–death… ff… », I said after a while. It was becoming very difficult to see further ahead. We were both shivering. Cadilla seemed to quietly endure everything. As for me, I was horrified to find my teeth were starting to clatter uncontrollably. And my mind seemed to no longer… think… straight…

 « Nonsense ! », Cadilla yelled determinedly against the howling wind. With another strong grip, she supported my slowly-weakening body and helped me limp forward.

 « Rod[…]st a few more steps […]’ll reach my home. »

But I had collapsed into a half-fainted state… Sprawled limp on the white snow…

My ears picked up a worried voice : « Stay here… […]get help from my[…] »

 « But… p–please… » went out a breathless weak voice from my lungs.

 « Just stay here…! I’ll—I’ll be right back ! »

And I saw a figure dashing off, out from the corner of my eye….

—‹‹Shift in POV››—

The double doored entrance of the Fleurstrom’s burst open, to reveal a shivering young girl stumbling indoors.

 « Father please ! », said Cadilla between gasps of air.

Dirty, wet boots, and all, she walked unsteadily on the smooth, solid floor towards the warm, inviting fireplace and chimney right in the middle of the interior of the house. The girl approached her father, who was comfortably sitting with his side facing the main doors, the flickering flames
in front of him.

He didn’t even realise that someone was standing on his right.

« Father, please ! »

The man turned his head and gave a smile. « Please what ? What would my dear little girl like to have ? », he began casually with a smile.


The man sprung up from his armchair. He hurried towards the corner of the room and near the staircase to look for his heavy coat, without even the slightest glance at Cadilla’s mother who was just settling down at the lunch table nearby.

« Kent, where do you think you’re going ? »

That Cella again. Kent Fleurstrom decided not to explain the urgency to that insensitive lady, yet. He fumbled for another coat on the coat hanger.

Cella watched him, who was followed by the little Cadilla, both with heavy coats.

« And Cadilla ! » — she hurried towards the startled girl — « DON’T you dare go out again ! » Cella grabbed her daughter and blocked her from the entrance, but the girl wiggled her way out from her arms with a protesting « No…! ».

The lady was left standing there bewildered at the way her daughter had reacted. Sneaking out earlier, and… Now both of them are escaping outside into the cold. Rebellious.

Moments later, she was waiting with her arms and legs crossed, at that same armchair in front of the fireplace. Her face was even crosser when she saw the door finally open with Cadilla entering the house, not bothering to scrape off the snow from her soiled reddish-brown winter boots. Again that girl forgot the rug just lying at the doorstep. How rude. Cella stood up and with a raise of a finger, opened her mouth to give a piece of her mind…

But she saw that her husband Kent was carrying someone on his shoulder.

« He’s hurt », said Kent.

Cella gave a certain look and asked, « Who’s hurt ? ».

« What do you mean who !? », Cadilla burst out. « Mother ! »

« Cadilla, calm yourself », said the man firmly. « It’s going to be all right. »

—«Shift in POV»—

My eyes opened slowly…

I found myself reclining on a chair, with my cold wet clothes soaking in some warmth, and with a soft towel wrapped around my body. I heard bright fiery flames crackling… in a fireplace quite near to me in front. Wondering where I was, I gazed around some colourful stuff, probably paintings, hanging on the wall above a dark mantelpiece. Curiosity made me slowly turn my head leftwards and behind, and I found (…two ?) people seated on a table, perhaps having a quiet conversation, over a meal.
Now I was frightened, but as my vision cleared I noticed Cadilla was there… with both of her parents. I wanted to walk over and greet them, but I could not get up. And I was too timid and nervous to say anything. Even turning around was strenuous for my aching body. I tried again…

« Don’t worry, boy », a voice came from behind. I thought a hand from behind me was placed on the top rail of my chair. « It’s just your leg. It’s just a little bruise, that’s all. » And that was Mr Fleurstrom’s voice.

All that I could reply without turning around was « I—I… ». Then I heard someone approaching.

A little girl with a reddish-brown skirt, or Cadilla, went and stood right in front of me with a sympathetic look. « What happened ? », she asked.

« Th—they… they… tried to… left me freezing…nearly kill… » I said in deteriorating composure. I thought about the man’s bloodcurdling scream, the snow dragon, the bullies leaving me wounded and alone in the first place… to be left for dead… And as much I tried to control myself, tears streamed from my eyes, and I struggling to keep myself from breaking down in front of her, with hands trying vainly in wiping away the tears. It was so embarrassing. What a horrible impression for everybody to see…

A sharp rising from a seat at the table behind… followed by a richly dressed lady that walked right up to Cadilla’s left.

« {rolling eyes} Oh come on, pull yourself together. In any case, who were they ? ». So that was Cadilla’s mother, Mrs Fleurstrom. And just as I feared, she already seemed to have a horrible first impression of me.

With my voice just a little steadier than just now, I replied, « The boys… I couldn’t fight them. I cannot… »

I continued, « And then there was a — ». [Mr Fleurstrom said at the same time : « Of course you cannot keep up with their rough games ».]

« You are too skinny », he said. The nobleman went and sat on an armchair on my left. « You just need a lot more nutrients, necessary for all that exercise and work. »

(He was right, except about the part where he said I couldn’t keep up with the boys’ rough games. I avoided looking straight at him and showing my unhappy face. I focused my eyes at the fireplace directly in front.)

« Cadilla », began Mr Fleurstrom.

« Yes, Father », the girl replied, still standing beside her mother.

« Whatever vegetables or other kinds of food that you wish to give him, you could do so. »

Cadilla seemed a little surprised as if she was considering something. « Um… What do you mean, Father ? », she asked. « You know terribly well that Mother would be unreceptive… »

And indeed the lady seemed completely unreceptive to this. « Kent ! You’re ridiculous ! », she stated while walking across towards the man at the chair.

« Cella, please ! »
This looked like the start of an argument between man and woman. I stopped it with a « Madam — I mean, my lady, I’ll work for it… [inaudible to her] Just this leg… »

There was a pause. She sighed with a « Very well then, but you would have to keep your word, boy ».

Nodding nervously, I swallowed a lump of emotion down my throat, and looked directly at Mr Fleurstrom for his reaction. But he had been sternly glaring at Cadilla’s mother all the while. Then he turned to me and said, « For now, I insist that you stay here and wait out this terrible storm ».

Nobody moved for a while. There was the middle-aged man on his armchair to the left of the cosy, warm fireplace. There was the lady with a sense of style standing on the other side, the huge main entrance behind her back; and she was crossing her arms in an annoyed, defeated-looking manner. And there was the girl, no longer with her winter coat, standing beside her and staring at…

Me.

« Rodène, I think I can get you something, perhaps a drink », she said. I almost couldn’t catch what she was telling me so quickly. Anyway, I was simply glad that she was all right also.

« No, Cadilla » — interrupted Mrs Fleurstrom — « Let Eylina fetch the boy a glass of water ».

« No, it’s all right, Mother. Let me do it; Eylina could give Rodène some old dry clothes », the girl said. « Or lend to him temporarily », she added with a bit of hesitation. The lady of the house called loudly for Eylina (whom I had seen but never met before) and Mr Fleurstrom left and went to the dining table. I watched Cadilla going around and behind a structure that seemed to be the centre of the entire house. It was the fireplace, reaching the ceiling like a chimney that went out of sight.

« Yes, madam », said someone out of nowhere. A rather short black-haired lady stood waiting somewhat attentively, in a peasant attire that could be best described as somewhat similar to my mother’s…

« Eylina, fetch the boy here some old warm pair of clothes », went a command from the lady of the house to the maid.

« Yes madam », said Eylina. « Perhaps the ones belonging to Darlt would do…? »

(I was still stuck helplessly on my chair listening to their conversation. Just then, Cadilla appeared, with a glass of warm water in her hand.)

« […]you prefer. But the clothes must be returned », said Mrs Fleurstrom.

« Oh, Darlt wouldn’t want them back », assured Eylina with a little amused smile. « He’s already[…] »

« Um, Rodène…? », said Cadilla suddenly while the relatively towering Mrs Fleurstrom told Eylina to bring a bucket of ice water for my wounded leg.

With a formal-sounding « Now if there isn’t anything else, I shall resume my meal », Mrs Fleurstrom left us to go to the dining table behind me.

Cadilla brought the glass of water nearer to my right hand in a stiff manner. It felt so weird. But I couldn’t resist her offer and I was really thirsty indeed. My still-cold fingers held the surprisingly
hot glass that sent a slight tingle of warmth down my body. I took a sip, finding the water to be deliciously warm and not hot; and forcing myself to look at her in awkward appreciation, I said, «Thanks, I—err…»

She gave me a smile and hurried quickly off. Then she stopped and turned around to look at me. «I’m so glad that you’re okay. Does your leg still hurt?»

Ah, that sympathetic voice of hers… I replied pointing to my left shin, «The pain, it’s a bit painful sometimes but…»

«So… the pain’s sort of pulsating right now?» the girl asked as Eylina passed by her with a bundle of clothes and a bucket of water.

«Yeah, something like that», I said.

…

Eylina had cleaned and bandaged the horrible bloody wound on my left shin with a damp cloth — with Cadilla standing and watching the entire time. Then the lady helped me on my feet with a «Move aside please, Miss Cadilla», and we walked — or limped for my case — around the fireplace-chimney, towards a narrow passageway.

Now we were at the end of the passageway or corridor and there was a door on the right. Apparently, there was a ‹servant room› in the house specially for her and her husband. I was still blown away by the size of this house. A bundle of clothing was passed to my hands.

«Would you need my help in putting these on, Rodène?»

«No err… no Mrs—Mrs…?», I said awkwardly, completely unused to anything of this sort.

She simply smiled in an understanding manner and said that I could keep them if I liked them. And that I could call her Eylina and not Mrs Kettlon.

I went into the room, took off my still-soaked shoes, and dressed myself. Now there was something funny about changing into old clothes which used to belong to an older Viking boy I never knew or met. And there was something special and warm about taking refuge in the grand and cosy interior of a someone’s house — which I had never entered before — just because the weather outside was fatally wintry. With overly large warm clothes, I went out somewhat clumsily of the room with my bundle of wet clothes under my right arm; and there was the waiting Cadilla.

«Looks like you won’t be keeping these; they’re simply too big and completely unsuitable for you.»

One of my soaked socks dropped onto the floor. Although she seemed to hold back a giggle, I could tell that the concerned look on her face hadn’t left. She leaned close towards my left ear and impatiently whispered a string of words:

«Can we go upstairs where we can talk a little bit? There’s a fireplace also and I’d like to show you my room; but my parents only agreed for you to see my room, that’s all. (They’re quite conservative and can be quite traditionalistic, so yeah.)»

«Err…» I began very hesitantly.

«Come on! I’m sure you can walk up that staircase. Here, let me help you.»
« Err… but what about my wet cl— ? » I began.

« Don’t worry, just leave them on the floor here. Now let’s go. »

The persistent girl put her arm over my shoulders and we started hobbling our way out from the hallway towards the big brightly candlelit «main room».

Instead of passing by the fireplace-chimney (I asked Cadilla and she said they simply called it the «chimney» and that «fireplace-chimney» was « simply too ridiculously wordy »), we went towards the double front doors and nearby it there were staircases — on either end of the house. Wow, two staircases ?! But I kept that thought to myself. As we started going up the steps, I could see the adult Fleurstroms on the right at the dining table, peacefully having their meal with an air of dignity.

Well, going up the staircase was doable. I only had to use my right hand to grip the smooth railing, while being supported by Cadilla on my left of course. At last we finished the last of the deep-dark wooden steps and there was a hallway.

« It’s white », I said in amazement. « All white. »

« So you’ve noticed » she commented simply. « But white paint made from eggshells is hard to come by in Lelondell, oddly enough. »

Now, seeing so much white was something unusual for me especially when there was so much of that dark wooden furniture in a typical Norse home. « Your house is so different. It’s like a mini palace », I remarked.

She didn’t add anything to that. I noticed a little window at the end of the hallway. I would like to see whether it was still snowing crazily outside or not. But we didn’t go there; we turned right to another hallway. Another fireplace was indeed there, acting as the second opening of the chimney. I assumed the third chimney opening would be out of the roof.

Facing the flickering flame, we had been comfortably reclining ourselves on a luxurious cushion-covered bench for some time. Then Cadilla broke the silence :

« Feeling warm ? »

With warm large clothes, nice warm socks, and such a cozy place in front of a fireplace it was hard to believe that not long ago I was nearly frozen in the cold outdoors. « Yes… It’s so nice here », I said, trying hard to give my best grateful smile.

« Now err… do you know why I was buried… », I said. [« I know you probably don’t want to talk about it, but… », said Cadilla.]

We looked at each other blankly for having spoken at the same time, and turned our heads away awkwardly.

« I’m afraid to ask », said Cadilla as she stroked her braids shyly with her fingers, « but would you mind telling me about how you got buried in the snow ? »

« Actually, I… »

« It’s okay if you don’t feel like telling about it. »

Actually, it was the other way around. So much is stuck in my heart, waiting to be shared with
With timid glances at her all the time, I told her everything, pouring out my heart bit by bit. When I told her about how Kindt kicked me in the shin, Cadilla winced a little and called him a "violent person she’s always careful to stay away from". And after telling about the boys leaving me, I paused for a while, focused my gaze at the flickering flames in front and posed my burning question of whether a snow dragon existed in Lelondell or not.

"I don’t know… Why would you ask such a thing?", she asked. I could feel as if her shock and confused eyes were staring right into me.

Still with my gaze at the fires, I said weakly, "That howl you heard… I think… I think the dragon got someone, and that someone screamed."

Cadilla eyes stared elsewhere. "Oh, thankfully it wasn’t you who screamed. I was so…" she said softly. The girl shifted in her cozy spot on the cushion-bench and took a fluffy pillow. Hugging it, she continued, her eyes staring into the white floor, "So that’s why you buried yourself…?"

I took a breath and nodded. "And that dragon has a… had a very unnatural-sounding howl."

Cadilla appeared to be lost in thought for a long time.

"You know, um…", she said. "I knew a little about you before we introduced ourselves to each other. I knew about a boy whom the bullies would bully, but I didn’t know who it was. Then one day I found out. Would you like to know about it?"

I nodded silently, my thoughts churning.

"Ah, right…", she said and appeared a little embarrassed. She adjusted herself on the couch and put her pillow on her lap. "I remember that day when I saw you, running across a paved road, zipping past the trees. You looked so scared, so frightened. I became curious and I ran silently after you. You disappeared into the surroundings of a fairly large barn, then you went into a small wooden house."

I nodded, looking at the girl who had her eyes focused elsewhere.

"For some reason, the memory is still very clear to me", she said, continuing her story. "I tiptoed over the very very long grasses, and went to the side of your house — I didn’t know it was your house at that time — and searched for a window."

"Like a stalker. Or a thief."

She gave me an embarrassed smile, turned her head away, and continued talking, "So I found a window and I craned my neck to peek inside. It was an empty… a dark empty room. It turned out to be your bedroom because you suddenly entered the room. That was when I saw you for the first time."

"How come I never saw you?", I said, suddenly worried about the invasion of my privacy by this girl.

"Actually you did, but afterwards. You spotted me among the trees and then you gave chase, remember?"

"Oh that. Argh, you really were uncatchable, zipping between the houses and trees and all that."
“Yeah…”, she acknowledged, less cheerfully as expected. The girl hugged her pillow again and she turned her head to look straight at me. “You… you have the exact same tired and unhappy look now as you did then. And it’s all because of the bullies. I’m terribly sorry, Rodêne.”

I kept silent for a while. “I’m glad that you feel concern for me… It’s touching.”

I shifted myself so that I sit closer to her, and absentmindedly reached for the pillow she was hugging. Despite the confused look, she allowed me to have it and I hugged it quite tightly, tucking my chin over its luxuriously soft texture and surface.

“How are you feeling now?”, she asked.

“A… little thirsty.”

I caught a fleeting smile on the corner of her lips.

“So, err… would you like to have a cup of tea together with me?”, she asked.

I smiled gently. “Yes, thank you very much.”

Viking tea. The drink of the aristocracy… or perhaps the sickly. It should always be drunk in an elegant manner with expensive kitchen utensils along with conversation of an upper language full of metaphors and grandiose words. Or at least that was what I thought until Eylina the maid appeared somewhat humbly from the white hallway, carrying a wooden tray. It gave me an impression of a homelier, in this case, friendlier atmosphere. I watched impatiently as she set it down onto a little low table that I never noticed was hiding just beside the left of the cushion-bench. Cadilla leaned on her stomach, chin resting on arms, over the left edge of the bench to watch as Eylina poured the very special drink called ‘herbal tea’ into two colourful mugs.

“I hope you’ll enjoy it”, said the lady as she handed me a mug, warm to the touch.

After handing Cadilla a glass Eylina left both of us alone, and we started sipping bit by bit some deliciously warm aromatic liquid in our mugs. Cadilla gave a sip and lowered her striped-coloured mug, to reveal gleaming eyes. “Ah, there’s nothing better than a distinct taste of birch, with a nice undercurrent of angelica and Icelandic moss.”

Bringing my nose closer into my mug, I breathed in the warm steam and the aromas of whatever herbs or plants she had said. Ahh! I gave her a grateful smile. “I… like this! I really like it!”

“You do?”

“Yeah! I gave a sip. “But what mug it this?”

“Err… sorry?” she asked, not understanding my probably clumsy question.

“I—I mean, this mug seems to be made out of a different material. It’s not wooden…?”

“Nope. It’s made of clay.”

“Interesting.” I took a big sip.

After a few delightful sips, the mug had become half-empty. “There’s nothing better than to take refuge from the winter in a cozy house”, I said.

“Oh?” she said, a little surprised. “And there’s nothing better than to have a teacup in your
hand». The girl smiled.

« Not just a teacup. A teacup with nice, aromatic, herbal tea. »

She smirked. « Of course! Who would hold a teacup without anything in it? »

Pointing, I said, « Erm… you’re holding it like that now. »

She laughed and said, « And there’s nothing better than spending the winter with a friend, in front of the fireplace. »

My heart warmed. I have a friend.

After that we proceeded to talk (and laugh) about all sorts of random topics, such as finding out that her birthday was on August 25.

It was a long, cold night, with a magical fire fuelled by warm friendship… and warm herbal tea.

---

I opened my eyes lazily. There was a white ceiling above, oddly enough… And my eyes closed back again… so comfortable… I was lying on a something so delightfully soft. Wondering where I was, I turned to my side and saw a fireplace that had already been put out.

« Oh ». Then I realised where I was. I was still on Cadilla’s cushion-bench…?! And it’s bright? Is it morning already…?

Rolling over, I sat up and breathed in some cool morning air. Okay, for the first time, I had spent a night in a place that wasn’t home. It was an unusual feeling. I struggled to stand on my feet. Deciding that turning to the right was the correct way, I limped along the white hallway and entered a sunshine-filled hallway that glowed the white walls. My eyes blinked in awe at the sheer beauty of the rays of sun shining through the window near the staircase.

« Morning, Rodène. »

I turned around to see Cadilla. « Err… morning? », I awkwardly replied. My family never had this habit of a nice and proper morning greeting.

« Have you slept well? », asked the girl in her loose-fitting dress, her hair being a little messy.

« I… think so », I began unsurely then quickly said « Actually yes; the bench is very comfortable ».

« Last night, we wanted to call you down for some soup for supper, but you had already dozed off. »

« Oh ». I gave a short nervous laugh.

With waves of her hand she said, « Come. I’ll show you something ». 

I limped towards her, to the other end of the hallway where there was another window. A garden of snow could be seen outside below, with white snowflakes peacefully descending below. So the storm had subsided.

« It’s beautiful, isn’t it? » asked Cadilla.
« Yeah, definitely. »

She sighed. « But I simply can’t wait for spring to bring forth its colours… »

Some time afterwards, while Cadilla was showing me around the house a little…

Mr Kettlon arrived at the door, firewood in his hands. But I couldn’t really talk to him because Mr Fleurstrom had sent him out on an errand, which was to invite my parents over!

This was the first winter that my family and I did not need to worry about the shortage of food, all thanks to the Fleurstroms’ generosity. It was then that I realised just how warm-hearted the Fleurstroms are, though rich and upper-class as they were.

While Mom carried my wet clothes bundle, I took that pair of nice socks which Eylina insisted I should have. But before I limped for home together with Mom and Dad, I managed to force out a shy and clumsy sentence of gratitude, to the girl that saved my life:

« Erm… Thank you… Cadilla, for you know… your help…? »

She smiled beautifully. All she replied was a softly spoken sentence that ranged in my mind:
« Don’t mention it ».
Cella’s name is pronounced as « ’sɛla » (sell-lah)

A « cone trumpet » is a type of trumpet in Lelondell.

07 Shelter
Album: Winter (by Michael Gettel) Narada Equinox
I think this instrumental fits the part where Rodêne wakes up in a sheltered house

06 Lantern in the Dark
08 Coldest Night of the Year
Album: Winter (by Michael Gettel) Narada Equinox
I think these instrumentals express the delightful feeling of having friendly company by your side, while being cosily sheltered from the cold outdoors.
The faint chirping of birds outside could be heard as the last remnants of the winter had finally withered away. But the fresh, cool morning air did not enliven me one bit. Through lazily opened eyes I saw that the golden rays of the morning sun had already coloured my dark wood study table. The rest of the room, however, was still enveloped in gentle shades of darkness.

Ignoring everything outside, I slowly turned my body around and continued lying on the bed, heavy eyelids facing the ceiling. My thoughts were now circling around lazily: on how my injured leg took much of the fun of the winter away from me. By the time my leg recovered, I had spent the rest of the winter cooped up in my bedroom. All because I had failed to defend myself against the gangsters — again. And because of that I had nearly frozen into an… ice…

« Stalagmite… » I said in a dreary monotone. Even my life had nearly been snatched up by a terrifying snow dragon or monster that couldn’t be seen.

I remembered that while walking home from Cadilla’s house that special snowy morning Mom was so worried, kept embracing me, kissing my forehead, and kept asking me questions about what happened. So I told her everything, leaving out only the dragon part and how Cadilla and I drank tea together, just because Dad was also there. I often felt uncomfortable in saying things in more detail to him.

Dad was never the type to offer «womanly emotional support», and that was what I kept trying to remind myself. However, I still couldn’t ignore the lack of a fatherly hug or even the slightest comforting word. His silence puzzled me for a few days. Then it hit me; he was probably quietly disappointed of my inability to stand up for myself against the bullies all these years. But just yesterday, Dad came up to me and said, «You’re not a fighter, that’s the problem. For now, stay away from the boys and try to ignore them».

I threw my pillow into the air and said with frustration, «I’m not a fighter!» and turned to face my study table. Looking at the pillow that had just landed on the wooden floor with a fluffy thud, I said defeatedly in weakness, as if I were talking to Thustle, «So pick somebody else to fight…»

Mr Fleurstrom said that I simply lacked nutrition. I would be stronger when I get older… But when…?

{Sigh} I turned to one side. Cadilla… Upon thinking about her I tried to get up, but collapsed onto my bed again.

…

…?

There was a knock on my bedroom door.
« Rodène ? Il est temps du petit-déjeuner ! » Rodène ? It’s time for breaktime !», sang my mother from behind the door.

I stayed still in bed, not answering.

« Ton petit-déjeuner est prêt ! » Your breakfast is ready !

I shifted the bedding material around in my bed. The door opened. In walked Mom.

She walked closer and bent down to touch my forehead. « Comment ça va ? Tout va bien ? Are you okay ? Everything all right ?! »

I continued sulking and sighed.

« C’est ta jambe, c’est ça ? It’s your leg, isn’t it ?! »

I shook my head. Mom sat down on my bed.

« You want to say… anything ? », she asked gently.

« There’s so many things on my mind… », I began, « like turning fourteen this year ». I glanced quickly into my mother’s hazel eyes.

She looked at me with an amused looked as if she couldn’t believe what I had just said. Then she said, « Ne t’inquiète pas, Rodène […] Don’t worry, Rodène […] »

I sighed when I could not understand the rest of her sentence.

« What is wrong ? »

« Mom, I wished I could understand your language better. But I think it’s too late to learn a new language when I’m already fourteen. »

The lady suppressed her amused reaction. « Where is it that you got this idea from ? Me, I started to learn Norse when I was… euh… fifteen I think. So it is not impossible, you see ? »

« So you already knew Norse when Dad met you in Cœunette ? »

She nodded.

« Why doesn’t Dad say much about his past ? »

Mom sighed. « Dad has a lot of problems with his souvenirs… memories. »

« You mean he has a memory problem ? », I asked, even though I highly doubted this to be the case.

« No, he just does not like to talk about the past. He says he has a lot of pain when he recalls the past. »

« Did… something happen ? »

« Not really », said Mom slowly. « He told me not to tell you about this, but he stayed in Cœunette for a while, and tried so hard to learn the language but he gave up. (And he was very upset about that). Then he met me, and he asked me if there was a Norse speaking island anywhere
else. I told him it’s Lelondell, and we agreed to go to Lelondell together. »

« I really was born in Lelondell? »

Probably just me, but Mom appeared to hesitate for a moment. « Yes. »

« Dad really couldn’t learn the language? », I asked.

« I think he was too impatient. But learning a new language when you are an adult is more difficult. »

And I’m going to be a real fourteen-year-old teenager this year. « But how about me? I feel so useless relearning what should have been my second native language. »

« However, you have the time to learn. As adults, we do not have much time to learn new things because we have to work. »

Work. Well I’m already working as Cadilla’s gardener boy. « So this means it’s not too late for me to learn Cœunettian? »

She smiled. « Of course not. I thought you never wanted to learn it. »

« Are you sure you really can’t write in Cœunettian? ». I asked, wondering that maybe I would be better starting off with the written form.

She shook her head. « I also can’t write in Norse. But I can read a bit. But only in Cœunettian. »

« Aww… », I exclaimed, a little disappointed, « I think I learn better by reading. »

« No », said Mom. « I believe it’s better to learn by listening. »

« But whenever you say something I don’t understand, I don’t understand! », I exclaimed in frustration.

« You need to use your ears, you must concentrate. Now try listening to this. Pour […] le ke–netti–yÊ, il fo tavwar de la pa–si–āss, de la […] et de la créativité. »

« Can you repeat please…? I didn’t get much. »

« You know, sometimes you don’t need to know all the words to understand the sentence. Mais ok… Je vais le dire… plus lentement cette fois, d’accord? »\But okay… I am going to say it slower this time, all right?!»

« D’accord… »\[All right…\] », I said.

« Now focus on the sounds carefully, and repeat. Pour […] le cœunettien, il fotavwar de la passiäss, de la pèr sé vé rāss et de la créativité. »

« What’s the second word? »

« A–prā–dre », she said slowly.

« What does it mean? »

« To learn », she translated.
« Apprendre », I repeated.

« Très bien ». She nodded her head. « Now you try saying the whole sentence ? »

« Pour apprendre le cœunettien, il... il... »

« Fotavwar. It’s actually two words. <Faut_avoir>. <Faut> and <avoir>. »

« Oh... <must have> », I said in realisation. « I keep forgetting that in Cœunettian, sometimes words join together and a <t> sound just pops up out nowhere. »

Mom chuckled a bit. « Yes, we call it <la liaison>. »


« Yes. It is actually not so difficult once you... euh once you get used to it. Now, say the sentence again...? »

« Pour apprendre le cœunettien, il faut avoir......? I didn’t get one of the words », I said.

« Pas–si–yãss. Patience. De la patience. »

« De la patience », I repeated.


« De la peuh–suh–vérence. »


« Persévérance », I said slowly.

« Okay, good... Et de la créativité. »

I smiled. « I know this word. La créativité. Creativity ! »

She nodded. « Alors, maintenant, tu peux dire la phrase [...] ? »

« You mean... I say the whole sentence ? », I asked, guessing.

« Oui, la phrase... à_nã–tee–yê. En entier », she said.

« Pour apprendre le céunettien, il faut avoir de la patience, de la persévérance et de la créativité. To learn Cœunettian, <must have> patience, perseverance, and creativity ! »

« Très bien ! T’as beaucoup de patience, tu sais ?! Very good ! You’ve a lot of patience, you know ?! You see ? If you do not lose your patience, you can do it. Tu peux le faire ! You can do it ! You do not have much problems, problem, with your pronunciation, so... There should be no problems, for you ! Maybe if we speak to each other in Cœunettian, more frequently, you can improve...? »

« And I know it’d make you quite happy. »

She smiled.

« You have a lot of patience teaching me. »
« Aha », she said. « Try and say that in Cœunettian ? »

« Oh great », I stared elsewhere, thinking hard. « Tu as bowcooh… beaucoup, err, de patience… quand tu enseignes moi. »

« Quand tu m’enseignes », she corrected me.

« Quand tu m’enseignes », I repeated, « It still means ‹When you teach me›, right ? »

« Yes. We don’t use ‹moi› in this case. »

Huh. Interestingly, in that sentence, all that is left of the word ‹moi› is an ‹m› sound stuck at the beginning of the… um… ‹action word›.

« Okay, end of the lesson », said Mom. « I have things to do. »

I breathed a sigh of relief. « You know, Cadilla seems interested in Cœunettian as well. I was afraid at first of her knowing that I am actually of Cœunettian origin, but she is very nice to me. »

My mother gave me a teasing smile. « Ah… She’s nice to you, and you like her ? »

I struggled awkwardly in restraining a huge smile on my face, my thoughts shifting to the pretty girl with her cute, gentle personality. « Yeah… So ? »

« Nothing », she said, still with that smile of hers. « Kédila is a nice girl. »

« By the way, it’s ‹keuh dill lu›, not ‹Ké dil la›. »

Mom tried to pronounce Cadilla’s name and this time it sounded more correct. « Okay. I try to remember that », she said. « So euh, what is it that she has said ? »

« She appeared quite upset, I think, when I told her I have a Cœunettian mom, but I don’t really speak Cœunettian myself. »

Just then there was a knock on the front door.

« Excuse-moi, je vais à la porte. »

She left and went out of my room. With my delayed comprehension of Cœunettian, it took me a moment to understand what she had said: «Excuse me, I’m going to the door.»

I suddenly became curious at who it was at the door that Mom was now talking with. It sounded like friendly conversation, and it went on for quite a while.

So I finally decided to get out of bed. It was already late in the morning, and I had been ignoring my hunger pangs for far too long. So I walked out of my room only to find…

Cadilla sitting at the kitchen table talking to my mother.

I snapped myself out from my dreamy thoughts. I rubbed my eyes. I never expected her to come and visit me herself.

« …Look who’s finally up. It’s Mr Sleepy-Head ! » Cadilla began in a comical manner, intending to shake up my still-foggy mind.

« I think I’m less sleepy now… », I muttered, my eyes delighted at the sight of the girl
chattering cheerfully with Mom.

I sat down and started my breakfast.

« Merci Mrs Statenson. Vous êtes gentille. », said Cadilla opposite me, as she gladly accepted the humble offering of boiled carrots and vegetables, and oats and milk.

I was quite surprised not only because she just spoke Cœunettian, but that her voice sounded really pretty, despite the obvious Lelondish accent. Her «Vous êtes gentille» sounded more like «Voo zet jjäwn teey», but for some reason it didn’t sound terrible in the slightest. Well I already liked her melodious accent in the first place…

« Oh… », said my young blonde mother with a shy smile. « Tu peux m’appeler Héidie… »

« Oh », said Cadilla. « Héidie. C’est… c’est un belle nom. »

« Merci », said Mom with a smile.

« Belle nom » ? « Beautiful name » ? That doesn’t sound right.

I winked at the girl with her thick upper-class Lelondish Norse accent and I said, « C’est un beau nom ». She looked at me and pouted. « You are not the teacher! »

At this I laughed. « No, I’m not… In fact, just now, I had a little lesson with my Cœunettian mother here. »

Cadilla lifted her eyes to meet mine for a moment, then she looked elsewhere. « We’re both ‹liars› then. »

« Ah but still not really. Um, may I ask, why do you seem to be interested in the language? I mean, I have the impression that a lot of Lelondells dislike the Cœunettians… »

She seemed reluctant to answer my question. « Well, I do have a reason…. » She placed both elbows on the table and interlocked the fingers of her hands.
I waited for her to continue but there was nothing but silence. « O--oh, okay », I said, stuttering slightly, looking at her interlocked hands positioned just in front of her lips. « I won’t ask you to reveal anything that you’re not comfortable with. »

We resumed our meal.

« Um… Want some cheese ? », I said, offering a tiny cube of crumbly cheese to my guest. « It’s… homemade », I added with a little pride.

« Sure », Cadilla took it and popped it in her mouth. « Mm. It’s good. »

« C’est bon ? Is it good ? », asked Mom, when she walked near the table again with a bowl of soup. She took a seat and sat down.

« Yes, Mrs Staten… uh, Miss Héidie. J’aime bien les fromages. »

« Moi aussi », the milkmaid said with a smile. « Mais Rodène, il les adore ! [Eel–lā(?) Il lent(?)] mange beaucoup ! »

I shyly shrugged off the comment made about me. « Um… so ‹ fromage › is ‹ cheese ›, right ? », I asked, hoping not to sound like an idiot.

« Yes. Funny you didn’t know that », said Cadilla. « And not to mention you are a dairy boy… », she said and added with a joking, « just saying… ».

I gave an awkward laugh. « No I think I did ; just wanted to confirm. And let us not turn this into some sort of a competition… of who knows more words, because… »

« Because I think nobody would win anyway », she said. « We simply need the basics first. Um… Miss… Héidie ? »

« Yes ? »

« Would you mind teaching us a bit from time to time ? »

« But of course ! But I’m not always free, you see… », replied Mom.

« She’s never free », I stated with a smirk.

« Maybe I can find time to read to you traditionnelle Cœunettian stories… »

« That’d be very nice of you, Miss Héidie ! », exclaimed Cadilla.

I smiled at the Lelondish girl, finding her enthusiasm adorable.

Soon Cadilla finished up her breakfast, with a surprising absence of formal table manners, which I teased her about. She stated that she had this habit back home as well, and that she was « perfectly able to follow all the rules of etiquette — if she wanted to ». 

Mom eventually finished her soup and disappeared to tackle her house chores. As for me, I hadn’t finished my food yet, and so the girl watched me eat on the opposite end of the table. She had her chin placed low on the back of her hands which rested on the table.

« I can’t wait to go outside. »
I said nothing, preferring a lazy, safe day spent indoors.

« You’re not looking forward to the great outdoors? », she said after a moment of silence.

I sighed and said one word. « Thustle. »

« Oh », said Cadilla softly. « You’re afraid of him, aren’t you? »

« I have Thustle-phobia. »

She looked amused and immediately apologised, « Sorry... You know, I am afraid of someone too. »

« Your mother? »

« Yes... but I’m talking about someone else. »

« Err... your father? », I guessed, thinking of how terrified she was when she took the vegetables without his permission.

« Uh, nope. »

« Mrs Kettlon? »

« Still no. I’m not talking about an adult. »

« Nillie? Illy? »

« No... »

« Err... Jessyllka? »

« N--no! », she exclaimed with furrowed eyebrows, as if surprised I could even mention her... or I’m probably reading things again.

« Then who is it? », I asked, running out of guesses.

« Myself. »

I blinked. I looked at her dumbfounded, then I realised she was right. « You’re right. The enemy is often you yourself. »

« Clever of you to get it so quickly », she said. « Now you know what I say? »

« What? »

« You are afraid of the image of Thustle that you conjure in your head, but Thustle himself isn’t as scary as he seems. »

I let her words sink into my brain for a moment. « But... but. He gave me that nasty leg wound last winter, just last month...! »

« I’m sorry about that », she said with a look of sympathy. « But remember how we beat him with apples? »

« Yeah? »
« I suggest that we carry some pebbles in our pockets », she said, forming an imaginary pebble with her fingers.

« Probably a good idea… »

« Don’t worry », she said with her eyes serious. « I’ll protect you. »

I blinked my eyes twice. The girl protecting the boy. Not the most traditionally Lelondish concept, but I never considered us as traditionally Lelondish in the first place.

I gave her a gentle smile in response, and decided to slightly change the topic. « So what is it about yourself that you are afraid of? »

« Um… », she began. « I’ve got a weird feeling about this year. And being fourteen years old makes me feel weird. »

I widened my eyes a bit. « Oh, so we are in the same boat. »

« You mean…? ».

I pushed away my empty bowl and wiped my mouth. « The very idea of being a teenager scares me a little. »

« Yeah », acknowledged Cadilla. « Father once told me that things would change a lot and we would encounter even more things that we wouldn’t always understand. I wonder what those things are. Well I think I know, but still… »

« Mom told me more or less the same thing. »

« Also, I find it strange that I was already a teenager last year when I was thirteen years old, but it’s only when I turned fourteen last year on my birthday that I started thinking about this. »

« Same with me », I said, and stood up from the table. « Okay… », I said lazily, « Now, it’s time to sleepeeep ». 

« Oh no you don’t », said Cadilla, pouting. She went around the table and walked over towards me, as I stretched my arms in the air.

« Hey! », I exclaimed as she started pushing me in the direction of the door.

« If you wish to sleep, sleep in my garden or something », she said.

« Okayyy, you’ve convinced me… », I mumbled, exaggerating my drowsiness which I would occasionally feel after a long meal.

The girl waved her hands in adorably childish glee… and impatience. « I simply can’t wait to get the sun to thaw my frozen fingers. »

« Okay, okay. I’m coming — »

« Hurry up! » she said smiling all over. I walked slowly only to have a pair of hands propel my groggy self all the way to the doorstep, and out of the door. « We’ve got to do something fun! ». 

To think that I never wanted to get up from bed in the first place…

——–<>——
So, the next few weeks of spring were full of the colour brown — one good and one beautiful. The good: the nutritious soil that brought some many living things to life. The beautiful: Cadilla’s long, dark brown skirt…

Once a month, Mr Fleurstrom would pay me some coins for toiling in Miss Cadilla’s garden. And I would also get an extra reward: plenty of green herbs and vegetables for Mom’s scrumptious delicacies. My appetite increased as a result. Greatly.

One afternoon, I was outside Cadilla’s house, wheeling some — dark brown — earth towards Mrs Kettlon, who was hoeing onto some dirt, just beside some neat rows of some flowering bushes.

I pushed the barrow aside. « Um, excuse me… » A shy finger of mine pointed into the air for no reason. « Mrs Kettlon… may — can I ask you something? »

The rather short black-haired lady just kept on hoeing. So she did not hear me from the side. Should I raise my voice? Would that be considered rude?

She stopped unexpectedly, and wiped her sweat from her brow. I went straight to her in front. « Mrs Kettlon, may I ask you something… personal? ». Oh, why do I have this horrible feeling of… un-confidence?

« Yes? ». She continued hoeing.

« May I ask… Did you have children…? Who were they? » I continued in my most polite manner. Hopefully my over-politeness wouldn’t become annoying.

She did not respond but instead carried on with her work. She paused her work for a while. « Yes… but I never got to name him. »

Curiosity overcoming me, I braced myself and asked, « May I ask why? It’s okay if you don’t want to… »

« The Storm of Vadorf. »

My eyes glued onto the ground with horror and sympathy. So that terrible blizzard that occurred around twenty years ago had taken away her new-born son, along with many of the very young and the very old. How tragic. I had read about this with Garend before…

« I’m — I’m sorry for asking », I said regretfully. A feeling of guilt replaced my burning curiosity.

« Don’t be, Rodène. That was a long time ago. My husband, Alker, always says to me, «Don’t worry, the flowers and plants, they are like our children. I’m content, and you should be too» ». She smiled. The lady picked up a shiny green leaf off the top of a bush and admired its beauty, before dropping it. « And you can call me Eylina », she said. The leaf touched the ground silently.

I smiled back to her and thought about that something else to say. « Luckily there’s Cadilla. »

She gave an unexpected quick laugh. « You know, I am surprised you can get along with her », she said.

« Errr…ehee! Yyeahhh ». My shy expression simply made her smile even more.
« She’s always complaining to me about how nobody seemed to appreciate her… » she said.
« Err… but you do appre— »
« I’m talking about someone the same age », the lady said quickly.
« Erm… I really appreciate her », I said, with pure honesty and a little bit of shyness, clasping my own hands.
She stared at me intently. Then her black eyes gleamed as if she was hiding something.
« She’s right behind you, if you must know. »
{!} I stiffened comically and turned slowly to find that Cadilla had been standing there all the while. The girl immediately turned away and covered her mouth to stop herself from laughing. But she ended up laughing anyway.
I didn’t know…!
« Oops », I said awkwardly and I started to walk away slowly and nervously.
Then I picked up my pace as she started to chase me.
« You’re dead, mister ! »
« Oh no. »
« Oh yes ». She smirked mischievously.
A merry-go-round around the garden, and the fact that she could run faster than me, resulted in me headfirst into a pile of dead leaves…
« STOP… [tickle] Ha he… Tick [jab] eeh !.. Tickling me !…[prod !] Ho ho ha ! »
She finally stopped tickling me. I then stood up (with a leaf on my head), and said directly to her in that exact same sincere manner :
« I still appreciate you. »
Uh wait, did I really say that ?
Okay this is bad. Really bad.
I abruptly turned around and wanted to dash away from her, but instead I stood frozen, my back facing her. I heard her walking closer towards me from behind. She stood beside me.
« Um… I — err », I mumbled under my breath.
« Tu… m’apprécies ? [You… appreciate me ?] », she said, slowly turning her head. Out of the corner of my eye I felt her strong gaze burn the entire left side of my body.
« Pourquoi ? [Why ?] », she asked me.
I struggled to generate a good response with my limited vocabulary. I looked at her, feeling
awkward as the seconds flew silently by. I made a mental note to convince Mom to teach me more, despite her busy schedule.

Then I remembered what Cadilla told my mom that time when she visited us at our house: «Vous êtes gentille».

«Vous êtes gentille», I said, copying the sentence exactly, and liking that my sentence was grammatically correct... then the realisation that I had just said «You are nice» hit me. I would never have said that so obviously and directly in Norse, especially considering how shy of a person I was!

Cadilla laughed hysterically for a moment, but with an embarrassed awkward look on her face. I quickly backed away from her, saying frantically, «I... should err, have lunch with my family», then I turned around and fled.

—<>—

«Alors, ton amie Cadilla, comment va-t-elle?» [So, your friend Cadilla, how is she doing?] asked my mother one evening. She was sweeping the floor with a broom. I was sitting at the table. I shifted my feet so that Mom could sweep under the table.

My father, also seated at the table, simply continued his occasional after-dinner wood craftwork as if he did not hear anything — not that he could understand anything anyway (or could he?). His tiny wooden sculpture looked like a tiny sheep, or a horse.

While answering the question, I tried to suppress a shy smile that could not be suppressed: «Ah — err... I--I... She's fine. Yeah! Elle va bien... très bien» [She is fine... very fine]. I was met with Mom’s amused smile, probably scepticism.

«[...]», she continued in her slightly nasal-like voice, which seemed to stress words up and down, and join them all together... Actually, I probably spoke more or less the same way. It just became more evident now, now that I knew what real Norse sounded like.

And... what did she just say?

«Tu n’as pas compris[...]?» [You didn’t catch[...]?], asked Mom. The last part sounded something like «skuh shhtay dee» or «ske shtédi» but due to context, I guessed she meant something like «what I just said».

Mom leaned the broom against the edge of the table. I began to feel weird with us, in front of Dad, speaking in Cœunettian, and speaking of Cadilla. «Um...», I muttered and walked towards my room and I gestured Mom to follow me. The lady picked up her broom and carefully placed it back at the corner. So she had to put it back properly before she did anything else.

With the door closed behind me, I said, «Um... can you say that sentence again?»

Mom had a little puzzled look on her face.

«What? I prefer that you concentrate and don’t do anything else when you teach me Cœunettian... You’re always so busy.»

«Ok, ok. So just now I said: On direk tu lahre–troov plewtoh–rarhmā ces derniers jours». This time she said it more slowly, but I could only understand the last part («...these last few days»).
« You mean you’re asking me », I said, pointing to myself in trying to guess the meaning of the Cœunettian sentence, « what I have been doing these last few days? ».

« Non, pas… exactement [No, not… exactly! », she said, eyebrows frowned.

« But you said 〈on〉 so who are you referring to exactly? », I asked. « 〈We〉? »

« No, no, when we use 〈on〉 here, it is just to express what seems to be the case », she said.

« On dirait que… »

« On dirait que… », I repeated. « 〈It seems that…?〉 »

She nodded. « For example, I can say… On direk je n’ai jamais le temps. [It seems that I never have time.] »

Yeah, but she never has time. It is a fact, not a 〈seems to be〉 thing.

« But I thought you said 〈on dirait que〉? », I said, thinking that I had perhaps misheard the word.

« Oh, that is because when you speak fast the 〈dirait que〉 becomes 〈dirai’que〉 »

« Ah right, this is Cœunettian we’re talking about. Um… peux-tu dire la phrase… plus lentement… cette fois? [Um… can you say the sentence… slower… this time? ] »

« On dirait que tu retrouves ton amie [?] [?] ces derniers jours. »

« What’s the two words after 〈ton amie〉? »

« Plutôt rarement. 〈Quite rarely〉. »

I repeated the words, then asked, 〈retrouves〉 means 〈meet〉, right? ». (I mentally added the sound 〈retroov〉 to the library in my mind.)

« Yes… tu retrouves ton amie: you meet your friend. Tu la retrouves: you meet her. »

« 〈La〉 means 〈her〉 in this case? »

« Yes, and it is before the… verbe. [verb] »

« Tu la retrouves », I repeated. Then I kept silent for a while, trying to organise the new weird words in my mind:

On = pronoun? (whom does it refer to?)

On dirait que or 〈on dirai’que〉 = it seems that

la = the/her

tu = you

tu la retrouves = you her meet → you meet her

plutôt rarement = quite rarely

ces derniers jours (no 〈s〉 sound at all) = these last few days
My mind was spinning. « So… «On dirait que tu la retrouves plutôt rarement ces derniers jours» means… «It seems that you meet her quite rarely these last few days»…? », I said, hopefully that I finally got it right.

Mom smiled and nodded. « So… why you are not seeing her nowadays ? Pourquoi tu n’la retrouves pas ces derniers jours, alors ? »

I took a while for me to understand the sentence and then I realised it was a translation of her previous sentence, because pas = not. (So it’s «Why aren’t you meeting her these last few days, then ?».)

« Pourquoi ? », I began, feeling awkward just thinking about Cadilla.

« You should go and talk to her. And by the way, no one skips work for one week. We really do need those vegetables you bring home. »

« But… but… » I said and stopped. I was indeed avoiding the girl for days ! It was far too long. Now what would she say ?

<Where were you Rodène ?!>

Yeah, that would probably be her reaction.

« But I’m scared », I said, and I then pronounced one of my most familiar Cœunettian sentences I learnt a long time ago when I was young : « J’ai peur ». It literally meant «I’ve fear».

« T’as peur d’elle ?!You’re scared of her ?! » she asked with a raised teasing eyebrow and with an amused smile.

« No… no–no–no [hands waving sideways]… just how to approach her, especially since I disappeared from everyone’s eyes for so long. »

Now I was met with another amused reaction, this time being a frown instead of a grin. Now I wished I knew whether an amused frown was better or not, but what I knew was that she obviously didn’t quite understand me. Again.

« You are doing fine all the while. Just treat her like a lady, and you will be okay. ».

« But I was gone for so long ! », I said. « What if she — I mean they — What would they say ? ».

« They will be happy to see you » was her reply.

I gave an exaggerated sigh. Right. It’s that simple to her.

Mom pushed my head cheekily and added, « You think too much ».

Instead of admitting it, I acted stupid : « I think too much ? ».

« Oui oui… »Yes yes! now I need to… lot of work », Mom said. But before the busy lady could leave, I convinced her that despite my spinning head, I needed to learn a few more Cœunettian phrases… so that I could impress Cadilla if I was going to meet her tomorrow.

Impress Cadilla ? Err… the last time I did that, it went so awkwardly.
After a hurried morning routine indoors and out…

I impatiently rushed towards the direction of the Wooden Wall.

{deep breath}

_The wall should hide me well for now._

I walked silently right into the garden. But Cadilla was not there. Looking left and right I whispered to myself, « Now where’s she… Maybe she’s at the Little Pond ? »

There she was in the distance, sitting quietly by herself at the edge of the Little Pond. All I could see were her flowing braided hair on the back of her head, in a wonderful shade of colour that was both blonde-like brown and reddish… sweeping the green grass. I shook my head in disbelief at how beautiful the whole scene was. It could very well be in a painting ! With unconscious steps, I changed the angle of my view so that my eyes could see her face.

Her long, flowing, earthly brown skirt was dangling over the water and a dark purple shoe made ripples on the sparkling blue surface. With her two front locks hanging down, flowing straight and long, and with her head bowed, she looked as if she were deep in thought with a little ambiance of… of sadness.

_Why is she sad ? Is she sad because of me ? Or is it something deeper ? Oh no._

Without knowing it, I was going closer and the girl slowly turned her eyes to meet mine. Artistically put, her smile lit up my eyes brighter than the weak rays of the sun.

Cadilla slowly stood up. She still looked sad…

Then we both realized we had been staring at each other for some time.

« Oh ! » I gasped. We both turned our eyes away from each other very weirdly, with me fiddling with my stiff hair and her shyly clutching one of her long locks of hair.

« I… err… how are you ? » I began, eyes dancing around the green grass — nervously.

« I’m fine, thank you. »

We had greeted each other as if we were two complete strangers that had just met.

« I’m sorry for avoiding you. » I said.

« Sorry for the… » said Cadilla.

We both spoke at the exact same moment.

« What ? » [« Wha…? »]

« Oops ! » [« You…{giggle} »]

Frowning in comical suspicion, I asked teasingly, « Err… Do I know you ? »

Cadilla blew a quick puff of air with her mouth in trying not to giggle. « Now stop asking silly questions ! I’m the one who should be asking you a question : _Now where have you been ?_ »

_Uh oh. So I was right._ But I was still in a cheeky mood so I answered her, « I was on holiday ». 
She refrained herself from giggling and tried to act serious by crossing her arms. « You really love to play with my emotions, don’t you? », she said in a stern tone. But her face said otherwise.

« Of course! » I laughed, giving her a cheeky mischievous smirk.

« Then we’ll play fight. »

« We’ll what? » I asked dumbly. A swoosh of her hand came by at me. I quickly deflected her blow while saying,

« Close, but no… »

{slap}

« …cheese… » I ended. A light slap on my forehead effectively destroyed the awkwardness.

We walked together through the woods and chatted like we had never seen each other for over two months. (Actually it was only one week). Eventually we ended up in her garden, of course.

And she was chattering away enthusiastically as she described — or should I say over-described — her already blooming flowers — of her Garden of Beauty, officially named by me.

« And this is {gasp} look at the way this flower droops! », she said, in a string of high-pitched words, then composed herself and continued in a calmer more elegant tone, « Oh, how lovely… What do you think of this one? »

« Err… gorgeous? » I said, copying her favourite word.

Cadilla smiled as if she was saying ‘‘You always know how to say the right thing’’. But, what was also gorgeous was her. The way the blue petals of some of the flowers dangle down, quite resembled her two stylish front locks of hair that flowed a long way down. Or her two shorter, thin strands of hair that hanged down on both sides of her face. Even the pointed shoulder sleeves sewn on her dark vest, somewhat resembled a closed flower bud. She brightened up the garden with her…

« …okay, quiz time! What’s the name of this plant? »

{gasp!} I stiffened immediately. Too immersed in my daydream…

« Oops » that was all that I could say.

« Oops? Now listen here! ». And so it expanded into her little lecture of botany…

In the end I had enough. « {placed hands in the air} Mercy! Enough tutoring/torturing please… »

« All right fine », she said heavily. But with pleading brown eyes she said again, « Oh please, name this last one, will you? »

I faced her and said, « Nature’s decorative piece. »

Her eyes widened. « Great name — »

« But not the name », I interrupted.

« You know that », she pointed out, jabbing sharply at the rib near my armpit, making me yelp.
She appeared to tilt her head, saying, « So...? »

Time to torture her back. « So its name is... » I acted as though I was struggling to remember, with a shaking finger up to my head...

Her eyes were fixed on the finger, and...

« Living colours », I finished.

« AAHHRGH !! »

I laughed out loud, then stopped when I saw that the girl wasn’t laughing along with me. She stood still and quiet, looking tired. Maybe I went too far on this. She had spent much energy and enthusiasm on an unenthusiastic student — me.

I began weakly, « Um... Cadilla ? »

« Yeah...? » she replied, not looking.

« Maybe I can remember the names of these beautiful decorative pieces of nature if you... write them all down. »

Her eyes brightened then went down again. « But you’re not interested in plants at all », she said in a small voice. « I can’t blame you for being uninterested but... »

« Hey » I began softly, feeling bad. « I do spend time helping you do the gardening which makes them beautiful. I should at least know their names, but you know I’m better at remembering things that are written down. If I know their spellings — ».

« Hey, that’s not such a bad idea ! » exclaimed Cadilla. « Let’s grab my notebook then ! ». She took my wrist and pulled me along with her.

« Um... where are we going ? », I said, stumbling a bit, baffled at her sudden change in demeanour.

« Where do you think we’re going ? », she replied vaguely as we exited her garden.

We reached her house and headed to the back door of the big stone building.

Cadilla let go of my hand to swing open the door. She muttered something quietly to herself upon entering the house ; something like : « I hope[...] ».

We were now in the kitchen, a rather narrow room that was much longer than I expected. We went through another doorway and entered the main wide area of the house, which Cadilla called the « living room ». I looked all around me at the grand yet simple interior of the living room with its large fireplace and dining table, as I walked quickly to catch up with the girl, now already skipping up on the steps of the staircase in an adorable lively manner.

We walked along the long white hallway that now seemed very bare compared to the more decorated interior downstairs. For some odd reason, a strange feeling of otherworldliness grew in my chest as we two slowed down our pace, our aim set on reaching the end of the tunnel of white, now bathed in dark shadows because it was daytime and the torches were unlit.

The hallway opened on the right where the upper part of the large fireplace could be seen, and I smiled when I saw that couch which I had slept in, on that one special night of snowstorms... and
snow drag—

_I don’t want to think about that._

We ignored the hallway and walked further ahead until we reached the end where there was the window in the wall and the closed door of Cadilla’s bedroom.

I looked out the window which faced the gardens below. I could even see the forests from here…

« It’s beautiful, isn’t it Rodênè ? »

« Oui, c’est beau. Très beau », I said, then looked at her to check her reaction.

She appeared delighted, but didn’t say a word. The girl with long braids turned and opened her bedroom door. I like the way her braids swung around in an elegant and somewhat dramatically cute fashion, or maybe I was imagining things again.

I stepped in after her.

The first thing that I saw was a large bed, positioned against the wall. It had multiple pillows on its soft tempting surface of pure luxury. There was also a neatly folded quilt stitched with colourful, decorative patterns. It looked really warm, and perfect for our always-cold weather. Cadilla walked further in and began searching the table which was set against the wall, the wall that was opposite the comfy bed fit for a princess.

I walked around, taking in the surroundings of her room which gave me a sense of calmness, luxury, and simplicity; and I remarked at the bright white colour of the enormous wardrobe at the corner of the room near where the door was.

I turned to walk near the girl, who was still searching around her tabletop and the bookshelf, which was decidedly the only messy part of her room.

« …now where in the world did I put it…? », she was muttering to herself.

I looked at the rays of light from the windows near the Cadilla’s study table. They illuminated the room with such simple beauty I actually breathed a sigh. I could easily picture the girl, seated at her chair, looking out the window and sketching the scenery of the forest and gardens, while humming a sweet little tune she made herself. The image gave me a feeling of tranquillity. I smiled.

I spied a vase of flowers on the table, and found the choice of colours for the clay of the vase pretty interesting: a brown base with white stripes near its bottom. On the table was a book with the title: _How to Read Caunettian_. I picked it up and said, « This looks interesting, Cadilla; mind if I take a look? »

« Oh! ». Cadilla extended her hand and reached past me, nearly bumping into me. « Sorry », she said and picked up a notebook that was just under the guidebook I had picked up. « There it is. »

Then she noticed the unopened dark blue book I was holding in my hands. I flipped it around to see if there was anything written on the back cover, then flipped it back up.

« Um… », she began a tad awkwardly.
« Did you borrow this from the Library ? », I asked.

She stared at me wordlessly for a moment. « No, it’s mine. »

Judging by her reaction, I decided that I should give it back to her. Instead of asking her if I could borrow it, I said, « Um… could we… look into it a little ? »

I could not read her reaction. « Okay », she said. She took a writing charcoal and a sketchbook, and I turned to walk out of the room. « Where are you going ? » she asked.

« Um… I thought we are going to go outdoors while you show me your stuff ? »

« Well, I sometimes go out to draw, but let’s just stay indoors now, shall we ? »

« Okay », I said, and paced around a little in her room, looking for a place to sit.

« You may sit here. »

I looked at the girl, who patted the space beside her, on the bed she was sitting.

« Are you sure…? », I said while I tentatively moved closer and my palm touched the delightfully soft and cool fabric — which for a farm boy like me, felt like the stuff of dreams.

« I only invite friends whom I trust into my room. »

I sat down beside her, a warm, comfortable feeling rising in my chest ; and opened the Cœunettian guidebook.

Occasionally running one palm across the delightful softness of the bed which had absorbed the coolness of the air, I began to flip through the pages. Meanwhile Cadilla had her large sketchbook and was now scribbling a few words down. I couldn’t help but remark at the stark contrast between the sharp-looking Norse runes she was writing down and the elegant Cœunettian letters which I had no idea how to read.

« It’s funny how language can be so beautifully different », I remarked.

« True », she said nonchalantly, not stopping her work. She was lying on her abdomen on the bed, sketching diagrams of flowers on her sketchbook. We both had our shoes and boots removed, which made sense as the bedding looked too pretty to be stained by something like dirt from the soles of footwear.

I brought up my feet, in socks, onto her bed and sat cross-legged. I flipped to the first few pages of the book and read aloud the main heading : « The Cœunettian Alphabet ».

We each did our own work for a while. Then Cadilla closed her sketchbook aside and patted on its hardcover. « Need help ? »

« Yeah… it’s hard to progress further when I’m still getting used to the basics… »

« It isn’t the easiest, but I’ll teach you. »

I looked at her and smiled. « Okay then. »

So as we lounged about on the bed, I listened to her as she taught me the alphabet which looked like some sort of otherworldly code at first, until I suggested that we write our names using the Cœunettian letters, then it started to feel more personal and make more sense.
So that’s how my name should really look like », I said, intrigued.

Yes. Pity that you had to learn to speak the language you’re supposed to be born in, but no matter. We’ve got plenty of time !

I sighed silently. The way she had said that made me feel a little like a failure. It’s dumb that I have to discover my own language. I feel stupid.

Don’t be like that, Rodène », she said, Even I wished I spoke Cœunettian, as well as Norse, because they are both gorgeous languages.

My lips twitched upwards in amusement. Only Cadilla could apply the word gorgeous to almost everything…

What’s so funny ?

Nothing », I said and abruptly put on a neutral look on my face.

Come on…

I like that when you really like something, you’re not afraid to show it.

She looked away and stared at her sketchbook. I… guess you’re right.

I flipped through the pages of the book and came across a page. Silently, my eyes flew across the lines: Multiple letters in Cœunettian can often be pronounced with a single sound. A word can have numerous silent letters as well, and sometimes the silent letters can change the pronunciation of the word. There are several letter groups […]

Um… can you read the words in this list for me ?, I asked Cadilla.

Okay, I’ll try », she said. Perhaps your mother can read to us next time.

Cadilla pointed at the text and she started to slowly enunciate the words, one by one: Peau. La peau. Peaux. Les peaux. Pot. Un pot. Le pot. Les pots.

The letter group eu is pronounced with a single sound that closely resembles the Norse uh sound. If an r is added at the end of this letter group, the pronunciation naturally changes...
slightly but is more or less the same », I read aloud, and proceeded to read in my mind the same-sounding words on a list, skipping the many words unfamiliar to me. I didn’t read any of them aloud.


I skipped down the lines of text and began reading aloud: « Despite being a simple sound, the sound ‹enn› (as in the Norse word ‹then›) is complicated because it can be written in so many various spellings in Cœunettian. »

Indigène. À la tienne.

And my name ‹Rodène›, of course. The last four letters of my name rhymed with ‹chêne›. Hmm… I wonder what that word means. I glanced down at the next line below.

The letter ‹H› can be a tricky letter in Cœunettian[…]

Huh. It seemed to be another topic entirely. « Wait a minute… », I muttered suddenly. « ‹Fleurstrom›. There’s a ‹fleur› in ‹Fleurstrom›. »

« Yes there is », said Cadilla, who was walking back with another book in her hand.

« What does the word mean? »

« It means — don’t laugh — ‹flower› », she said quickly, as if embarrassed.

But I laughed nonetheless. Cadilla, acting enraged, playfully whacked my shoulder with her book’s cover.

« Ow! Hey! »

The girl pouted. « Told you not to laugh. »

« It’s funny, okay? »

She raised her book again.

« Okay okay it’s not funny!! », I said, waving her hands frantically in mock surrender. She lowered the book. I placed down my hands. « But what about the ‹strom› part? »

« I’ll tell you, if you promise not to laugh. »

« Okay, I promise », I said, an idea forming in my head. I got up, and put her sketchbook and the Cœunettian guidebook someplace safer, like the table behind the low headboard of her bed.

« Alright », she said, « It comes from an ancient Norse word meaning ‹stream›. So basically I’m ‹Cadilla Flowerstream›. »

I blinked my eyes, finding the name beautiful. I sat back down on the bed without a word. « Flowerstream… », I murmured, then I suppressed my smile.
The daughter of the Fleurstroms appeared furious and amused at the same time. "You promised not to laugh!!"

"I'm not laughing, I'm just amused", I said. "I'm now amused at how ridiculously adorable 'Flowerstream' sounds. Yet it's elegant at the same time."

She placed her book on the table and marched towards me. "That's basically the same thing!".

Before she could attack me — possibly with her deadly tickles — I had snatched a pillow from the bed and I had used that to shield myself. "Pillow shield!" I cried.

"Oh... a pillow fight, eh?" she said, a smirk on her cute face... which got blasted by a pillow swung by me.

{boof!}

"Oh you are so dead!" she cried. "RRGH!"

I felt my body fall behind as she pushed me back. I lay helplessly on the soft bed. She climbed up the bed, then, pinning her palm down on my chest and 'cruelly' using it to support herself, she crawled to the other side of the bed where the other pillows were.

"Now take this, mister!" A pillow crashed down on my face.

"Aah!"

She raised her pillow up in the air again to 'mercilessly' whack me again, but I reached up and grabbed it and punched it upwards. It flew up so high in the air, and disappeared from our sight! I got up and grabbed both of the girl's wrists, immobilising her.

A certain pillow fell on the cute girl's head. It balanced for a while then tumbled off comically and landed silently on the bed.

"Aha. What are you going to do now, Miss Flowerstream?", I said enjoying the adorable 'furious' look on the face of the girl with still immobilised hands.

She attempted to move her arms but I kept my grip firm... She jerked her hands and tried to break free but she remained my prisoner. Heh.

"You dare challenge your employer?", she said with a sly look. "Oh well, I'll ask Father to cut your wages."

I gave her a look of mock horror. "Nooo...", Then I started dramatically pleading with her. "Oh, forgive me, Miss Flowerstream, for challenging against your authority. I shall let you go. Err... Vous...me...pardonnez? You...forgive...me?!

"Again with that Miss Flowerstream nonsense and the vouvoiement! », she said. "No, I shall not forgive you. I shall tell Father that I should fire you. Hmpf!"

She laughed loudly while I changed tactics and stubbornly refused to let go of her wrists. This time, she managed to free one of her wrists from my 'evil' grip, and she reached for the pillow to repeatedly whack me on the head. I started laughing at how silly it was becoming.

Just then the door swung open.
« *What is this commotion*? », went a sharp adult woman’s voice.

Cadilla and I abruptly stopped laughing and whatever we were doing, seeing Lady Cella Fleurstrom walk in the room.

« And you, boy », she said pointing directly at me. « Why are you in my daughter’s bedroom? And why are you holding her wrist? »

I let go of her wrist, feeling an inexplicable weird feeling surface in my chest.

« We are just playing, Mother », said Cadilla.

« I’m asking him, not you », stated Mrs Fleurstrom sharply.

I took the courage to speak up: « Cadilla… invited me here to read some books, and see her drawings, my lady. Am I not allowed to do so, for her amusement? »

The harsh look did not leave the middle-aged woman’s face. « I hired you to be her gardener helper, not to amuse her… However, if you find it necessary to amuse her, I suggest you do so outside, such as in her garden. Not indoors in a girl’s private enclosed space, where one is prone to potentially immoral behaviour. Surely you know about this, don’t you? »

I nodded just for the sake of it, and was about to speak but was interrupted by Cadilla.

« But Mother… »

« I’ve told you before, to never to bring a boy into your room. It’s basic behaviour Cadilla! »

« But last time you allowed —! »

« I know what you’re about to say, but that was an *exception*. »

I looked at Cadilla, who looked distraught. She narrowed her eyes at her mother.

« Why can’t you even try to understand me…? », she said, her voice soft.

« *I* could ask that same exact question. Now, I’ll overlook this incident, but I would appreciate it if you, Rodène Statenson, follow the rules of my family. »

I unsurely glanced at Cadilla, who looked defeated. « Cadilla…? »

« Leave », she said.

« But can I at least — », I began, pointing at the Cœunettian guidebook.

« *Please just leave.* »

I got up from her bed and stood. « No, I mean, can I please borrow that book? »

« Sure. Take it », she said, her voice indifferent, her face sulky.

I took the dark blue book. « I’ll take good care of it, okay? ». I walked towards the door. Lady Fleurstrom now stood in front of the white wardrobe, her arms crossed. I walked past her, my vision unfocused.

I turned back to glance at the girl sitting on her bed with her head bowed, then at her mother
who shook her head.

« I believe you owe me an apology », she said, condemning the fun moments Cadilla and I had had as ‘potentially immoral behaviour’, whatever that really meant.

I felt angry inside, but I had no choice. No choice at all. So I raised my eyes to her stern ones and forced out a sentence in a voice weaker than Cadilla’s weakest voice:

« Sorry Mrs Statenson… »

Author’s note :
[18 April 2019]
[20 April 2019]
[13 May 2019]

★ I’m finally back. Please excuse my absence ; I promise I’ll make it up to you all with a continuous series of chapters for you to… binge-read !

★ I first uploaded this chapter on April 18. Then I noticed that the hair spaces (that I had just started using for the single angle guillemets [‹›] in this chapter) are not non-breaking for some reason. Whoops.

★★ Hair spaces are now used within [‹›] (single angle guillemets). Looks better for a novel with a
lot of text. Outside of novels, however, it is not necessary and might be impractical.

EDIT: Hair spaces are a bad idea. Let’s not use them at all. It’s hard to type them, hard to see them, you might accidentally copy them, and they break up punctuation, rendering them more annoying to the eyes. I had to reupload this chapter because I had to trim off all remaining hairs… hair spaces I mean.

I’m trying to simplify the formatting for my fanfic on FanFiction.net because I’m sick of French-style punctuation breaking off into another line, all because FanFiction.net does not allow non-breaking spaces. Using normal spaces in place of non-breaking spaces was a bad idea.

In other words, the version here on Archive of Our Own will demonstrate the exact formatting style I want, while the version on FanFiction.net will be much more simplified to better adapt to that platform. We’ll see which version is better in the end.

Of course, the contents of my story (minus the Author’s note section) are the same on both platforms.

When You Say Nothing at All - Ronan Keating [Piano Cover by Martín Gómez]
YouTube link: https://youtu.be/6J1rfmyqvGE
This beautiful instrumental music of a well-known song helped me in writing this chapter last time. But I nowadays I like the YouTube playlist by The Soul of Wind.

Beautiful Piano Music for Reading 【BGM】 This one is really relaxing ! Go check it out !

If you prefer something more emotional and deeper, albeit more melancholic, I recommend my favourite playlist of all time (also by The Soul of Wind): 2 Hour Beautiful Piano Music. Relaxing Piano For Deep Sleep And Stress Relief 【BGM】

« …look at the way this flower droops ! »

Google « flowers in Sweden fireweed » and open the website to see some images, or click the links below.

Link nº1
Link nº2

English name: rosebay willowherb/fireweed

Scientific name: Epilobium angustifolium L.

Icelandic name: sigurskúfur (« victory tassel »)

Swedish name: mjölkört (« milk-herb »)

Interesting fact: Rodêne was never supposed to see Cadilla’s room. I added the room scene quite recently.

I strive to make my formatting style as beautiful as possible, yet as simple as possible. However, I agree it is a bit foreign and might take some getting use to, especially for the novel version. Allow me to explain and clarify a few details.

In case it is still unclear, the reason why [‹›] are often used instead of [« »] is because the SEF 2.0 style for novels designates [« »] solely for real-time speech, and [‹›] for quoting almost everything else.
1. In this excerpt below, the \[I’ve\ \textit{fear}\] part is a literal translation that is not read aloud at all. [ « But I’m scared », I said, and I then pronounced one of my most familiar Cœunettian sentences I learnt a long time ago when I was young : « J’ai peur ». It literally meant \[I’ve\ \textit{fear}\]. ]

2. The word \textit{living room} here is being spoken aloud by Cadilla in real-time (even though it appears to be an indirect quotation) and that’s why it is enclosed in [« »] double guillemets. [ We went through another doorway and entered the main wide area of the house, which Cadilla called the « living room ». ]

I could have written this part as : [ We went through another doorway and entered the main wide area of the house.]

« This is the living room », said Cadilla casually. ]

Even with the word « \textit{casually} » , this one would look more like an announcement of something trivial, doesn’t it ?

3. The reason why the written text of the book, as shown below here, is enclosed in [‹›] and italicised is because it is not being read aloud in real time by the character. [ I flipped through the pages of the book and came across a page. Silently, my eyes flew across the lines : \textit{Multiple letters in Cœunettian can often be pronounced with a single sound. A word can have numerous silent letters as well, and sometimes the silent letters can change the pronunciation of the word. There are several letter groups [...]}. ]

4. As for this sentence below, the « E », « A », « U », and « O » are obviously pronounced and read aloud by the character, due to the whole sentence being enclosed in speech marks [« »] [ I then remarked, « Wow, they are all pronounced the same way, with an <O> sound. The three letters <E>, <A>, and <U> together are all… <O> ». ]

5. Basically, [‹›] take the place of [‘ ‘] or [“”] for scare, irony, or exaggerate quotes : [ She raised her pillow up in the air again to <mercilessly> whack me again, but I reached up and grabbed it and punched it upwards. ] Of course, it is obvious in this context that she isn’t merciless. The word is just used humorously. She “mercilessly” whacked him.

✽ My text formatting style is now \textbf{SCEF version 2.1}. If you have been reading my story for some time now, you might want to see the first chapter for the updated details for version 2.0. As for the extra « C » in the name, it stands for \textbf{C}anadian French. It is possible to pronounce the acronym « seff ».

\textbf{SEF 1.0} \textbf{→} \textbf{SEF 2.0} \textbf{→} \textbf{SCEF 2.1}

The SCEF style version 2.1 (starting from this chapter) introduces some changes to the dashes and hyphens. This applies to both the normal version and the novel version.

\textit{hyphens} [-]

• Most single hyphens are \textit{normal} hyphens (and not non-breaking ones)

• \textbf{NEW} in v2.1 \textit{two hyphens} stuck together with no spaces indicate \textit{stuttering} are now used to indicate stuttering (stuttering means a \textit{part} of a word being repeated)

\textbf{example :} [ « O--oh, okay », I said, stuttering slightly, looking at her interlocked hands positioned just in front of her lips. ]
• Confirmed in v2.1 A hyphen with a space on either side of it. It is actually really common to see this. However, I still don’t know how to call it.
Example : Colours - Part 1
I don’t think an en dash or an em dash should be used for this.

en dash [–]
• Follows the normal grammatical rules for the en dash
• NOT in v2.1 X To indicate stuttering (a part of a word being repeated due to the speaker’s nervousness or due to other reasons) X
double hyphens [--] are now used instead
• For a word deliberately broken down into syllables by the speaker
• For a phrase unconventionally hyphenated (rare)
example : « No... no–no–no » Hyphenating « no-no-no » with normal hyphens would make this look like a new joined word.

em dashes

• Follows the normal grammatical rules for the em dash

v2.1 ONLY (Archive of Our Own version) : em dash [—] with a non-breaking space before an em dash and a normal space after it (so it’s [°—] )
• for stammering
• to show interruption

v2.1.1 ONLY (FanFiction[point]net version) : em dash [—] no spaces
• for stammering
• to show interruption

EXCEPTION FOR the spaced em dashes for v2.1
• If part of a word is interrupted halfway, then there is no space between the em dash and the word
  eg. : I thi—
  (I think)
  snow drag—
  (snow dragon)

• If it ends with a [°»] or an exclamation mark [°!],
  then it should be [°—°»] and [°—°!]
  and not [°—°»] or [°—°!]
In other words, don’t forget to delete the extra normal space (represented here by a middle dot [·]).

You might be asking me : « Why do you want to create a new style in the first place ? Why not just write using the English or American style like everyone is used to ? ».

Well for starters, not everyone is used to the English style. And there’s even a difference in opinion on whether quotation marks should include the comma or not.

Secondly, fully following the English typographical style rules for a bilingual novel with a lot of bilingual themes doesn’t seem appealing to me. The parts written in French would conflict with the English writing structure, and the parts written in English would conflict with the French writing style… you get what I mean.
Another reason is because I’ve noticed issues with both the traditional English style and the traditional French style. Some authors do not fully follow the traditional rules because of said issues and they want to fill in the gaps (an example is the use of quotation marks to indicate thought, or the use of different quotation marks just for irony quotes). Being a language lover, I said to myself, « We can do more something more beautiful than that. Why not combine the best of everything ? ».

And you can contribute.

Please comment if you want to help me improve on the Swiss-Canadian-English-French style, and if you wish to see an awesome SCEF 3.0 in the future. Remember, it is supposed to be a new universal style for all Latin languages (or at least, just English and French), and there should be a good balance between clarity, elegance, functionality, and practicality.
Colours - Part 2

Author’s note:
* I wonder why I never said this before, but thank you for your honest but simple review!
* Sorry to keep you waiting. I needed to make sure it works first before uploading; if there are problems with the chapter I need to reupload it. I’m trying to avoid reuploading the same chapter multiple times, a bad habit.

* changes main character’s name and reuploads all chapters *

Oops. Well, this novel is a work in progress... Ahaha, ha.

-One particular bright but cool day, with soft white clouds rolling by the sky…

« What is your favourite flower? » I asked. Indescribable colours and aromas surrounded around us on all sides…

Cadilla just stood there like one of the plants. Maybe that question was a little sudden and… Even I didn’t know mine. There were plenty and plenty of flowers and herbs. Finding a true favourite might be a little bit difficult.

« This is hard… very hard to say… »

« Maybe you want to start with your favourite colour? Purple? », I said after some time. She looked like she was lost in her thoughts, with a curled finger to her lips.

« I’m going to have to pick two; I am allowed to do that right? ». She picked out a simple-looking five-petal flower and placed it on her palm. « The blue oleander, and the other one… ».

« But it’s not purple », I noticed.

« I know, but it’s simple yet elegant… with a sense of mystery — »

« Like you », I whispered to myself. Wait, did I just…

« I heard that! », the girl snapped cheekily.

« Let’s just say you didn’t… ». I carefully snatched the flower and stuck it into her hair.
« Hey! {giggle} ». She shooed my mischievous hands away.

« Okay, okay… », I said, smirking. We were silent for a while. Cadilla leaned against the red brick wall of the large arch that marked one of the entrances of the garden. « So… »

The girl looked at me, tilting her head. « Hm? », she hummed cutely.

« So what’s your other favourite flower? »

« Oh! », she said, probably realising that she had forgotten to continue her topic. « Definitely the alpine milkvetch. »

« Hmm, that would probably be my favourite as well ». I said, liking the cute look of the plant having bluish-purple-tinted white skirt-like flowers. I imagined an artistic tailor creating a skirt or dress inspired by these flowers. Ooh, I’d love to see Cadilla wearing that skirt…

« By the way, do you find the book you borrowed useful? » asked Cadilla. « Est-il utile pour toi? » she continued in Cœunettian in her cute Lelondish accent which seemed to make all of her words dance and bounce merrily.

Two conflicting feelings arose in my chest: One was about the disaster with Cadilla’s mother at her house, which Cadilla acted as if it never happened. The other was about my own intense personal study sessions I had alone or with my mom, as I attempted to crack the code bridging the wide gap between the sounds of Cœunettian and their bizarre written form.

« Oui, le livre est très bon… et très détaillé… |Yes, the book is very good… and very detailed…| I’m starting to know how to read the Cœunettian words. It’s like a code, you know, except that there are some exceptions here and there. »

« Wow », she said. « That’s good. »

« I realised that there is a very systematic way how they write the words and the sounds. »

« There is? », she said and her expression surprised me a little, considering that it was her book.

« Yeah, but anyway let me practice a bit », I said feeling a little shy to practice in front of her even though she was not a native or fluent Cœunettian speaker by any means. I raised my hand and picked up the flower still stuck in her hair. « Une belle fleur |A beautiful flower| ». Grinning, I held the pretty little thing in my palm.

Cadilla smiled and pointed at me, « Un garçon bizarre |A weird boy| ». I gave a comical frown, twisted my lips into a pout possibly similar to hers. « Une belle fille bizarre |A beautiful weird [thread]| », I said, pointing back. « Um… fille |girl| », I corrected, stressing the « feey » sound, and resisting the urge to make an « feel » sound.

She placed a finger near her chest, pointing to herself, saying, « Une belle fille bizarre… qui aime les fleurs |A weird beautiful girl who loves flowers| ». I chuckled inwardly. So she admitted that she was beautiful, eh? « Qui aime les belles fleurs… |Who loves beautiful flowers…| », I added to her sentence.

« Qui aime les belles fleurs… et les plantes qui [p…?] dans [l…?] », she said, with a upward
wave of her hand.

« Huh ? »

« Tu n’as pas compris… ce que j’ai dit ? [You don’t understand what I said?] », she said with a smile.

« How did you know so much ? », I said, puzzled, and barely catching her last sentence in which she asked me if I understood what she had said. I knew that her pronunciation had a very heavy Lelondish flavour to it, but her pronunciation seemed accurate.

Cadilla didn’t answer my question and instead walked away from the big arch made of red bricks. She approached a bunch of flowering plants. The girl knelt down and fixed her eyes in admiration of their natural, earthly beauty.

« Je suis une fille qui aime les plantes… qui [pooss] dans [la terhh]. [I am a girl who loves the plants… which [?] in [the ?].] »

« I still don’t get what you mean », I said, feeling a little agitated and inferior.

« Hey, ne t’en fais pas [Hey, don’t worry] », said the girl looking rather amused by my reaction.

I kept silent. I blinked my eyes in confusion when I felt her fingers wrap around my wrist, pulling me closer to the ground. My palm met the soil. It felt cool and slightly damp to the touch.

« La terre », said Cadilla.

« The earth ? »

« Yes, earth ! »

I eventually removed my hand from the ground. There were specks of dark earthly dirt on my palm which I brushed off with my fingers. Because of the dampness of the earth, a brown stain remained on my hands.

« Le terre », I repeated, saying the word slowly.

« No. La terre », she corrected. « It’s a feminine word. »

« Oh great, now how are we supposed to remember that it is feminine ? », I said, trying hard to think of some memory tricks.

« I think that it has something to do with the spelling of the word… but the method doesn’t always work », said Cadilla, raising one of her knees as she changed her kneeling position. Her hand brushed off some of the dirt on her dark brown skirt. The dirt appeared darker than the colour of her skirt, and in fact it was almost black. I remembered Cadilla telling me that the black soil was black in colour due to the dead leaves that had decomposed.

I reached and touched the hem of her long skirt, and dusted away more dirt that she had missed. « Wow, there’s so much dirt, your skirt is stained. »

« Oh, it’s all right », she said, « C’est pas grave… », she continued and I guessed she meant to say the same thing as her previous sentence in Norse. I thought I heard Mom said that expression before. « Tu sais, c’est pourquoi je mets toujours cette jupe brune [You know, this is why I always put on this [?] », she said, giving a little laugh.
« Err, what is ‹jupe brune› ? »

Cadilla felt the fabric of her skirt. « Guess. »

« Skirt ? »

« Yep », she replied casually. « Brown skirt. »

« Oh », I said, « I thought it was one single word. »

The stains no longer appeared visible on her skirt because the girl had almost completely gotten rid of them. She stood and stretched her arms, and bent down to touch the tips of her purple boots.

« So », I said, wanting to clarify, « ‹Brown skirt› is…? »

« La jupe brune », she said and repronounced the last word. « Ah, this word is quite hard to say. »

« Aha… », I said, realising something. « La fille. La fleur. La terre. La jupe ! [The girl. The flower. The earth. Skirt !] »

« Oh yeah », she said with a laugh. « Yeah, pretty much. »

« Now I know which words are feminine ! », I stated proudly.

Cadilla gave me a weird expression. « I'm pretty sure that's not how it works… ». The girl walked ahead of me, to a nearby tree.

I followed after her. « But…! », I said protesting, « I have a very good image just associating them all in one group… whatever method that works, am I right ? »

She suppressed her amusement.

« Then how do you remember which words are feminine or not ? », I asked.

« Uh… », she began unsurely.

*Ha. Maybe she doesn’t even have a method.*

« Sometimes I check the word’s spelling while other times I imagine the word itself in different colours », she said, « Like for example if the word is feminine, like ‹la fleur›, I imagine a pink word describing a pink flower. And then I’ll write it down on a list. And if a word is masculine, like ‹le ciel›, I imagine it being blue. »


« But it doesn’t always work and sometimes I just can’t think of a way to remember its gender. Like ‹fourmi›. »

« Fourmi ? »

« Uh, basically it’s that tiny six-legged creature that is crawling on your shoulder now », she said pointing at my dark blue tunic.

I hurriedly brushed the black ant off. « This masculine-feminine business is starting to make me wonder if everything is in fact male or female. »
Cadilla giggled while I laughed.

« Anyway, it’s time to do some gardening », she said, picking up a shovel.


« Um… », she said, standing still for a long time. « C’est temps… no err… Ah ! Il est temps de faire… le… du… jardin. [It’s time to do… the… of the… garden] ». She scratched the side of her head. « I don’t think that’s right… »

« Jardin means garden, right ? », I asked as the girl muttered off some words, debating with herself.

« Yes. But I don’t know how to say gardening », she replied quickly. « Maybe I’ll check the dictionary later. »

My eyes grew wide. « You have a dictionary ? »

« Of course silly. How else would I know how to say these Cœunettian words ? », she said, her eyes darting around rapidly.

I was beginning to think she was hiding something, but I kept silent. « Okay, anyway, let’s do some gardening ! », I said, making her smile widely in response.

…

We were resting at the edge of the Little Pond of Eau after a hard day’s work at her garden, with our hands feeling cold to the air after being rinsed with pond water… and as for me, with my mind filled with the strange Cœunettian words that Cadilla had taught me in her “demonstrate the word, touch the object” teaching style (she laughed when I told her that).

« I love your mother’s cooking », Cadilla said to me.

I could guess that she was still dreaming of Mom’s hot-smoked salmon salad from the other day.

« Aha. Do you know how to say that in Cœunettian ? », I said, with a teasing finger of mine jabbing the air.

« Oh quit testing me », she said, looking annoyed. « In any case, I think it’s J’adore… la cuisine de ta mère. »

« But I thought cuisine means kitchen ? »

« It also means cooking. »

« Oh », I said. « Well, my mom loves cooking, so that’s why it’s so delicious ! »

« Yes. I can see that she has passion in it », agreed Cadilla, probably not knowing that I could take what she said and apply it to the girl and her drawings and flowers.

« Yes, but I love your drawings… », I said. « Vous avez une passion… pour drawing. [You have a passion… for drawing] »

« Le dessin… [Drawing…] » she said rather quietly.
« Vous avez une passion pour le dessin  
|You have a passion for drawing| », I said. « Is my sentence correct ? ». Secretly, I also admired her gorgeously soft, flowing hair. And their mysterious brown-red colour…

The girl shyly smiled away, then fixed an unreadable expression that looked really funny. « What ?? », she said, sounding annoyed, but her face showed otherwise.

« What ? »

« Firstly… », she said. « Why do you keep addressing me as ‹vous› ? It’s… »

« Wrong ? », I said, confused. I remembered Cadilla using it with Mom so I thought I should use it with her.

« No it’s not wrong. It’s just weird because we use ‹vous› when you address someone you respect. So when you talk to me, you should use ‹tu› instead. »

« But I respect you…! », I said, embarrassed that I had to say it out loud.

The girl looked away, hiding whatever expression she had on her face. « No… I mean… someone higher in the hierarchy than you. »

« But you are higher in the level of hierarchy than me », I said. « I’m just your gardener. »

Cadilla looked downwards at her feet dangling over the edge of the pond. Then she started giggling uncontrollably. I made myself laugh along with her, rather awkwardly.

« I’m not a princess, okay !? », she cried out, this time with an obvious embarrassed, irritated look on her face.

« Okay, okay… Calm down Miss Cadilla. »

« Call me that one more time, and I’ll throw you into the pond. »

« Okay… », I said in a gentler voice, « Now let’s just take a deep breath… ». Taking a deep breath myself, I rested my hand on her shoulder. « And have a relaxing time looking at your amazing and beautiful drawings… shall we ? »

She looked at me, her eyes cutely half-closed as if she was getting tired of me. « You never stop teasing me, do you ? »

« I’m serious. »

But she sat there not moving an inch, her brown eyes twinkling.

« Please ? » I pleaded with my hands clasped together.

She rolled her eyes, but in a playful, embarrassed manner. « Fine », she said before she dashed off into the direction of her house. I uncrossed my legs and turned to face the pond, to dangle my legs over its watery surface. The tip of my shoe started making ripples on the water.

Moments later, Cadilla was already back carrying a little stack of papers.

« Wow, that’s quick ! Speedier than a rabbit ! »

« Don’t call me that. »
Ouch. Bad–bad–bad–bad. « Sorry », I said. My eyes looked downwards. Bad comparison. I gave a nervous chuckle. Apparently, calling someone a rabbit or a cat was considered very insulting in Lelondell. No wonder the gangsters would sometimes call me that.

Although most of Cadilla’s drawings were all colourless, grey charcoal sketches, they effectively captured the beauty and awe of nature. They ranged from flowers, to scenic views of forests, and to birds.

I watched in admiration as the graceful girl beautifully expressed her heart as she drew…

Vividly stunning drawings of her favourite flowers, paper on the grass, white clouds rolling by above…

All in quiet beauty.

We spent much time chattering away about various drawings. All of them had one thing in common: they were splendid images of beautiful colours all around. But a particular one struck me. It was a surprisingly accurate sketch of a tiny terror. It was a little odd that she drew the very thing that every Viking hated. And she said that she only drew ‘anything that’s beautiful’.

« How did you manage to portray this dragon so well ? », I said with a little suspicion.

« I, uh, I crept up close to it and captured it with my mind ». She said that nonchalantly, as if it was a very normal thing for her to do.

« Wow… Nice ! » I exclaimed. My left palm felt the green grass to make sure it was dry then I gently placed the drawing down. How could she draw so well ? I didn’t understand why Mrs Kettlon said that nobody her age could appreciate her.

I picked up a magnificent sketch of a bird perched on a branch. « Awww… this is sooo cute ! » I exclaimed. Underneath the feathery creature was a label: WILLOW WARBLER. Elegant handwriting too… But no name of the author, huh.

I held the drawing in my hands for some time. I glanced at its creator, who was looking intently at me.

« Um… », I said, lowering the paper.

« N--nothing… it’s just that I find your mannerisms a little interesting. »

Ah right. A littil interesting. With her cute pronunciation of the word ‘little’ to stress a euphemism. Illy and Nillie would say ‘funny’ to avoid saying something more insulting to me. At least they were polite and indirect, but sometimes I wondered what the girls were really thinking about me.

« What do you mean by that ? », I asked.

« You really want to know ? »

I nodded.

« Fine… You know, sometimes you act like a girl. Your chuckles sound so girlish, in fact, they are almost like giggles. »

I was shocked by this. « Really ?? ». Then my smile dropped. « Um… so… basically… », I
said slowly. « Is it a bad thing ? »

She smiled. « No… A little strange, but I don’t see anything wrong with it. »

Thank you. I thought inwardly. At least she doesn’t ridicule me for being different.

Still with the paper in my hands, I began, « Cadilla, may I ask you something ? ».

« Of course. »

I was struggling to not hide my face behind the paper. « May I know what is your hai — err forget about that sorry — I mean… You… Do you have anybody else to talk to ? I mean, like girls your own age ? »

Her smile dropped. « No… ». She looked down sadly.

I prepared myself for my next question. « May I ask… why ? »

She just sat there without a word, looking a little upset.

Wait, she’s now feeling that common « depressed » thing that often tortures me ? My heart sank. I placed down the paper slowly and said, « I—I… Sorry… for asking. I’m just curious why you don’t seem to talk to others ». Somehow, I felt that it did not seem right for her to be only around me all the time.

« There’s no need to apologise, Rodêne. It’s… me… But it’s a secret. »

Desperate to know her more, to know what she’s thinking, and to care about her problems, I kept silent for a while and fought my own thoughts for some time. How should I get her to open up ? I had an idea, but it was risky.

After a deep breath I began, « I’ll tell you my biggest secret first then. Well, other than the way that I laugh with myself a lot. »

The girl tilted her head ever so slightly while not looking straight at me. « Huh ? …All right, go on. »

« You know why the other boys hate me ? » I said. « Other than the fact that I’m quite a timid person of course, and that I used to be a sickly child dependent on his mother. »

« Not really », she said in her usual soft voice.

« I may not even be a Lelondell at all. »

Cadilla didn’t quite get it. Maybe I said that too softly. Curious, she asked for clarification : « Sorry…? »

« A complete foreigner, not a Lelondell at all », I said again. « I mean, my mother is from the isle of Cœunette. And my father, I don’t really know where he comes from. He said he was from a different land. »

« Really ? ». Her eyes were wide with astonishment.

« Yeah… » I weakly acknowledged.

« Where ? »
I sighed and said with my knuckles on my forehead, « Ah, he refused to tell me more about it ». « Oh », she said and fixed her eyes onto one of the drawings laying on the grass.

Clasping my own hands, I said, « I hope you understand ». « Why of course I do », Cadilla said, with a look that could have said ‘Err… Hey ? Don’t you trust me ? You’re my friend’. « As far as I’m concerned, you’re not a foreigner », she said, « so stop thinking of that ». Touching… She took that far easier than I thought. « Thank you… for understanding ». I gazed at her friendly smile. Her touching brown eyes always seemed to radiate a strong sense of something within me. Then my eyes darted away by themselves.

I knew she told me that I wasn’t a foreigner, but sometimes I felt like I was a foreigner in my own country land.

After a while of each of us being in a situation of not knowing what to say, with me still dangling my legs nervously over the river bank and her… well, sort of the same, I forced myself to ask her this : « So can we play the Secrets Game…? ».

Her eyes blinked. « The what ? » « Secrets Game. Err… very simple », I stated quickly. « I told you my secret. Now you can tell me yours ! {shy laugh} So… it’s fair. » « O… kay » she said slightly reluctantly and paused for a while. « I… used to be good friends with Jessyllka Tilton ». She paused again.

« With Thustle’s sister…? » « Yes, we often played together as kids. But the more we grew up, the more we distanced ourselves from each other. She became sort of like haughty and proud and demanding, and she… I, well… anyway I mean, our interests changed. One day, we had an argument. She said that I played too rough and fought even rougher. » « You ? Rough ? So she maybe thinks that throwing water at someone for fun was rough. Okaayyy. » She sighed. « Anyway, none of the girls really get along with me. » « Including Illy and Nillie ? » I asked.

« Yes. They love my garden, but I refuse to join in their gossiping. They really overdo it, always ». She continued firmly, « I think it’s really rude to intrude on people’s privacy ». Upon hearing that, I leaned a little closer to her and whispered angrily, « They were the sole reason why Thustle knew I was a so-called ‘half-blood foreigner’ and why he used that fact to make fun of me and take advantage of me. » Upon saying that, we both suddenly stiffened and looked around fearfully to make sure those troublemakers were not anywhere nearby.

I stood up and peeked around for a short while then I sat back down again. « Nope. They’re not here. Speaking of them, I just remembered something what Nillie said… She said that Malcost said
that you once kicked him out of your garden; because he was picking your flowers, without permission — of course. »

« He wasn’t only stealing them, he was 〈accidentally〉 destroying my plants while doing so », said the girl angrily.

« What! Stealing and destroying?! Couldn’t he, err, steal a plant without destroying it? » I shot out.

« Of course he couldn’t. He’s Malcost. He must destroy something. »

« Worst thief ever », I remarked with a blank face.

« Exactly. »

I relaxed my mood and said in a calmer tone, « No wonder we three are rejects. »

« What do you mean? »

« I mean… you, me, and Garend just can’t seem to fit in with the rest. »

« Hmmm… I wouldn’t like to say 〈rejects〉, but you’re quite right… » said Cadilla and she shyly looked away, reddish-brown locks flowing gently down. Her shoe went over the water, forming a ripple of a liquidly pattern…

That style. My heart ached to tell her that…

« What is it with my hair that’s making you stare? » she asked, herself staring at the way the water was moving.

{Gasp!} My opened mouth then went into an awkward shape. Too late. Might as well ask her.

« I… err… just… »

Cadilla’s eyebrows. I couldn’t guess whether they were annoyed or amused. I began, « Okay. If you want to know… »

« And I want to… », she said with an almost undetectable, faint smile. She leaned closer ever so slightly.

« {My eyes looking downwards} Sorry for asking, but, I think… ». Nervous. Nervous. Stalling was making me more nervous. And her patience could run out anytime. My eyes met hers finally.

« I like your hair colour. What colour is it? Tes cheveux, de quelle couleur sont-ils? »

We both breathed sighs of relief, with me inching away and wanting my body to disappear. Shouldn’t have said that. Shouldn’t have said that. Luckily there was an obvious literal space between us two.

Cadilla broke the silence with a soft-tone question, « Okay, you’re my friend, I’ll tell you. But will you please not make fun out of it? I’m serious. »

« I--I will. »

« Truthfully? » she continued softly.

I nodded my head slowly. But apparently, she wanted me to say it out loud.
« Truthfully », I acknowledged, secretly wondering why she was so serious.

« It’s chestnut. »

I didn’t catch her. « Err… say again? »

Cadilla sighed and said hastily, « My hair colour’s not blonde or brunette. Or auburn, or even burgundy. »

Nodding my head along, I tried in vain to understand these unfamiliar terms. « What’s broo… brunette? ». Every day I would learn new words from her. And new styles of speech.

« A brown-haired girl. {rolled eyes} Obviously. »

I suppressed my embarrassed smile. « Okay. But yours…? »

« Chestnut », she said slowly.

I was about to make a good compliment but my mind’s ideas were all terrible like: *Fits you. Chestnuts, I like to eat those, but my family doesn’t have the money; they are surprisingly rare and expensive in Lelondell. Cute term. Starts with the letter C. C for Cadilla your name…*

In the end I said : « This… seems to be a sensitive topic for you. I’m sorry about it. And for bothering you. »

She gave me the faintest of smiles. « I’m fine. »

We sat peacefully for a long time, slightly apart from each other. The cool breeze blowing soft feelings of peace into our hearts, the sparkling blue water on the Little Pond of Eau turned simmering golden as the sun gradually descended. The only thing missing was that we could never get to see the sunset in Lelondell for real. A huge pity.

Eventually it started to get dark and I said a little worriedly, « It’s getting late ». While standing up I added, « I should… should be going. »

« Bye », she said softly, smiling at me as I disappeared from her sight, and into the evening light.

—‹‹››—

It seemed to me that I was spending every tiny little second with the girl Cadilla. Well who wouldn’t? She always treated me nicely, and I also got paid for helping her in her garden.

Sometimes, in an impatient attempt to boost my knowledge, I would borrow books from the Library (one book each for a shiny Lelondish cala) for a solitary reading session at my study table at home, where I would browse through multiple genres of fiction and nonfiction alike: a how-to-tie-a-rope manual, tales of the Norse gods, and a nice little book of styles and colours for hairstyles.

And also: tales of adventure and err… romance crept into my growing imagination. The chivalry like sort of stories tended to include the very thing I strived to exclude from my thoughts and life: *dragons*. Attacks or raids on our villages or not, I didn’t care. I couldn’t anyway.

Why read alone? The boys would scoff at the stuff I was reading. And Garend would definitely chatter non-stop.

And of course, I would also borrow Cœunettian books for beginners that I would ask Mom to
read to me. I hoped that with time, I would be able to converse, and even read, in Cœunettian more fluently and delight my mom and Cadilla. I wondered why Cadilla could speak Cœunettian so well considering there was no other people speaking Cœunettian. Maybe I should ask her to tell me during another round of the Secrets Game.

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One particular morning…

{door opened softly}

I skipped out of my bedroom. « Morning, Dad ! », I cheerfully greeted my nowadays introvert father. He was having his usual « morning armchair routine » (or at least that was what he called it).

« You’re up… » went an uninterested deep voice. « Already ? » went a surprised deep voice. It was just starting to be bright outside.

« Yeahhh… Already ! ». I stood still not knowing what else to say. « Heh ! » I laughed shyly.

« Tu vas prendre ton petit-déjeuner ? | Are you going to have your breakfast ? | » my mother called back to me, and I was about to burst out of the front door.

« Yeah yeah, bye Mom ! Dad… »

{door closed softly}

{door opened softly}

I stumbled in the house, and started to go straight towards the meal table.

« I thought you had gone out ? » asked Dad, still in his armchair.

« Je pensais que tu ne voulais pas le petit-déjeuner ? | I thought you didn’t want breakfast ? | » asked Mom who was standing beside Dad.

« Erm… Looks like I going to need my petit-déjeuner », I replied quickly while pulling out my chair from the table. « Petit-déjeuner délicieux, here I come ! | Delicious breakfast, here I come ! | »

--- Shift in POV ---

Lastern Statenson pondered over his adrenalized teenage son. Even the way he walked and talked had a joyous spring to it. Unlike himself, who was withdrawing more and more, perhaps due to the fear of hearing the other anti-foreigner Vikings gossiping about him not being a local, Rodène seemed to interact surprisingly well with most Vikings, even adults. Unlike himself, who was becoming more and more like a timid withdrawn individual, the lad was growing in confidence every single day, despite his pitiful lack of physical strength and disinterest in anything related to combat.

The man sighed while staring at his sword. Unfortunately, the more Rodène grew up, the more he was turning out to be exactly the opposite of the child that he was expecting… the child that could carry on his father’s sword-bearing legacy… the child that could continue in his father’s footsteps. The child that could protect himself from the constant threat of the invading flying reptiles. Also, he had the most unstable emotions of anybody he had ever seen. And the typical Viking Norse was notorious for his apparent lack of expressing their emotions…
The Viking in his mid-forties switched his gaze upon his sweet-natured Héidie who offered a mug of water in her hand, which he took. She may be a little simple-minded; but her hazel eyes always had a very stable, gentle, and patient expression. Maybe Rodène took quite a lot from her as a peaceful homemaker. But there was one thing: her calm demeanour contrasted with Rodène’s changing nature. Ah, life. Always unpredictable.

—«Shift in POV»—

By the time I finished my breakfast and headed outdoors, everything was already brilliant with the rays of the sun. With my shoes making no noise, I started stealthily navigating around the village. I spied Thustle talking to an adult Viking just around the corner. Bully alert! I immediately hid behind a wall and peeked at that boy. One thing I had learned was that he was a two-faced hypocrite. So, when there were no adult Vikings around… you get the idea. For now, that handsome lad was smiling brilliantly away, combing his wavy blond hair with his hand. Not his true self. Well, somewhat.

But that… artificial voice. He was imitating the posh Lelondish style of speaking like Cadilla’s!

« […]? […] I must say, it pains me to hear of such atrocities, sir… »

_Hmph_. I rolled my eyes. « As if he could… » I whispered, « Well I can tell that the accent’s fake. »

As for «atrocities», well, what about that winter incident? Their cold revenge that winter against me? Okay nowadays I was having less trouble with the gangsters. If they didn’t bother me I wouldn’t have a reason to bother them. Easy.

Disgusted, I stopped peeking and made myself disappear quietly from the scene.

I was walking along Mr Stheen’s barley field, which was in eye-soothingly green reflecting the freshness of spring. Wow. And there were singing in the air by the birds, with some of the cute little things pecking along the stony rugged pathway, and the lot. Hmm… also nowadays, even the dragons seemed to attack less. A few times the fiery creatures did attack, but the Market was raided rather than anywhere else. And so, my parents’ barn was untouched. Well, except for the one time they stole several sheep rather quickly and peacefully. Odd.

Then suddenly, I saw someone in the distance, walking closer to me. Huh? Jessyllka Tilton? Usually that girl with the wavy blond hair would be indoors or something. She seemed to act quite cold, and at least, expressionless, to almost everyone. She rarely spoke.

« Um… Morning », I tried greeting her as politely as I could.

Her green eyes darted quickly around me and she walked off haughtily without a word. It was a pity she never smiled. She could be quite pretty if she did. Not even a little joke that I had made one time could cause any reaction to that expressionless face of hers.

I decided to approach Cadilla’s garden from the Wooden Wall and not from the busy vegetable farm. Tiptoeing silently to a tree, I peeked ahead to find that she was already in her garden.

The little damsel was watering her plants with a bucket. Even from a distance I could see that she waters them with her heart… and with passion…
Cadilla placed down her half-full bucket and decided to rest for a while. She stretched her arms and started to look around. I sneaked closer, standing in the middle of the garden. I crossed my arms, wondering how long it would take before she saw me —

« Aww… You spoil the picture ! » cried the girl as I approached her nearer.

Well that was quick. I made a mental note to be sneakier next time. « What picture ? », I teased and tried to look confused. I pretended to be frightened and said, « I’m sorry for trespassing on your territory. Je suis désolé. I am sorry. ».

« Oh, you’re désolé, eh mister ? », said Cadilla and she crossed her arms, while failing to make herself look scarier. In fact, she just made me want to laugh — almost. I continued my cheesiest smirk without saying a word, trying to guess behind that face of hers…

« What are you grinning at ? » she asked, in a manner probably trying to read my thoughts too.

« Nothing », I replied simply.

« I know it’s something. »

Okay, time to mess with her. « Someone, actually. »

« Who ? »

« You. »

{Splash !} went the wet bucket onto my head.

« Now you spoiled my head ! ». I laughed into the bucket which muffled everything up.

« I think your hair needs watering to grow better ! ». She giggled away using one of my jokes — against me.

…

After plenty of gardening under the yellow rays of the sun, Cadilla and I decided to stop for lunch. « I think it’s lunchtime », she said.

« I was waiting for you to say that », I replied.

« Oh you {giggle} greedy cow ! »

« Hey ! I cannot resist my mother’s meals, you know ! », I cried out. (And I work with those four-legged creatures on the barn daily.) Now getting better in teasing me, eh ? Somehow she managed to insult me in such a playful manner I wasn’t offended.

« So shall we visit, say, the harbour, after joining you for lunch ? »

All that playful mood went poof for me. My eyes grew in astonishment at her request. Somehow I felt nervous. The harbour was noisy, busy, and full of odd, unfriendly people. I looked away and fiddled the fingers of my left hand nervously.

I muttered something to myself, something liked, « I’m not sure ». 

Her smile faded. I turned to look at the girl. She looked disappointed. Oh no. Did I just speak out the wrong thought unknowingly ?
« Sorry, Cadilla, didn’t mean to… I was just little surprised that you want to… » I began frantically.

Her face was hidden by her long reddish-brown locks. Oh — was I really that bad?

« Okay, we can go… »

« Why do you seem so reluctant? » she asked and we both started walking to my house.

« I--I… » I did not know what to say. Should I tell her one of my secrets?

We were walking together in silence among the trees, sunshine squinting through the abundant green leaves above. I spoke:

« I have an issue with myself. »

She turned to glance at me. « Huh? Like what? »

« I have an irrational fear of trying new things for the first time. »

« Oh? » said Cadilla nonchalantly.

« It’s my personal secret », I said uneasily. « It’s almost like a phobia. »

« Well, then you should get rid of it; it’s not very good if you want to achieve things in life. »

I stopped walking. My head went down. Moodiness overcame me. For some reason, her words hurt more than punches and kicks.

Cadilla stopped walking in front too.

« Speaking of phobias », I said stiffly, « What is yours? Quelle est ton… ta peur? »

She answered in a string of Cœunettian words I couldn’t catch.

I sighed to myself. « Sometimes I wonder how you can speak Cœunettian. Who taught you? »

With an unreadable expression on her face, she started walking ahead slowly.

« Hey, it’s only fair that you say something, since I’ve already told you my secret », I said, eyes fixed on the elegant way her hand reached to the back of her hair, brushing the long strands.

« I thought we’re not playing the Secrets Game » she began unsurely and turned around slowly. « Fine, I guess I owe you one secret. »

I just kept silent, feeling bad for apparently forcing her to reveal information in such a reluctant manner.

« You see, once a Cœunettian family visited Lelondell when I was young. They did so to learn more about the Lelondish Norse language and culture. »

« A royal family? »

« Not… exactly. They were ambassadors of Cœunette. The ambassador brought his family along to sojourn for few years. His wife, and two children. They also brought along bodyguards
and servants as well, but the ambassadorial family was more modest than I had expected. 

She stopped talking for a while, and sighed. « Whenever I speak Cœunettian, I remember them, the two children, [?] and [Emmalayn ?], and their servant girl [Maylindt ?]. »

« They sound like beautiful people », I said, not fully catching what she said. I wondered how the names would look like in written form…

« They were », said Cadilla. She rested her hand on the bark of a tree. « They were very patient in teaching me their language while I improved their Norse. They played with me as children… and they have been a wonderful influ— »

Out of sudden Cadilla froze. Her head turned and looked around. I knew something was wrong…

« {gasp !} Hide quick ! It’s Thustle », she whispered in a frenzy.

My ears picked up someone’s voice and trudging footsteps from behind somewhere. « Oh great », I said and started to run but I noticed Cadilla was just standing there. « But what about you ? »

« Just hide yourself », she said.

I made a somewhat clumsy leap over some dark green forest shrubs and I pressed my back against the smooth silver-grey surface of a tree trunk.

« Stupid trees. Must I blast a path myself just to walk across ? » I heard Thustle grumble.

I had hidden myself just in time. The sound of heavy trudging footsteps was coming closer now.

« Ah there you are my darling », went the haughty voice of the noble boy, which was later contrasted by the surprisingly still soft voice of Cadilla’s :

« I’m not your darling. I’m not even your friend ». She sounded more indifferent than annoyed.

I peeked cautiously from behind the… the… beech tree (as Cadilla had taught me). So, the muscular blond-haired boy was trying to appear as presentable as possible.

« Aww… Cadilla. Come on. Why can’t we be friends ? We could, you know, get to know each other better. My father and I would give you anything you can ask for… precious metals, food of all sorts… you name it ! »

Cadilla appeared to say something. The purple boots of the chestnut-haired girl were pointed away from him, clearly matching her blunt disinterest.

« Then what do you really want ? Flowers ? I can give you a bouquet. I can give you anything », Thustle tried. « And you know that right ? »

Seriously, does he not know how pathetic he sounds right now ?

She snarled, whispering something like, « …don’t you [dare]/[try]… ». 

That was when I saw a side that I had never seen before from that boy. He actually seemed to apologise innocently to her. Afraid of accidentally revealing myself, I stopped peeking and my head leaned against the surprisingly nice-to-the-touch tree trunk. But my ears continued straining
for their voices, which went from behind the tree.

« Please… » Thustle continued in a softer tone. « What can I do for you to make you happier ? »

« You can start by stop bullying others supposedly weaker than you. »

« Like who ? Garend ? »

« Anybody weaker than you », went the girl’s voice firmly.

« Are you talking about Rodène ? »

So Cadilla is defending me ? Me the weakling Rodène.

« I said anybody weaker than you », her voice continued.

« But he’s the weakest ! He’s useless ! He can’t even win me in arm wrestling. He can’t even carry… this ! » I could hear something large being lifted.

« [...] he’s my friend. » stated Cadilla’s voice unclearly, followed by a muffled thump on the forest floor. Maybe Thustle had placed whatever he was demonstrating back down.

« Cadilla, you shouldn’t be friends with him. How can he protect you ? It’s a dangerous world nowadays. There are dragons everywhere. As a matter of fact, he can’t even protect himself… However, I can. »

Sick with curiosity, I slowly let my right eye peek ahead. Looked like the boy had inched closer.

« But he’s my friend ! » Cadilla stated, with much more force this time. The girl crossed her arms tight, and seemed to move backwards an inch.

« But he’s my… enemy ! » Thustle growled.

« Then you’re my enemy », Cadilla softly stated.

« Come on, [held her hand] please Cadilla… » Thustle said, with seeming intension to ease her anger. « Let’s talk about other things, nicer things. »

The girl pulled away from his arms as though he was poisonous. Thustle, what are you doing…!?, I thought angrily.

Thustle said in desperate frustration, « What’s wrong ? I’m just trying to… I just want to… Why not we have a little stroll ? Together ? »

« No ! ». But Cadilla’s stance froze suddenly when his hand clutched hers. Firmly.

I had heard and seen enough. « How dare you ! », my voice shot out of far ahead. All fiery inside ; I stared directly into Thustle’s despicable blue eyes. I walked straight up to the blond. « She already said no, how dare you force her ! »

« Rodène, what a pleasant surprise ! ». Thustle said with an evil gleam, not losing his grip on her wrist. A short chuckle. Then a roar :

« HOW DARE YOU STEAL MY CADILLA ! »
I paused to look at Cadilla and then faced Thustle directly in the face. « She doesn’t even like you ». I stated firmly. *Shouting for no reason*. Him.

« Oh yes, she did. Until YOU came along ! ».

« You’ve got it all wrong — ! », protested Cadilla her eyes shooting arrows at Thustle.

Thustle loosened his grip and went forcefully between me and her, suffocating the girl’s view. Those brown eyes were now so frightened…

I glared at Thustle. « This is no way to treat a girl ! How disrespectful ! »

« Oh yeah ? Like what ? »


« Hey, I’m not even touching her », he said, releasing his grip of her. He stepped aside a little.

My eyes stared into his even harder and angrier. « You’re still bothering her. Let her pass », I said softly.

« Fine ». Thustle inched more away from Cadilla and she immediately backed off in fear.

Suddenly something hit me hard in the chest. The wind knocked out of me, I staggered backwards.

*Thustle had just punched me !*

I dodged another blow from my right. But his fist shot out from the left and knocked my face onto the ground.

Lying on the ground, I glared at the boastful boy from the left corner of my left eye. He was laughing away.

« HAHAHA ! Idiotic weakling… »

Insults had always driven me mad. And this one *burned* inside me. I sprang forward to kick him —

But he simply blocked it with his elbow. « Playing the kicking game, eh ? ». He pushed me so that I crashed towards the ground.

« See ? He can’t even protect himself ». He turned to talk to Cadilla, but she was gone.

« See ? [hands resting on his hips] Even your so-called friend has abandoned you. »

I got up weakly and started to run away but was pummelled to the ground again.

He walked haughtily and menacingly to me. « Haw haw haw…. » Then out of the green, a stone hit him from the back.

« What the ? ». Thustle turned around to find Cadilla picking up a heavier stone — aiming it right at his blond hair.

« Thustle ! One more step towards him and I’ll throw a larger one at your *despicable* head ! »
"Wha--a ?!"

"One…"

He just stood there in completely in shock. The muscular boy backed away slowly.

"Two…"

Still lying down in pain, I saw Thustle grumbling away in a defeated anger…

Moments later…

"Are you okay ?". Cadilla stretched her hand to help me up, but I just lay on the ground.

"I--I failed."

Her eyebrows twitched in sympathetic confusion. "What are you talking about ? No you didn’t », she said.

"Don’t…" I stated softly. "Never mind."

"In any case, can you get up ?"

"I think so… but let me just rest for a while ». I was now sitting cross-legged on the forest floor. My head was down and my eyes were avoiding her. « I’m sorry. »

"For what ?" she asked.

"For being a failure and a weakling."

"Rodène, stop this !"

"You know what Thustle said was true. I can’t even protect myself ». My mind wasn’t helping. Images and memories of me failing to protect myself from dragons kept appearing everywhere.

Cadilla did not immediately respond. She sat down beside my downcast self and said : « You know, failing doesn’t mean that you’re going to continue failing. And actually, the way you handled yourself against that bully was… courageous ». She was trying to cheer me up again, but…

"I don’t understand… », I said.

"In spite of the fact that you’d probably lose to him, you still try… to protect me. Thanks. »

I turned my eyes directly to her sympathetic brown eyes. She was impressed by me the weakling ? My head turned away from her and faced downwards shamefully. « Why… are you so patient with me ? »

"Because—because… when you plant a seed, it takes time to grow », she said. "Quand tu plantes une graine, cela prend du temps pour qu’elle grandis… grandisse. »

I looked up. Confused, I focused my eyes at her right hand emphasizing the word 'grow'.

"It’s mean you have potential. It just takes time. »
« Cela prend du temps… » It takes time, I repeated, letting her advice sink into my mind.

« Oui, cela prend du temps » Yes, it takes time, she said, « Sois patient… » Be patient.

I looked at her as she smiled at me.

« D’accord ? » All right ?, she said with a cute tilt of her head.

« D’accord. » All right.

« So let’s go ! » she said enthusiastically.

« Let’s have lunch first, I’m hungry. »

« Yeah, probably a good idea. I wonder what your mother has on her menu ? »

…

That night, as I lay my tired head onto the soft pillow of my bed, I could not help it but ponder over my adventures with Cadilla.

Cadilla and I had gone for a visit at Lelondell’s Spikey Sadder Harbour. A curved and narrow land formation sticking out into the blue southwestern sea, it housed the neat row of white-painted ships that docked side by side all long. Côte à côte. I still remembered her teaching me that, along with the grands voiliers blancs — big white sailing ships.

The harbour ended into a little tip that our footsteps soon conquered. I smiled to myself, picturing a vivid image of us doing that.

As for meeting strangers, yes, we had met someone : a friendly and talkative merchant that chattered more than Garend. So much for my strange fear of odd unfriendly people at the harbour. Cadilla said that he had a very foreign attire and was rather un-Viking. His handle-bar moustache parted parallel to the ground, in a style like some of the Cœunettian traders, maybe. But he said that he was not from those isles of splendour.

He had a name I simply could not remember ; blame that on my inconsistent memory. One thing I did remember was that he would go on and on telling about his seafaring tales and dangerous adventures : Wrestling the colossal squid, trading with the hardy Vikings of the freezing north, meeting the chief of Papa-don’t-know-what… and then Cadilla and I had to stop him.

One story of his interested me though. It was the time when he was tasked with a lot of gold by the chief of a certain tribe, with the task of finding the location of a mysterious island which was supposedly the nest of all dragons. But no one had ever found it.

I turned over to the side and hugged my bolster on the bed.

I wonder…

That mysterious island of dragons… Is it near to Lelondell, which possibly explains the many dragon attacks ? Is it really true that nobody has ever found it ?

…
Author’s note:
[28 April 2019]
[13 May 2019]

★ Written in SCEF Style 2.1

★
English name: European beech
Scientific name: Fagus sylvatica

Google Drive link to view image

★ The blue oleander flower is fictional, with fictional properties.

★ Hot-smoked salmon salad. It would be nice if I actually learn this recipe.

★ willow warbler drawing (by calamaripaint)
(All three links point to the same drawing.)
Link nº 1:
http://photobucket.com/gallery/user/calamaripaint/media/bWVkaWFJZDoyOTIwOTI4Ng==/?ref=

Link nº 2:
https://calamaripaint.blogspot.com/2008/12/bird-pencil-drawings.html?showComment=1547031964721#c1824036032479276374
I was sitting on a log facing the direction of Milky Cliff.

The last three days had been burning with the wrong kind of excitement. I had tidied up my room, settled my silly projects, made three pairs of shoes, conjured up four axes, and sharpened a dozen swords and spears, et cetera. All that mad punishment thanks to my lack of tidiness, my stupid lie to my parents, and Mr Stonberg’s insane workaholic attitude. That stupid lie of mine. I had caused disaster to fall to fall upon myself… All because of… myself. My anger grew.

« Sometimes I feel that you’re just too soft, too meek…too timid to complain… », I grumbled to myself. « And that Mr Stonberg ! …RRggH ! …I could have gone to Cadilla’s yesterday but no ! {sigh} ».

« Cadilla’s right here… »

My ears absorbed the one feminine voice that always seemed to soften my heart. No longer could Mom do that. Cadilla… My eyes were struggling to avoid her magnetic gaze.

« I’m not very happy. »

« Shhh… Rodène… I know you’re terribly upset » went Cadilla’s voice. « But relax. It’s okay. »

I sighed for the thousandth time. « You know what happened the last few days ? »

« I think so. Your mother told me not to visit you because you were grounded…What did you — »

« I lied », I interrupted. « A small mistake. Big punishment. Parents arguing again. I’m not seeing things clearly again. »

« Um… what ? I didn’t get you… »

I did not answer her but instead turned my head down in shameful depression.

« In any case, it’s over, Rodène. Why not we forget about the whole thing and have a little game of Clue Hunt ? », Cadilla asked, probably trying to cheer me up again.

I just sighed without saying anything. For a while. I looked right into her eyes. Of patience. Feelings of fearing to upset her started to push away my dark gloomy thoughts.

« All right », I said finally as I got up. Stretching myself, I continued in a reluctant, somewhat sleepy manner. « So… who’s the Clue Master this time ? »
She smiled slightly and handed me a note. « You’ll have to find that out yourself. »

…

It turned out to be Garend being the Clue Master this time. But with Cadilla covering the chatterbox’s mouth far too often, the clues were tougher this time.

« Now, the final clue is… », Garend began to read aloud his own clue. He nearly fell into the Little Pond of Eau.

I did not wait for him to finish and instead pulled his hand closer to me so that I could read the paper. There.

I read aloud in an emotionless half-hearted tone that was being threatened with the moodiness in my chest:

« Go to a person with a name that starts with the letter “O”. However, that is not his real name. He was threescore years old when the catastrophe involving the colour white and the temperature cold occurred. What kind of — what kind of Norse is this?! »

« Cadilla, what do you think? » I asked the braided-haired girl, who looked lost in her thoughts.

« I… err… th--this one’s very difficult », she replied, stammering for no reason.

« Never mind », I said and handed her the paper. Immersed in my thoughts, I placed my fist against my chin. The colour white… the cold… the catastrophe… my catastrophe… Thustle… winter… Mrs Kettlon’s son… her catastrophe… « The Storm of Vadorf! », I exclaimed.

« Yes! You have guessed it right! I was thinking of giving you a clue but… »

« Don’t give any clues yet! » I snapped at the babbling Garend.

Cadilla looked at me oddly, perhaps with a slight frown, before saying quickly: « Threescore — that should be three times twenty — sixty ».

« You are always better than me at math », I remarked to the bright-minded girl with a hint of jealousy. « So, he’s sixty years old? »

« Yes, and his name starts with the letter «O» », said Cadilla. « Now who could that be? »

« Need a clue? » piped Garend.

« No! »

Cadilla and Garend stared at me.

« Goodness, Rodène, there’s no need to shout », said Cadilla in a worried tone.

I dismissed it with flicks of my hand. « Okay, okay ». After thinking long and hard I spoke out, « Old McLell? He was one of the few of the very old who survived the Storm. »

« Rodène, you’re a genius —! »

« Yeah-hmm » I responded uninterestedly to the exclaiming Garend.
“The treasure is with that eighty-year-old man?” Cadilla said doubtfully.

“Knowledge is treasure,” emphasized the freckled-faced bookworm with his outstretched hands. And his foot would have sunken into the watery surface of the pond behind him, if not for Cadilla’s quick reflexes.

…

Having crossed the bridge across the Mead River, we three young teenagers headed straight for the edge of the Great Pond of Eau. We then saw a little old house, trees all around.

According to the map of Lelondell that I bought at the Market yesterday (for an unfair sum of three silver calas), the Mead River was at the very centre of our island, just northwest of the Palace of Ahgernt — whatever.

We knocked at the door of the little cottage. Cadilla was nervous; I was not. I knew the old man and his family quite well because he was the expert when it came to the quality control of blue cheese. Especially my family’s cheese. As for Garend, he was chattering up and down in excitement as an elderly old man, tall staff in his wrinkled hand, answered the door.

“Good day children. What brings you here to my humble abode?” he croaked, in his fluent Norse voice mixed with a peculiar foreign twang.

“We just wish to listen… to hear some of your advice, sir,” I began, feeling a little weird.

“Advice, you say?”

“Surely you have plenty to share about tales, adventures, and words and phrases of knowledge?” exclaimed Garend. The boy over-emphasized the word knowledge.

“Ha ha.” The elderly Viking’s grey eyes gleamed. “Welcome! Welcome! Pleasantly surprised I am that there are still young people around who put an ear to elderly advice.”

And I just had some tiny issues with some older people — my parents.

We entered the house.

“Please have your seats. Ask me a question… and I shall tell you a story,” Old McLell said. The old man took a sip of mead from his mug and placed it back down onto the antique table.

I could see Garend as if he was pondering over countless things in his cluttered mind.

Then Cadilla spoke, “May I know, sir, the reason wherefore you are surprised to see young people coming over to you?”

I wasn’t used to hear Cadilla speak so formally…

The man stroked his extremely long white beard. Placing a palm onto his bald head, he said in a softer tone, “I am worried, of the dark clouds that are creeping over the land. I…”

“What do you mean?” asked Garend.

“Don’t interrupt the elderly” said Cadilla with a quick glare.

“As I was saying, worried am I of the future of Lelondell. A strange coldness is creeping into the hearts of the people… like selfishness. Back in my younger days, every man helped every
man. »

We watched as Old McLell took another sip of his mead. He continued: « But that is not it! New horrible things are affecting the minds and hearts and souls of the young and the old. I trust that you know some of them, Rodène? »

« Yes. Like cruelty, hatred, and discrimination…? » I said.

« Aha! [finger in the air] But there is also hate…and corruption. » With his eyes glancing around, he leaned forward and whispered, « The people are becoming oppressed. The royalty is not ruling wisely. The Law of Human Equality — it is inadequate…and is now being ignored. » He leaned backwards against his elaborately designed chair. « You know the story of Roget, no? »

I looked at Garend who shook his head.

« Roquert’s descendant he was… », said Old McLell.

Eyebrows rising upwards I leaned forward. What? Roquert? The Cœunettian guy who discovered blue cheese? But how did his descendant end up in Lelondell?

« …stealing from the king’s treasures. He was accused for hoarding them for himself; but the man was desperate…simply wanted the poor to survive. What happened next was atrocious. He was forced to fight against two nasty dragons in the Stadium with just a sword. »

The old man seemed to chuckle at us three teenagers shuddering. « But that was the past. One more thing there is. One…that is very important…and current. »

« What — what is it then? », asked Garend. The timid and plump boy was stammering more than Cadilla and I.

The old Viking did not reply and instead he took a sheet of paper and some charcoal. He started writing something for a long time. We patiently kept silent and waited for him to finish. Then he handed us the paper, saying, « Never ever speak these words. »

We exclaimed when seeing what he had written.

« Hey, aren’t these… » started Garend.

« These are some of Thustle and Malcost’s favourite words », I said.

« Repulsive », said Cadilla.

Old McLell slapped his hand onto the table. « Yes, repulsive! A foul spirit is affecting the younger generation, including the son of a nobleman. Have your last look… »

We three took one last stare and moved backwards in disgust. Taking the paper, the old bearded man hobbled slowly to the fireplace, dropped the paper into the raging fire, and added a few more phrases of advice: « Never stain your mouth with these words…Let your yes be a yes and your no be a no…Most importantly of all, never let your anger be a weapon to consume others, as it shall consume your soul… »

As the last remnants of the paper turned into ashes, I secretly vowed to be a good teenager within my heart, and I hoped my two friends were doing the same.

—<>—
« Looks like the rabbits and cats got you again, eh, Thustle ? »

« Shut up Nork ! …urrrrh ! » Thustle grumbled at the youngest.

The curly-haired blond backed away in fear.

« Look, we just want to know what happened », said Malcost, attempting to calm his leader down.

Kindt simply sat back in his personal chair. The spiky-haired teenager crossed his arms, bored with this conversation Thustle and them were having. They were all sitting around at a round table at his house.

« It’s that Coenetty cat Rodêne ! He turned my Cadilla against me », Thustle said the Cadilla part in a manner as if his ego had been hurt.

« Your Cadilla ? Puh-lease », scoffed Kindt while rolling his eyes.

« KINDT ! » Thustle rose. « You got the {BANG !} guts to say something against me ? ». His fist had slammed the table.

« I have something to say… yes. And you won’t like it. » went the cheesy sharp voice of his unwavering mouth.

« WHAT !!!! » the muscular boy boomed. He gripped Kindt by the collar and was about the bash out his face when Kindt shouted :

« Thustle, STOP moping around and do something ! »

« Like what ? »

« Make sure he’s separated from that girl then… he he… you know the rest », said Kindt with a sly smile.

Thustle loosened his grip and nodded with a proud « A… ha… ». The bully’s hand hit Kindt’s face. « You’re lucky you’re not Rodêne. »

—‹‹››—

I was walking around my bedroom, hands behind my back. The many times that I had sighed and shook my head couldn’t be counted.

« Idiotic disaster ! » I complained to myself. I tightly grasped the handle of my wooden sword with anger and frustration. For some reason a word from Old McLell’s forbidden list of words appeared in my mind and sounded like the best way to express my negativity. I brushed it off, shaking my head.

« I hate training ! Herhhh ! Why must it be so hhhhard ! » I tossed it onto the bed while grumbling a few inaudible nonsensical sounds.

Yes, my lack of interest and my father’s stern sword fighting training was making me mad. Mad ! MAD !

« His reason ? {imitated deep voice} You’re already fourteen ; it’s time to learn some basic crucial skills… This is how to make yourself useful. Frolicking with friends and gardening are not enough… »
It’s learning without learning.

I sat down on my bed with (another) sigh. « I better go for a walk around before I… ». I didn’t finish my sentence and got up and headed outside.

…

It was late in the afternoon in early autumn; but it didn’t look like one. It was as if summer was unwilling to loosen its grasp. I walked past quickly my working parents. Normally I would address anyone politely; but I was not even polite to myself.

Mr Stonberg. That man. I turned into another direction, pretending that I didn’t even know he was there. I was feeling a little sick of that little incident; of my father’s harsh punishment and the blacksmith’s critical attitude.

« It’s time to show who is boss! »

I gasped. That was — that was the familiar voice of a certain sinister teen, with long strutting footsteps ahead. Looking backwards to see if I was being followed, I silently went between some village houses into the direction of Cadilla’s house.

Unfortunately for me Malcost and Nork were waiting. The two boys grabbed both of my arms to keep me from running away. Then Kindt showed up.

The spiky haired teen walked steadily towards me. « Got you now. »

I gulped. What are they going to do to me this time?

« You see this cheek? This is what Thustle did to me. »

I did not answer and looked around for an opportunity to escape.

« Thinking of escaping, eh? To your little Cadilla, eh? » said the son of Mr Lapis. More like the son of the… Winged Devil. The two brothers who were holding me tightly, snickered evilly.

« It doesn’t matter. He’s going to put a stain onto your face », whispered Nork, who was the relatively scrawny younger brother of Malcost, probably in his pre-teens… whatever.

I couldn’t even open my mouth in pain as the Kindt slapped me left and right several times on the cheek. He was ruthless.

His cold blue eyes faced my terrified eyes directly. « You look bad enough. Shall I place a blue and black mark on your eye to finish the job? »

« Please no… »

A smirk on his face, he ordered Nork to give him something. Some dabs of red paint managed to stain my cheek and forehead, although I struggled violently as I desperately tried to avoid his wicked fingers.

Suddenly they let go of me, to see me crashing against the ground. Their taunts went on and on behind my back as I frantically escaped.

« …Now you look perfect for a date! …Meh herh ha HA hA! … »

Covering my face shamefully I headed for home to wash my face.
« What’s with the makeup, Rodêne ? »

Without realising it I had almost bumped right into Illy. The brunette giggled at the way I stormed off without daring to look into her eyes.

Nillie was on the left staring at me...

Uncomfortable.

Now what’s with her ridiculous two braided light brown hair on either side of her head…? I sped off. I really bumped into all the wrong people today.

Intending to avoid anybody as much as possible, I walked to the Mead River near the Great Pond of Eau instead. With my face dripping wet, I stared at my reflection on the water and muttered sulkily to myself:

« You’re just too soft… Always getting bullied by the boys and… even girls. Yes… both ! »

I thought of what Mr Balansen had said to me when I was younger. «Do you know the secret of how I outsmarted pranksters ? …You outsmart them back ! You prank them back… you fight them back.»

« Pranksters…{scoff} These are gangsters ! » I yelled at no one ; hand jerked upwards at the word ‘gangster’.

A dragon’s roar.

I stood up in a panic to see black tiny dots in the gloomy clouds… moving towards me. My eyes grew wider and wider.

Fear.

Disbelief.

Then panic.

« N--no… »

N--not… not again.

I rushed back home…

« MOM ! DAD ! {pant} Dr--dra {huff} […] alert {pant}.»

My father stopped me with a « Rodêne ! What’s wrong ? Take a deep breath first… ». An eerie hissing sound silenced him. Dad and I turned around to see green gas surrounding us and the inside of the barn. All was quiet.

Then there was an EXPLOSION.

« DRAGON ATTACK ! » yelled Dad.

The shock of the explosion pushed my feet off the dirt. I fell onto the wooden floor of the barn. Oh, no. It was Dad, actually ; he had actually pushed me out of the way, just out of harm’s
Lying on the floor, I could see fire raging, and it was… raging nearer and fiercer towards my eyes. I grabbed my father’s sturdy arms and we both ran for Mom… who was… not there.

« NO ! WHERE IS SHE ? » Dad exclaimed. « HÉIDIE !... HÉIDIE !! »

I could see him panicking as much as I was.

He rushed for the house.

A dragon was blocking the entrance. It noticed us and began to approach us. Oh no, it was one of those ones who had two heads, supported by inhuman, unnatural, reptilian, snake-like, twin necks which were dancing above us in a menacing manner.

Dad drew his sword. But before he could swing his sword…

{ Whish !} Huh ? Did something just fly overhead ?

It turned out to be a bola which had entangled the dragon’s twin necks. In response, one of the monster’s heads sparked.

An explosion. An explosion which separated me from…

« Dad ! Where are y…?! », I cried.

Cries and chaos were all around ; debris kept crashing down left and right. I blinked rapidly, not seeing clearly, not knowing where to see. I did not know where to run —

{…??}

I was now on the ground, unsure of what just happened. The ache on my forehead made me realise that I had just bumped into something. I got up. Mr Whean was hollering as he fought off a ronkie — with a hoe. That four-legged rock-eating beast nearly carried him off. A roaring sound was over the air…

FIRE.

It appeared beside me !

My legs stumbled and I fell backwards like a useless idiot. I got up again and the moment I turned around my face met with something black.

Someone had bumped into me.

It was Mr Stonberg. He was yelling to my face, « Rodène ! To the Secret Hall ! To the SECRET HALL ! The blue — ! ». 

In a daze, I turned my head around, towards the direction of where he was looking.

Blue fiery flames appeared. They destroyed the right wing of Mr Whean’s house. A huge wooden beam fell down in flames in front of my eyes, together with parts of the roof. That was when I saw it.

The blue fire drake.
It landed onto the disintegrating roof. Its coat was enflamed with a devilish blue... an eerie
glow emitted from his translucent skin... and its mouth was spitting out fire. Blue flames spat out
from its mouth and they engulfed the long necks of a downed two-headed dragon, burning the
bolas and setting it free. The two-headed dragon flew away, sweeping over the burning rooftops
and spraying everywhere with its dangerous green gas of destruction.

I was frozen on the spot. Terrified to move. I shakily took out my wooden sword. The blue
fiery beast turned around, snarling, facing me directly. Its eyes. Its horrifying blue eyes...
glowing menacingly at me, each blue iris having a black pupil in the centre.

_Cold and evil._

« Rodène !! » someone shouted.

Dad appeared and threw a spear at it.

_An angry roar._

The dragon flew upwards, and spread blue fires all round in mid-air.

« _Oh no_ », said Dad.

A hand grasped my wrist, pulling me backwards. Dad and I backed away. And ran to nowhere.
A blue fireball went over our heads --- destroying a wall right ahead. Smoke covered everywhere.
We stumbled over the rubble. Curiosity made me turn my gaze behind to see a faint glow up in the
midst of the smoke. The glow, it spat out fireballs which nearly got us.

We hid behind a wall, panting heavily. Dad never seemed so terrified. When the attacks
appeared to cease suddenly, he still looked around with anxiousness.

My eyes peeked around the corner, straining to see a bluish figure going up into the clouds to
become a hovering dot.

« Don’t, son », went my father’s voice. I felt a cautious grip on my arm.

Ugh, this smoke. I rubbed my eyes again.

After what seemed to be an eternity of hiding from the aerial attacks, I said, « Err... Dad, I
think the blue fire drake is gone ». Searching upwards led to no sign of that faint blue dot.

« We’re safe from him », said Dad.

... 

My father and I were worried. We had been searching for her some time.

My mother was still nowhere to be found among the debris of the scattered parts of the
demolished wooden houses.

Dad and I stood for a while and examined the damage on our house. The left wing had been
blasted into ruins.

And it had caused a wooden beam to fall on top of....
« MOM !? » I screamed in horror to find her laying on the ground… unconscious. « No…! ».

Ignoring everything else, I shook her… but she did not move.

I burst into tears.

...

The dark clouds gathered, and raindrops came falling. The dragons snatched their last catch and disappeared one by one.

And I was crying beside the one person that had raised me… and always, been patient with me.

« She’s alive ! » Dad’s voice exclaimed, his hand checking her heartbeat.

The rain kept pelting down, more and more ferociously. My knees were on the muddy earth, now soft and damp.

_How could anyone, anything — even a dragon — hurt my soft-natured mother?_

—«Shift in POV»—

Héidie Statenson opened her eyes… to find that she was not in her own house. Then she felt her hand being held by someone.

Lying on the bed, she weakly turned her head… to find her teenage son at her bedside.

—«Shift in POV»—

« R--Rodêne… Tu… vas bien ? [Are you okay ?] »

I stirred up from my cloud of desperation to see my mother with a worried expression on her face.

« Mom ! You’re awake ! »

« T--tu v--vas bien ? [Are you okay ?] » she asked.

« Mom, je vais bien. I’m okay… just… mais tu… [but you…] »

« Comment va ton père ? La maison… et — et la grange… ? [How is your father ? The house… and — and the barn…?] », she said.

« Mom, Dad’s fine. Mais la maison et la grange [sigh] [But the house and the barn [sigh]] », I said, a little surprised at her being worried about everything else except her own self.

She attempted to get up from bed.

« Don’t ! » I tried to persuade her. « Mom, you should rest… tu… dois reposer… te reposer. [you… must… rest.] »

« Ohh… j’ai mal à la tête. Qu’est-ce qui s’est passé ? Où suis-je ? [Ohh… I have a headache. What happened ? Where am I ?] » she muttered groggily while placing her palm onto her head. My arms struggled weakly as I guided her to lie down again.
« Knocked out cold. No scalp or brain damage ». A middle-aged nurse appeared and had said that. She chuckled, saying, « Your son is too worried about you ».

I stood up from the bed and stared sternly at somewhere else. « Is that bad ? » I stated in a sharp low tone.

« No… » was her reply.

I gave her a glare out of the left corner of my eye. That nurse. We were expected to pay one Lelondish gold cala before she agreed to do any treatment for Mom, here in one of the tiny, compartmentalized, miserable rooms of the Recovery House. (The Recovery House was just a fancy-sounding enclosed section of the Secret Hall, reserved specifically for us peasants.)

But we only had fifty silver calas and around twenty bronze calas at that moment. It was only after my father yelled at her saying that it was a « potential emergency » that she complied and accepted our « insufficient payment ». Typical Lelondish selfishness ; so money minded.

—<>—

Sighing to myself all along, I was helping in the repairing of our destroyed home and barn. My father insisted for my mother to rest at the Recovery House while I was to join him, Mr Whean, and Mr Stonberg in the backbreaking work.

Problem was ; I was still too shaken by the heart-breaking incident to properly concentrate on that backbreaking work.

Or any work.

_Stupid work. Why must we keep working all the time ? I’m sick of it._

I stiffened my aching arms and forced myself along as I carried plank by plank and beam by beam over to Mr Stonberg, who passed them to my father, stern, moody expression on his face. He appeared to be struggling to control his emotions, and that led me to wander over some thoughts :

_Why must bad things keep happening ? Why must disaster fall upon us ? How could anybody hurt my dear old mom ? How could anything… ?_

« WATCH YOUR HEAD ! »

I barely avoided knocking my dreamy head into a long pole, which Mr Whean was carrying.

—<>—

Because we could not afford to pay for another night for Mom to rest in the Recovery House, as soon as we finished building a room for our house, we brought Mom over. My father walked into the room where I was sitting beside Mom.

« Don’t worry, Rodène. She just needs rest. »

« Yes, Rodène. It is not so bad. I am fine », she tried to assure me.

But I stared unsurely at my mother’s smile and looked at the surroundings. There wasn’t even a decent place free of dust and debris to stay and it was « not so bad » ? Her optimism was unbelievable, almost to the point of being pathetic.

I thought I heard a sigh. Dad appeared to want to speak, but no words were formed. I could tell
he was nervous. He looked at Mom, who nodded slightly.

« Son… I’m sorry for not telling you earlier. »

I stole a nervous but curious glance at my father’s dark eyebrows, « Huh? About… what? »

« I came from a land full of dragons », the tall middle-aged Viking stated quickly. He continued in a slower but softer tone, « I was born there. It was too dangerous, so I came here. »

« But why didn’t you tell me that before? ». I was keeping deadly still while saying that.

I stood waiting, looking. Dad was glancing back and forth between Mom and me. He seemed to have been persuaded to even bring up this topic.

« Lastern? »

My ears picked up my mother’s soft voice.

In the end my dad said, « {sigh}…I’ll tell you some other time… »

I dropped my staring eyes. My shoulders drooped as the hope of getting answers collapsed.

« Why not visit your friends? », said my mother.

« Yeah… », I replied moodily and unenthusiastically, in a manner like I was out of breath.

…

Glancing back to the half-repaired house with a sulky face, I trudged over to Cadilla’s. But it looked like she was not at home. So, I decided to sit at the edge of the Little Pond near her house and rest. Moodiness always made me lethargic. A heavy, dark feeling resided inside my chest.

I could not remember how long I stayed there, my thoughts swirling around aimlessly. A twig snapped somewhere. I jerked to my right, fearing it was Thustle and his gang.

« Oh there you are… I was worried… about your mother… »

I sighed. My head went back down again. The growing pain within me couldn’t be hid, even from Cadilla. I knew, she was worried about me too, and I felt bad about that.

« Rodène, don’t worry. She’ll get better », the braided-haired damsel said softly and sat down beside me. « In fact, she’s already getting better. »

I closed my eyes. My heart was desperately trying to burst out to the one person who could understand all my frustrations… my hurts… my embarrassments… my sadness… my...

« This is too much… for — for me to handle… » I said. My voice was wavering. I forced back a sniffle.

Cadilla placed her hand on my shoulder, saying, « Care to share some? ». 

My teary eyes were trying to avoid hers as I replied, « I’m too soft for my own good… {sigh}… I’m too weak… I can’t even fight Thustle and his gang, how should I fight… a blue fire drake?? … »

The sympathetic eyes of the girl widened.
« ...{weak voice} Yesterday... » I continued, turning away with one hand hiding my face.

« You mean...? »

« Yes I saw one. »

« You actually saw one!? », she exclaimed.

My hand went down and my voice raised to say, « The dragon! It... ». I covered my sniffling nose with the back of my hand. « It... nearly killed my mother... and me ». I turned away and broke down.

A moment of silence.

« Shhh... Rodène... It's okay... she didn't die... Your mother did not die. »

« But what if she had? » I snapped emotionally, eyes not looking directly.

Cadilla did not answer and instead patted her hand on my shoulder. « But she didn't », she said softly but sternly. « Now stop crying. »

I forced out the last of my tears, emptying a barrel of sadness. Then kept silent. Cupping my hands with the pond water, I washed my face, while being careful not to stain the water and Cadilla's dress with my sniffles.

« There. Feeling better? »

I wiped my wet hands against my black trousers and became apologetic and embarrassed instead of being relieved. « S--sorry... I'm. »

« You needn't be, Rodène... »

We sat back, dangling our legs over the Little Pond in front. « Anything else... that you would like to share? » asked Cadilla.

I managed a weak smile and told her about my poor performance when sword-training with my father, about how upset I was being over the constant arguments of my parents, and about how Kindt made a mess of my face.

« ...That's going out of hand! », said Cadilla stopping me midsentence, upon hearing about the bullying incident. « You know, you should do something about this. »

« But how? » I muttered sulkily.

« You should appreciate your father's training more. That way, you can, you know, defend for yourself. »

I kept silent. Again the 'defend for myself' advice? Fighting had never been my expertise. But as negative as I was, I was afraid to let her down.

« I'll think about it », I said finally.

—«—

A few days afterwards...
Thoughts were still densely circulating around my head, not allowing me to rest. Confusion. Fear. Sadness. Peace. My eyes were aimlessly exploring around the densely packed leaf-covered forest.

I walked away from the woods around the Great Pond and went to the Mead Bridge across Mead River, with a heavy mood like the falling dead leaves of autumn. With the Secret Hall behind me and away into the distance, I leaned against the bridge’s wooden railings, watching the river flow underneath me.

The water was rushing, gently rushing over the sparse rocks of the river banks. I look directly below me at a deeper part of the water, and said to myself to try to stop the nagging thoughts in my head, « Looks quite deep here ».

« For you to fall into. »

[!] I glanced backwards at the Nailekkten brothers.

« Please… not now », I pleaded weakly.

« Relax, Mr Cow… ward », said the unruly haired younger Nork. « We came here to see if you’re still alive or not, after the recent dragon attack. »

« One coward down, one less mouth for your mother to feed », joked Malcost.

After hearing ‘my mother’, I glared at the ground and said angrily, « It’s not funny ! ».

« It’s not supposed to be », said Nork with a smirk on his face.

A lump formed in my throat… I swallowed it with an eye-watering expression. My hands blasted past their insensitive, wicked eyes...

When I was far away from them, I burst into tears, in solitude.

...

A leaf fell onto the surface of the Great Pond of Eau. A leaf fell into my hair. I ignored it and instead continued standing and staring at my reflection on the still water. Another leaf fell onto my reflection and destroyed it with a ripple. Even leaves were mocking me. I gave a sarcastic little laugh. Haha, ridiculous. Leaves.

I looked slowly downwards, twisting my lips to stop myself from speaking out evil words. But anger was boiling inside.

They. They never cared whether I lived or died. An imaginary object formed in my palm.

Yes, I was just an object to be ridiculed. To be controlled. To be played and tortured with.

« You’re too soft for your own good ! », I yelled to myself, crushing the invisible object into bits.

How dared they ! The gangsters… the dragons…!

« They took away my happiness ! ». I snatched the leaf from the top of my head and crushed it in my hands. I stared at my right fist as the leaf crumbled… water covering my eyes. The once-beautiful leaf turned into bits, falling onto the ground, with my tears following them down. I blinked my eyes, and slowly glared upwards. I widened my eyes… in — in anger.
Choking through my tears, I murmured softly, « I want to k--kill… I want to kill them all ».

*I want to exterminate all those useless evil beings off the face of Lelondell.*

I felt a strong breeze. Some dry leaves smacked me on the face. A sharp pinch on my arm grew more and more unbearable. An ant. It had bit my left elbow. Of *all the stupid beings in this stupid world...!* That red ant. *Cette fourmi!* My fingers captured it. Instead of what I’d normally do which was simply flicking it away, I held it up to my eyes…

« You. Are. Dead! »

I flung it onto the ground and I stomped on whatever was beneath my feet — repeatedly. Life was bullying me. « And I… shall bully it back! »…including that so-called blue-fiery Dragon of Revenge… *How dared it tried to kill my mom! How dared it tried to ruin me and my family. What reason must it even have to make our lives so miserable?*

I drew my wooden sword, and glowered at it. « One day I’ll find you… And you shall be sorry! ». My fist clenched… with hatred. I felt another strong breeze and instead of yelling out loud, I whispered to myself:

« I am Mr Timid no more. »

――――― «‹‹ ››» ―――――

*Author’s note :*

[28 April 2019]
[13 May 2019]

*Important announcement :*

The main character’s name has been changed to Rodène, and it has nothing to do with the storyline or plot. I have updated all of the earlier chapters and have also changed the introductory description of the story. Terribly sorry for the confusion or inconvenience. My apologies.

* This chapter shows that Rodène is starting to lose his mind, to hatred. Poor guy. I wish I could
tell him something, but I can’t intervene in the past.

* Written in SCEF Style 2.1

* **12 Longing or Love, All the Seasons of George Winston, Windham Hill, 1998.**

This instrumental piece portrays the sadness and comfort Rodène was experiencing, after almost losing his mother. It also portrays the sadness that still refused to go away even after Cadilla consoled him.

* The cala is the coin currency in Lelondell. There’s gold, silver, and bronze calas. 100 silver calas = 1 gold cala (Silver calas are physically very tiny in size.)

* The main difference between SCEF Style 2.1 and SCEF Style 2.1.1 is that the simplified 2.1.1 does not require non-breaking spaces. Another difference are the second-level and third-level quotation marks. (Only the novel style version is discussed here.)

**SCEF Style 2.1 (novel version) used here for this chapter on Archive Of Our Own**

first level : « … » (French double angle guillemets + non-breaking spaces)
second level : ‹…› (Swiss single angle guillemets)
third level : “ … ” (English double curly quote marks)

quoting anything else that is not real-time speech : ‹…› (Swiss single angle guillemets)

**SCEF Style 2.1.1 (novel version) used on FanFiction[point]Net**

first level : «...» (French double angle guillemets, no spaces)
second level : “…” (English double curly quote marks)
third level : ‹…› (Swiss single angle guillemets)

quoting anything else that is not real-time speech : “…” (English double curly quote marks)

* The paragraph below uses the rare third-level quotation marks. Let’s discuss why.

[ I read aloud in an emotionless half-hearted tone that was being threatened with the moodiness in my chest :

« ‹Go to a person with a name that starts with the letter “O”. However, that is not his real name. He was threescore years old when the catastrophe involving the colour white and the temperature cold occurred.›. What kind of — what kind of Norse is this ?! » ]

1. This paragraph uses third-level quotation marks which are the curly double inverted commas. [“”]
2. The entire sentence [ «Go to a person with a name that starts with the letter “O”. However, that is not his real name. He was threescore years old when the catastrophe involving the colour white and the temperature cold occurred.› ] is within secondary quotation marks [‹›], and even italicised for further distinction, because that sentence is written down on the paper and is being quoted by Rodène ; it is not his own sentence.
3. The letter [O] is enclosed in third-level [“”] to avoid using second-level [‹›] again.
4. After quoting/reading aloud the second sentence the reader (Rodène) immediately switches to give his own negative comment [What kind of—what kind of Norse is this ?!] which is
of course not on the paper at all.

* The next chapter is going to be very special.
Far, far away in the open night sky, amongst bluish-grey clouds of darkness and over the endless open ocean, a pair of wings were flapping. They were large and sleek-looking. A tail cut through the wind. It was long and thin. So thin, that when it ended into a sharp needle-like tip, the tip could hardly be seen against the dark background. The wings and tail were of a terrifying creature every Viking feared and loathed:
A dragon.

From the slightly elongated neck to the smooth back, and from the powerful hind legs to the spear-like tail that made up half of the body length, it was a long and slender beast, with a colour that blended well into the starless sky:

Dark blue.

All alone, the Blue Dragon kept flying at a constant speed, directly towards the direction of the north. He seemed determined to reach his destination in as little time as possible, and his striking blue eyes showed something. Fear was deep within his deep black pupils.

He was actually escaping.

At last, the elegant winged creature of sharp clean lines sighted something ahead far into the distance. He picked up his speed, cutting through the icy winds.

An island.

Circled by a veil of seemingly perpetual fog and jagged towers of rock, a lone black and tall mountain loomed in the distance, with a visible red glow of lava between cracks and crevices. The flying reptile picked up his pace and flapped his tired wings faster as the rocky island became closer and closer. Craning his neck upwards, he gazed at the narrow cone-shaped mountain which appeared to be an enormous pointed volcano reaching into the clouds. There was an eerie hum or buzz in the air.

<< Turn back…! Do not go further…! >>

<< You have come to the wrong place, stranger…! >>

Sad dragon voices… They were all around the Blue Dragon as a swarm of flying reptiles flew hurriedly past him. Huge wings completely cluttered his view for moments.

<< Do not become like us…! >>

The voices had another thing: desperation, and they were all telling the Dragon something. But, exhausted from the extremely long journey, he continued flying towards the mysterious volcanic island in hopes of resting his weary wings for the night.

<< Return to wherever you come from while you still have the chance…! >>

Instead of fear, curiosity grew within the Dragon. And a strange undefinable feeling which he dismissed. He ignored the warnings and seeing a large two-headed zippleback landing heavily on all fours onto the stony ground of an enormous rocky structure that extended out from the mainland, he reassured himself and proceeded to do the same. The blue reptile landed on all fours as well.

<< Welcome to my domain. >>

A loud howl had just pierced into the very mind of the Dragon. He shook his head to get the stinging homing voice out of his head. Panic struck him! He realised everything now, he had just been trapped by one of the most terrifying behemoths of the world. His flight north to the land of green fields and cattle never happened; he was drawn to the east, to this place, against his own consciousness…
The Dragon looked fearfully towards the Yellow Zippleback who suddenly charged at him, roaring hostily: "<< You there! Get going and meet the Red Queen! >>."

"<< Come >>. The sinister howling voice went piercing into the Dragon’s mind again.

"...Against his will..."

"<< Come to me. >>"

A titan wing common fire drake or monstrous nightmare, green in colour, appeared. He and the zippleback surrounded the Blue Dragon on both sides. They roared, "<< MOVE! NOW! She is not known for her patience or mercy >>.

...Under the mercy of a ruthless being...

The Blue Dragon sprang to the air, escorted by the vicious-looking guards and they flew across the barren, grey landscape around the volcano, towards the southern part of the island. Another swarm of dragons rushed past them, flying into an opening on the side of the volcano.

"<< But... this is not an active volcano, is it not?>>, the Blue Dragon asked worriedly, slowing down his speed a little.

"<< No questions. Shut your jaws up! >>", roared the titan wing monstrous nightmare.

"<< Who? The blue drag’ or me?>>, asked one of the heads of the zippleback, starting a dispute with the other head.

With growing fear within, the Blue Dragon flew into the darkness of the opening, sharply banked right to avoid some low-hanging stalactites, and flew through the winding tunnel crowded with other dragons. Suddenly a giant cavern, with creepy rock towers partially enshrouded by a reddish mist, filled the view. The walls of the cavern were dotted with jagged openings where thousands of dragons flew in and out. Many were carrying something between their claws.

The Blue Dragon hovered for a while, taking in the interesting view. This is it, the ‘largest dragon nest in the Archipelago’. One that I can finally see with my own eyes, he thought.

Avoiding more stalactites, the elegant reptile swooped down towards the many rock towers and flew just above them. He glided across the cavern making a wide circle while taking in the incredible view... of thousands of dragons resting on the platforms of the rocky structures... of thousands of dragons dropping their cargo of food into the spacious floor of glowing red mist.

"<< I have been expecting you. >>"

A voice boomed piercingly from under the Blue Dragon.

He froze and hovering his wings, slowly turned around to see... Rising from the floor of mist, a gigantic head of a behemoth shadowed a huge part of the cavern!

All the other dragons cowered in fear or flew out of the way. Completely blocking the Dragon’s view, the behemoth’s bluish-grey body kept rising... up and up until her long tail appeared, a dangerous-looking club at the tip. "<< So! This is the one I have been told about >>", boomed the behemoth in an unearthly wavering voice as she flew across the cavern on her colossal wings and landed onto the yellowish, perforated ground of a small cave. Relatively small cave.

"<< Speak! Any more delays and you will be eaten. >>"
<< I… >>, began the Blue Dragon as he looked around in fright, not just from the behemoth, but from the staring reptile eyes all around. Finally he had the courage and he roared, << You have been expecting me ? I am not aware, your Majesty >>. He flew across the cavern to the behemoth’s cave-throne and landed in front of her, bowing his head — because he had to.

<< Yes. But my subjects should have said that you were smaller ! >> roared the behemoth and she began a series of laughter that rattled the walls of the entire cavern.

The Blue Dragon felt insulted. True, he appeared relatively smaller compared to other dragons, against a monstrous nightmare or even against a tall, two-legged deadly nadder. However, his body was actually very long and his tail even longer. And although he appeared very lizard-like, his limbs were not sprawled out to the sides and his frame was narrow and quite tall. His chest had a curved surface that smoothly swept upwards from his ground-facing abdomen. Within his chest held his heart, pounding heavily by now.

Not daring to see her enormous face which was a thousand times greater in size than his body, the Dragon, still with his head bowed, said meekly, << Yes that might be true. But I think my speed makes up for that >>.

The behemoth said thoughtfully in her unnerving voice, << Yes… speed. Reminds me of someone, a dragon you are to track down >>.

<< Track down ? >>, asked the Blue Dragon, confused. He looked upwards and saw the face of the behemoth, for the first time up close. Terror gripped him as he studied her face. She had huge teeth-lined jaws, enlarged nostrils, and… And with three eyes on the both sides of her ugly, bulky, boulder-like head, a total of six eyes were staring right at him, shooting fear into his spine !

<< But first… what do they call you ? >>, she roared, with her teeth ominously sharp and long, as long as <spears>, one of the weapons they always used. They, the two-leggeds who often called themselves Vikings or humans.

<< I… uh… Le bleu mortel, that is what the two-leggeds call me >>, stuttered the Blue Dragon.

The behemoth roared impatiently, << Meaning <the blue death> ? >>.

<< Yes. >>

Everywhere, there was silence, until a thundering roar from the Queen shook the walls of the cavern.

Suddenly her enormous head sprang forward towards the terrified blue reptile, her large teeth just inches away from his comparatively tiny head. << You dare to make fun of me!? First, there is the whispering death… >>

Upon saying that a very large snake-like beast with a spherical head and an elongated spiky tail tunneled through the air. It had bulging pale eyes and a circular mouth with rotating rows of teeth.

<< Then there is you, a so-called blue death that is no bigger than a deadly nadder >>, taunted the behemoth with a scary, amused expression. << You do not deserve such a name, for I, and I only, am the one and only Red Queen of Death. >>

The Blue Dragon could not understand why she was called that when her bluish-grey body looked anything but red in colour, but he dared not say anything and tried to change the topic:
In any case... I do not know why they call me that but... uh... anyway, I wish to ask your permission to allow to rest my weary wings for the night and I will be on my merry way.>

This amused the Red Queen of Death. Her head knocked the petrified blue reptile over while roaring, << I have not laughed since I ate a dragon sandwich decades ago! You shall be my very first personal slave! Consider it an honour! >>

The Dragon, lying on his side, felt his dignified appearance diminish somewhat. He used his four limbs to get up, and slight downward tilt of the head, he decided to act a little: << Your Majesty, I do not understand what it was that I said, that was so very amusing, sorry >>.

<< No dragon ever leaves this island, other than to raid and bring back food for me >>, said the Red Queen. << But you, your first task is to track down that Black Dragon who dared to disrespect me in rebelling against me! >>, she bellowed in anger and a fireball formed in her mouth, threatening to blast forth. << One of my subjects, a razorwhip, says that only your species can fly fast enough to catch that traitor. Find him and bring him back to me, dead — or preferably — wounded and alive. >>

The Blue Dragon was genuinely confused this time as he had never seen or heard of a «black dragon» or a dragon named «Black Dragon» before. << But... >>, he began in an attempt to clarify. << I am your Queen now; you live to serve me or you will be devoured >>, howled the Red Queen of Death in a hypnotic tone, with her three eyes on the left side and three eyes on the right, a total of six, all staring right into the Dragon’s, striking deep into his thoughts.

<< You belong to me. >>

Shattering his willpower...

<< Go. Do not disappoint me, and you might live. >>

<< Y--yes. I will not disappoint you, my Queen >>, said the Blue Dragon as he bowed again and took off. Anxious to get away from the Queen’s presence as quickly as possible, he sprang off the floor of her cave-throne, flew up aimlessly and nearly collided into a large long-necked sea creature. It hissed. Boiling-hot water spat from its mouth. The Blue Dragon dodged the blast of water with rapid spins in mid-flight, in a manner less graceful than usual. The Dragon hissed back, imitating the creature’s voice. Boiling-hot water dragon with a boiling-hot temper.

His neck turned to the left and his eyes swivelled left to see the gigantic Queen flying back into the red mist. He flew down to a low rock tower barely poking out of the mist and he spread out his wings to land... but the gronkles who were there backed away fearfully, with worried murmurs. The hovering Dragon felt disturbed and he took off to find another rock tower. Just when he was about to reach one he overheard a nadder squawking: << I don’t know why she laughed so much. True, he’s not much bigger than one of us, that blue death, but he looks so scary with that all that blue. >>.

<< Scary? He looks suspicious to me, like that traitor who left us just weeks after serving the Queen >>, another nadder said.

<< Well, I don’t trust him. >>

Feeling unwelcomed, the blue reptile roared sharply at the group of spiky-bodied deadly nadders and flew away from the rock towers to the walls of the cavern. He glided around in circles,
seeing that most of the dragons resting in the pockets of the cavern walls were the even more unfriendly types — like himself — groups of whispering deaths with their destructive rotating teeth, a razorwhip clad in metallic and spiky natural armour, monstrous nightmares or cauchemars monstrueux or fire drakes or whatever they were called with their huge attitudes, and… an empty spot a little higher and further away than everyone else.

The Blue Dragon flew upwards and landed onto the stony platform. Finally resting properly for the first time, the flying reptile sighed in relief, his wings aching terribly. He looked out towards the busy scenery of dragons flying around and stared miserably for a while. Out from a cage, and into another cage. He coated himself in flames for a while before closing his eyes and laying down his head. Finally.

—<>—

It had already been several hours but sleep still tempted him. His blue eyes opened lazily and closed again…

He could hear a windy flapping noise around him and then a heavy landing noise —

So. The same yellow zippleback who had escorted him to the Queen earlier had just landed onto the platform.

One of the yellow dragon’s two serpentine necks craned closer, with the neck arching high above and the head just above the blue reptile’s low body. With sparks in its mouth, the head roared excitedly, << Wow ! That was some conversation you had with the Red Queen ! We had never seen anything — ! >>

<< This is my place >> stated the Blue Dragon without looking up at the Yellow Zippleback.

<< I know that ! >>, stated the other head on the Dragon’s left.

<< Hey, Gas-Head, be more polite to our friend here ! >> roared the other head on the right. With sparks no longer in its mouth, the head lowered to the blue reptile’s eye level. << Sorry about that. But anyway… you do accept visitors on your stone platform, right ? >>

Still in a resting position, the Dragon swung his needle-like tail to and fro menacingly. << What do you want ? >>

<< Nothing. Just chilling out here >>, replied the sparking head. << Actually… >>

<< Then ‘chill out’ with your own kind >>, stated the blue lizard-like creature.

<< You are not very friendly >>, said the head with green gas seeping from its mouth.

<< Said by a dragon who escorted me to the Queen with unfriendliness >>, snarled the Dragon, his skin getting warmer, then fiery hot.

The two yellow heads of the Zippleback looked at each other, saying in confusion : << We did that ? >>.

<< I don’t remember. >>

<< Of course, you are not the head that remembers things, I am ! >>

<< You remember the wrong things — >>
A sudden blue flame appeared, stopping the argument. The Zippleback froze, his spine-studded
necks entwined.

<< I am unfriendly. You are annoying. Now leave! >> roared the Blue Dragon.

The Zippleback’s two long necks disentangled. The eyes on his two heads blinked twice. His
somewhat small wings spread and before taking off he said: << Okay, okay… fine. We thought
you needed help on knowing more about that Black Dragon >>.

This got the Blue Dragon’s attention. He immediately sprang off the rocky ledge and chased
after the already flying two-headed horned lizard. << Wait! >>, roared the Dragon, flying speedily
across the cavern.

The Zippleback suddenly disappeared into a cloud of flying reptiles which blocked the Blue
Dragon’s view. Hovering his dark blue wings for a while, the Dragon then spotted a gap in the
cloud where he could fly into. He flew into the chaos, spotted the Zippleback and gave chase,
flapping his large sleek wings faster and faster, while avoiding a clumsy gronkle buzzing around
and a monstrous nightmare.

<< Okay. You got us >>, said the Yellow Zippleback when the Blue Dragon flew above him.

<< Nice tactic of flying into a cloud of flying dragons >> stated the blue reptile, tone annoyed
and sarcastic.

<< You still caught up with us in no time >>, said the head with sparks.

<< Still slower than a skrill riding a lightning bolt >>, said the head with the green gas.

The Blue Dragon flew down and gliding side-by-side he roared, << Just because I am tired and
hungry! >>. He continued in a normal voice, << We should go somewhere quieter. I detest this
chaos >>.

The two dragons turned around in a circle and headed for the twisty exit tunnel. As they exited
the darkness of the tunnel to meet a foggy atmosphere lit up by the afternoon sun, the Zippleback
said, << As you know, uh, they are about to raid in the west >>.

An enormous swarm of dragons were seen flying towards the west.

An awkward silence ensued between the two dragons.

<< You said that you could help me with the hunting down of the Black Dragon that the Queen
demanded of me? >>, asked the Blue Dragon as he quickly flapped his wings, and outstretched
them for gliding around the volcanic mountain.

White smoke was constantly ascending from the centre of the volcano, and all around the
coasts there were plenty of bizarre, arched rock structures.

<< Maybe >>, the sparky head of the Zippleback casually said.

<< Then tell me about him or her. >>

The sparky head started to talk but was interrupted by the gassy head one complaining about
the Blue Dragon gliding too fast.

<< All right, I will slow down >>, said the blue-winged creature, noticing that the Zippleback’s wings were much smaller in size; especially considering that he had those twin elongated necks that met a wide body, and also that thick long tail that split into two even longer tails, all necks and tails having evenly spaced blunt spines across their lengths. A short wingspan, a huge long body — an unbalanced proportion. The Blue Dragon found it bizarre that the Zippleback could still somewhat keep up with his speed.

His two tails sailing fluidly through the air, the Zippleback flew over to the Blue Dragon’s left side. The head of sparks opened its mouth and began, << You’ll know him when you see him: a sleek black creature that dive-bombs at a terrifying speed >>.

<< It’s a wonder his larger-than-normal wings don’t get ripped off by the wind! >>, exclaimed the other head.

<< He kept to himself and rarely spoke… For the short time he was with us, he’d usually hang around in one of the more isolated pockets of the cavern over here on Red Queen Island >>.

With more curiosity the Dragon continued interrogating: << Is he a large dragon? >>.

<< No, quite small… Come to think of it, he’s about your size. >>

A smirk formed on the Dragon’s jaw. Oh good. Same size, something in common. With a speed to be challenged against…

<< You have described him in detail. Have you met him before? >>, asked the Blue Dragon, flapping his wings and wishing he could cut the air with them at a higher speed. But that slower two-headed dragon wouldn’t keep up if he flew faster.

The Zippleback stopped circling the volcano by turning a little to the right, towards the direction of the north. His sparky head replied, << Not really. We spotted him once or twice, that’s all >>.

The two dragons flew in silence across a heavily-forested area and later, across the calm blue sea…

<< One thing is for sure… That drag’s as mysterious as you >>, said the head with the gas, finally breaking the silence.

<< Yeah, where do you come from, anyway? Never seen your kind before >> said the other head.

<< Where are we going? >>, asked the blue-winged Dragon, completely ignoring the question. He swooped down lower, seeing that they were flying above the coast of a forested island.

<< Well, to have a quick meal >>, said the Zippleback who was now flying above him.

<< Aren’t you hungry? >>

<< Of course I am >>, stated the Dragon bluntly, knowing he still had not eaten ever since his long dreary journey from the south.

They slowed down as they approached a clearing amongst the tall pine trees. There was a lake, clear as the sky, with fishes leaping out of the watery surface — a perfect scenery. The Zippleback immediately dived down into the lake and emerged with each head having a delicious, slimy,
wriggling fish.

The Blue Dragon’s eyes gleamed at the sight of fresh fish — freshly caught! Swooping down at an extremely shallow angle into the pond, he opened his lower jaw and skimmed across the water… and caught an enormous salmon. After gobbling it up hurriedly with blue fire in his jaws, he dived down again and caught a brown trout in his jaws and a little while later, a small perch between his foreclaws. The Dragon flew back to the edge of the lake and landed beside the yellow horned lizard, who was busy eating — slowly.

<< And then after this we’ll have to raid >>, said the head with green gas.

<< You’re coming to help us, right? >>, said the head with sparks.

The Zippleback seemed to be pleading and his eyes were of fear. Not knowing what to say next, the Blue Dragon looked closer at his bizarre dual heads. Each of the heads had two thin and straight spikes on top, and a large curved horn on the nose, all of which were completely unlike his own elegant body shape, devoid of any horns or spikes.

The Dragon decided to say something else: << Sometimes I wish that we could just catch some fishes from lakes like this one and give them to the Queen >>.

<< You know that wouldn’t be enough >>, said the sparky head of the Zippleback as it gobbled up a fish. << Besides, she demands large fish such as salmon — and lots of it! >>

The Blue Dragon decided not to say a word, still believing that this was one of the ways a dragon could avoid going to raids that were full of blood, pain, and death. He had enough of that experience.

<< So…? >> began the Yellow Zippleback as if awaiting his answer. One of his necks craned closer while the other finished gobbling up the rest of the fish.

<< I do not know >>, the Blue Dragon finally said. << I do not know how I am supposed to fulfil two tasks at once: hunting down a traitor and going to raids >>, he reasoned.

In a strange expression of discomfort, the Zippleback brought his two snake-like necks closer and squeezed them together, ‘linking’ them using the many rounded spines lined on his necks.

<< Well, uh… good luck on hoping the Queen understands >>, said the head with gas.

The Zippleback separated his two necks.

<< So, where are you heading off to now? >> asked the head with sparks, seeing that the Blue Dragon was getting ready to leave.

<< Since I am already in the north, I will go further to the north and search for him. >>

The horned lizard opened his wings and before taking off he said in a reluctant, sad tone: << Well then uh, we have to… go… Be seeing you. >>

The Blue Dragon watched as the yellow two-headed reptile flew off melancholically into the distance as if he were flying towards his doom. He could have said a word of thanks to that Zippleback for having given him valuable information about the Black Dragon. He could have followed him to the raid so that the poor dragon would stand a better chance of not getting killed. However, the Dragon’s heart was cold, and he knew it. He only took care of himself. Others? He could care less.
But he also knew that he was not always this cold.

—<>—

Flying just above the level of the sea reflecting the sunset, with his long, pointed tail slicing across its watery surface, the Blue Dragon flew fast and straight towards the Nest in the south. Along the way, he stopped by at the same forestry island the Zippleback had taken him to. Wanting to rest his wings and continue on foot instead, he landed in the forest. After closing his wings and neatly tucking them behind, the narrow-bodied reptilian creature zipped across the ground towards the edge of the lake on his four reptilian legs. Upon reaching it, he bent his elongated neck down and filled his jaws with the cool fresh water. This effectively quenched his thirst, and lessened his disappointment a little. He was dejected. The Black Dragon was nowhere to be found around the snow-covered jagged peaks of the mountains of the north.

_The Queen will not be pleased. I should get her something instead of going back with nothing_, thought the Dragon. And so, he spent hours catching four huge salmons, and even a brown trout for himself. Pleased, he carried the trout in his jaws and a salmon in each of his four sets of retractable claws before speeding off hurriedly towards the Nest. He did not eat the trout; he would save it for later.

By the time he saw the island in the distance night had already fallen. The volcanic mountain appeared as eerily as ever, its dark red glow making the Dragon uncomfortable. A sudden feeling of regret overcame him. When he first arrived at this island, he had not listened to the warnings of the sad dragon voices, listening instead to his curiosity...

The blue-winged reptile continued flying south, above and across the heavy forests. When he spotted the entrance on the side of the volcano, he extended his wings and hesitated, hovering in mid-air. Everything was strangely quiet and calm, with not a dragon in sight. He flew inside nonetheless, through the twisty dark tunnel and ducked under the low-hanging stalactites.

Once inside the cavern, he could sense the atmosphere being eerily still… soaked with sadness and defeat. Whispers could be heard all around:

<< She has eaten many of us. >>

<< We are doomed! >>

<< I wonder who’s next…? >>

<< We should’ve raided the east… >>

Greatly disturbed, the Dragon sped off towards his high platform and — someone was already there.

_The Yellow Zippleback. Now what?_

Before landing, he dropped his cargo of fish onto the stony surface. He looked closer at the two-headed lizard who was lying down curled up, and he was distressed at what he saw. There was a pointed stick, narrow in diameter, sticking out somewhere from around his left neck or shoulder — it was one of the dreaded _arrows_ of the Vikings!

<< There… there were too many of them… those spears… >> moaned the Zippleback weakly. His long right neck raised up and collapsed to the floor.

The Blue Dragon went closer, his voice grave: << This is not a spear; it is an arrow. Perhaps I
<< It doesn’t matter anymore >>, said the head with sparks. The Zippleback winced in pain while trying to shift his left foreleg, due to the pierced arrow.

<< We’ve failed… in bringing back anything for the Queen… >>, the head with gas said defeatedly. << She’ll end us anyway, sooner or later… or maybe we will die of our wounds first. >>

The eyes of the Blue Dragon grew wide with shock and continued distress. The Zippleback’s twin yellow heads lay right next to each other, side by side, and started to whisper to each other:

<< I’ve lost… I’ve lost my sparks. >>

<< Oh no. I thought you said you could never lose your sparks. >>

<< I mean, dear friend, my sparks of joy. >>

<< Well… I am going to lose you. >>

<< Me too… >>

<< Stop >> roared the Blue Dragon, unable to watch any longer. He leaned closer and whispered, << Are you able to fly now ? >>.

<< Yes… W--why ? >>

<< Gather all your strength and bring these three salmons to the Queen before she realises you do not actually have any food >>, said the Blue Dragon.

<< But… >>, said one of the Zippleback’s heads.

<< But what about you ? >>, said the other head. << She will not accept you offering only one fish. >>

<< Do not worry. Just do what I tell you to >>, stated the Blue Dragon as he picked up the salmon with his front paws.

Without a word, the Zippleback opened his tired wings and flapped them faster and faster until they lifted his heavy body upwards. He started to fly out, with the Dragon following behind him. The two-headed dragon carried the fishes in his mouths and claws and, flying high above the great spacious floor of mist, he dropped his cargo, and turned to fly back to the platform.

The Blue Dragon dropped the one single salmon. A second after it fell through the thick mist, a booming growl below shook the cavern. It was the Red Queen, and she was displeased. << Insufficient offering ! >>, she bellowed. All the other dragons murmured in fear hearing that dreaded phrase.

<< Oh no, look who’s next… >>

<< He’s about to get swallowed up by the Queen’s gigantic jaws !! >>

Hovering in mid-air and engulfed in fear, the blue reptile said, << Your Majesty, do not be displeased. It is I, your uh… personal slave, the Blue Dragon >>.

<< Ah, so it is you… You are late ! And I see that you have not brought back that
traitor to compensate for your miserable offering. >>

<< I am sorry for my lack of punctuality, and... >>, began the Blue Dragon, struggling to keep his voice from trembling. He knew that any moment now, a pair of angry jaws mysteriously hidden by the red mist could suddenly snap him up and turn his life and body into a mere meal of blood and flesh. He shook his head at the gruesome thought.

<< And...?>>

<< I have learned a lot about the Black Dragon >> — the Blue Dragon said quickly — << but I have not yet succeeded in finding him... because... because I have great difficulty in concentrating on two difficult tasks at the same time... hunting down a dragon of great speed and bringing back enough food offerings for you, Your Majesty >>.

The brief period of silence tortured the Dragon. Still hovering, he looked around and saw that every dragon eye was fixed upon him.

<< Very well. You may not be required to bring back food for me.>>

To show his appreciation as well as to release the tension in his feelings, the blue-winged reptile lit up a little flame of blue fire in his jaws, striking the darkness for a second.

<< However, as your sole task is to hunt down that disloyal dragon, I will expect more from you. >>

The Blue Dragon stiffened and said, << I will strive on my task by all means... but I need time in order to achieve it. >>

<< Time! Yes, you need it. But do not take too much of it and test my patience. >>

<< I will not. Thank you for understanding, my Queen >>, roared the Blue Dragon and he flew swiftly back to his platform. He landed just beside the dying Zippleback and brought his jaws close to one of the two heads.

<< Hey...! >>, the Dragon whispered, to the Zippleback’s tiny ear hole positioned just between the half-closed yellow eye and the narrow and conical, straight spike that grew from the back of the head.

<< Yes...?>>

<< I have an idea. You just need to stay still. This will hurt a little >>, said the Blue Dragon. Resting on his hindlegs, he positioned his right front paw on the Zippleback’s body for support.

<< What... what are you... What are you doing don’t hurt us! >> fearfully exclaimed the wounded creature, and he attempted to back away.

The gentle and serious voice from the Blue Dragon stopped him: << Stay calm. I am going to help you. >>

<< Thank you for offering to help us but... it’s already too late for us now. >>

<< Now it is not! You can do this >>, said the Blue Dragon worriedly.

<< No, we can’t. Goodbye... We hope... you’ll have... a better life than us... >>
A staring pair of blue eyes struggled to not melt into tears.

<< Now… Now we are free… >>, said the Zippleback.

—<>—

First was darkness. Then, along with the darkness came a background noise of voices and fluttering wings. A scent of fish filled the cool air, and it awakened a sense of hunger.

Two pairs of lizard-like eyes opened… to see the streamlined body of a dragon lying close by.

Realisation hit the two minds of the Zippleback. They were still alive. But how?

The two-headed yellow lizard attempted to get up but stopped when he discovered that his shoulder wound was being licked by a certain fearsome dragon with blue wings. << What… what are you doing ? >>, asked the Zippleback.

The Blue Dragon stopped licking. << Do not move. My saliva can help you heal >> was all that he said.

<< But… but how ? >>, asked one of the two heads. Then, suddenly realising that the arrow was nowhere to be seen, the head of sparks said in shock : << What happened to the arrow ? You removed it !? How did… How did you… >>

<< I know a little on how the weapons of the Vikings work >>, casually replied the blue reptile. << And the wound was not as bad as I thought. The arrow had not pierced too deeply. >>

The Zippleback’s yellow eyes opened fully, meeting a pair of brilliant blue eyes. << You… you… >>, said one of the Zippleback’s heads in a weak voice. << Why ? >>

With a hint of an annoyed tone the Blue Dragon replied : << I have already told you. My saliva has certain healing properties, and that I know a bit about Viking arrows. Now stop all movements. >>

<< No, why are you doing this ? >> asked one head.

<< Why are you helping us ? >> asked the other.

The Blue Dragon froze and looked at both heads. Then he looked away. << I… do not know. >>

The Zippleback’s two serpentine necks lifted from the stony grey floor. One of his heads smiled and said, << I think I know why. You want us alive so that you can find your black dragon and be in the good graces of the Queen, right ? >>.

The Blue Dragon looked a little surprised. << That is not the main reason, or even the reason at all. >>

<< Then what is ? >>

Not a word went out from the jaws of the Dragon.

<< Relax drag’. We’re just trying to see your reaction. >>

<< On second thought, Gas-Head, I think it’s not such a good idea… >>
The blue eyes of the Dragon swivelled towards to the yellow ones of the Zippleback’s and stared hard into them.

<< Don’t you get angry, please. We’re just — >>, said the Zippleback.

<< I know. You dare to joke around with one of the most fearsome dragons of all. Why ? >>. The Dragon gave a little growl.

<< Because you are actually a…nice dragon who has saved our life>>, said the Zippleback quickly with a little fear of angering him further. << We thank you for that, and will always remember what you’ve done. >>

The Blue Dragon took a few steps away from him and went to sit at the edge of his platform overlooking the cavern.

After a while the Zippleback called out, << Umm… Blue Dragon ?>>

The blue reptile did not reply and continued staring somewhat peacefully at the surprisingly quiet scenery of dragons flying about in the cavern.

<< Can we ask you a question ?>> asked the Zippleback.

<< Listening >>, replied the Blue Dragon.

<< How long… how long have you been taking care of us ?>>

<< You do not remember ?>>, asked the blue-winged lizard without looking at him.

<< We’re sorry, but we really don’t. >>

<< Around two weeks and a half, or perhaps more than that. >>

The two heads of the Zippleback turned to face each other and started talking :

<< Wow that was a long time. >>

<< Not as long as one whole month. Remember the time a spear pierced the leg of one of our zippleback friends ?>>

<< Yeah don’t remind me of that. >>

The Zippleback walked over towards the Blue Dragon and sat down side by side. The two dragons did not speak for a while. Although the Zippleback knew he should be a little frightened by the Blue Dragon’s mere presence which had a sense of darkness, he was struggling to keep in his expressions of gratitude.

<< What is it that you wish to say ?>> said the Dragon suddenly, as if the silent presence of another dragon was too unbearable for him.

<< You’ve given us another chance at this life ; we wish to express our gratitude. >>

The Dragon refrained himself from scoffing. << By saying ‘thank you’ again ?>>

<< Even if we really think saying another ‘thank you’ would be nice, we know what you really want : our help. >>
<< You have already helped me >>, stated the Dragon bluntly.

<< Yes, but we want to continue helping you as long as our life allows us to. It’s the least we can do to repay you. >>

The Dragon turned his head to his left and looked at the eyes of his two-headed companion.

<< I appreciate you wanting to repay me, but your wound still needs healing. >>

<< Don’t worry about it. What you need to worry about is finding that black dragon before the Queen loses her patience. We don’t want you losing your life because of us. >>

The Blue Dragon sighed. << All right, but I do not want you to tire your wings on long search journeys with me >>, he said.

<< That’ll be later. Right now, we are going to go on a little trip of question-and-answer… after a nice fishy meal of course. >>

<< You seem to have a plan >>, said the Blue Dragon, becoming more receptive. << You are suggesting that we question every dragon about the black dragon? >>

<< Oh, we two heads are full of great suggestions and ideas, not just only for this issue… But only if you agree. >>

The Blue Dragon’s head slowly lowered. A smirk that looked somewhat sinister-looking grew on his mouth. << I agree. >>

—«Author’s note»—

This part of the chapter REPLAYS Chapter 11, Clouds of Storm, this time with a different point of view. PAST TENSE. ↓

—«End of Author’s note. Back to the story»—

A few weeks later…

Through the cold air of the sky, beneath a carpet of white clouds that packed themselves so closely together that they blocked out much of the sunlight, a vast group of various kinds of dragons were flying towards the west. There were clumsy slow-flying Gronkles with their humming bird-like wings, large monstrous Nightmares with their forelimbs being great wings, bird-like deadly Nadders with their ammo of poisonous spines packed neatly behind in their tails, and Zipplebacks with their two heads of destruction. But there was also one unique dragon — the Blue Dragon, capable of breathing flames of possibly the hottest fire known — blue fire.

Flying alongside with the Blue Dragon was the Yellow Zippleback with two worried heads. The Blue Dragon’s hornless head turned to his left, his eyes looking at his only trusted companion. Noticing how worried the Zippleback was, the Blue Dragon opened his jaws and broke the silence:

<< This is the first time you are going to a raid ever since your… serious injury. Any words? >>

One of the Zippleback’s heads replied, << No, it’s just that you may need someone else to help you with that unfinished quest of hunting down that speedy black dragon, if we two don’t make it,
that is >>

<< Do not worry. You will. >>

<< How can you be so sure ?>> asked another head of the Zippleback.

<< Because this time… you have me >>, stated the Blue Dragon confidently.

The Zippleback’s heads eyed briefly at each other and said:

<< Ha. >>

<< I feel safer already. >>

<< Blue Drag, do you realise that this is also your very first raid since you arrived at Red Queen Island ?>>

The Blue Dragon said nothing.

Suddenly in the blurry horizon, a faint sight of an island could be seen. It seemed to grow larger and larger as the dragons increased their flying speed.

An enormous green titan wing monstrous nightmare roared loudly to all dragons: << Now, my winged soldiers! The last raid we lost, but this time we have a newcomer who we are counting on changing things around — the Blue Dragon! This time, we shall not fail! This time, we shall bring back food for the Red Queen — with our lives intact! >>.

All of the dragons except the Blue Dragon roared their battle cries. In fact the blue-winged reptile scoffed. He turned his head at the Yellow Zippleback and said, << I dislike being mentioned >>.

<< Well, at least they are trying to look up to you >>, said the Zippleback. << And accept you as part of the group. >>

<< Recognition? Ha. I am not used to that. I like doing things alone and in my own way, behind the shadows. >>

They flew down a little lower towards the sea. The island had an extended, curved coastline, high cliffs, and tall buildings. With every passing minute and with each flapping of wings, it became closer and closer. Then…

A blood-curdling roar of a dragon.

<< Someone’s been shot! >> roared the Leader Titan Wing Monstrous Nightmare before whispering to himself, << It has begun >>.

Upon seeing more arrows being fired from the cliffs, the Blue Dragon roared, << Fly up higher! Fly up higher! We need to get away from the volleys of arrows and spears! >>.

<< What are you doing!?> asked the Zippleback seeing the Blue Dragon flying up higher into the clouds out of a sudden.

<< If you trust me, follow me >>, said the blue-winged beast partially hidden by the clouds.

The Zippleback followed suit and saw him flying just above the carpet of clouds, the shining
sun in the background. Confused, he asked him, "Are we leaving the raid?"

"No, you have misunderstood my unconventional plan."

The two Zippleback heads looked at each other. "A plan, eh?"

"To ensure we do this with success," replied the blue reptile with an unchanging tone. "Learning about the terrain of the enemy is very important. We shall fly a bit further and then a bit lower to see below the clouds. The clouds now serve as our cover."

They flew further west and a little lower through the carpet of clouds and peeked below to see the island’s coastline, which apparently had rows and rows of dangerous Viking weapons.

"We are now directly above them!", exclaimed the Zippleback.

"Now let us face north... and fly down and destroy those shooting weapons for the other dragons!", roared the Blue Dragon who continued in a smaller voice and a sly smile, "Time to cause destruction."

The Dragon contracted his huge blue wings so that they become smaller and narrower before he divebombed downwards and towards a tall rock tower with two very dangerous Viking weapons stationed: a catapult and a spear shooter.

Partially extending his wings, he levelled off his steep descend, and fire formed in his jaws... which blasted out as a blue fireball that exploded upon direct impact with the two weapons — now completely disintegrated. A Viking who was beside where the remains of the catapult turned around, a crossbow in his hands. But before he could fire a crossbow bolt at the Dragon, fire formed in the Dragon jaws again and a fireball collided with the Viking, exploding everywhere and destroying part of the rocky tower. Rocks broke off and fell from the tower.

"The Dairy Tower’s been attacked!", went the Vikings, shouting frantically all over in what seemed to be another of their strange languages.

"The blue fire drake...! It’s back!"

What they were shouting caught the Blue Dragon’s interest. ‘Blue fire drake’?, thought the Dragon. ‘Ha! Better than ‘bleu mortel’ which is too much, or ‘blue dragon’ which is too plain.

And they fear me.

He smiled.

Good.

Behind him he could hear a huge explosion. He turned around mid-flight to check and see whether it was the Yellow Zippleback. Indeed it was, and he had destroyed more weapons at the foot of the tower. "Follow me!", he roared to the two-headed beast below him. He flew ahead of the Zippleback and faced north again. Increasing his speed, the Blue Fire Drake flew across a narrow strip of a beach and towards some steep cliffs of the island which had rows and rows of catapults and spear shooters.

"That is a huge number of weapons!", said the Blue Drake to himself. He created a massive blue flame that engulfed two catapults before he turned around to fly back towards the slow-flying Zippleback.
This is the perfect job for you. Make a huge gas cloud and destroy their weapons!

<< Gladly >> said the Zippleback and he flapped his wings faster towards the cliffs and flew a little lower. As the Blue Fire Drake fired fireball after fireball at the fleeing Viking solders around the catapults and spear shooters, the Zippleback’s right head began to emit a steady stream of green gas that covered the Viking weapons from one end of the cliff all the way to the other. With a spark from the Zippleback’s left head, the enormous gas-covered area went ablaze!

The absolutely panic-stricken Vikings went shouting below:

« Send more reinforcements to the Milky Cliffs! »

« Gather the women and children to the Secret Hall! »

Suddenly a large rock boulder flew towards the Blue Drake, who blasted it into smithereens. A volley of arrows whizzed by and the Drake barrel-rolled out of the way before firing a huge blue fireball at a group of Viking archers.

But before he could rejoin the Zippleback, the blue reptile’s winged ears caught a distress call of help from another dragon flying just nearby him. A female deadly nadder had just dodged a spear aimed at her.

« Fire again! Bring it down! », went a command of a Viking leader from below.

« Bring it down! Bring it down! »

Quick as a flash the Drake activated his flaming blue fire coat and he spun around, his jaws acting as a blowtorch with a sword-like blue flame that disintegrated a spear aiming towards the helpless deadly nadder.

Upon hearing a huge blast, the Drake hovered in mid-air and turned his head towards the Zippleback, who apparently, had just destroyed the spear shooter which had shot that spear. So that explained that blast. The deadly nadder was also hovering as if she were in shock. Suddenly the blue dragon recognized her as one of those who had belittled him as a small unintimidating dragon undeserving of a species name such as «the blue death».

<< Now fly away; it is dangerous here! >>, he roared at the terrified Purple-Blue Deadly Nadder. She nodded fearfully and the bird-like flying creature flew off hurriedly. The Drake and the Zippleback flapped their wings forcefully and headed for the clouds.

<< Spears and arrows cannot reach us here! >>, roared one of the Zippleback’s heads.

<< That is correct >>, said the blue dragon. << But we must still be careful. >>

<< Now let us grab ourselves a cattle! >>, roared the Zippleback, both heads pleased at their destructive handiwork.

<< Cow >>, corrected the Blue Drake. He turned around in a wide circle and started to fly down towards a nearby barn being raided by other dragons.

<< Whatever >>, said the Zippleback. The huge two-headed lizard swooped downwards with a great windy {whoosh!} and his left head released a stream a green gas around a barn house. With a spark the gas suddenly exploded — much to the terror of a Viking man who yelled:
The Blue Drake smiled and roared, <<This is indeed an attack, all right. Now let us steal your food and we will leave>>. The elegant beast swooped down to a wide fenced area of grass but before he could snatch a cow, he sensed that the Yellow Zippleback was in trouble. Deciding to create a distraction, he flew upwards and fired blue flames at the roof of a house, which crumbled in front of a terrified Viking youngling.

As usual, the Blue Fire Drake was unable to resist the pleasure of shooting fear right into his enemies’ eyes. He coated himself completely with his blue fire jacket in a typical monstrous nightmare fashion, glowed his skin to an eerie bright blue, and landed on the disintegrating rooftop. He then spotted the Yellow Zippleback on his feet not far off, with his towering serpentine necks trapped by another annoying Viking weapon. That entangling contraption was then broken with a single fireball shooting from the Blue Drake’s mouth, and the liberated Zippleback flew away to continue spreading chaos.

Not forgetting his victim, the Blue Drake turned around as menacingly as he could, lowered his head, and glowered into what appeared to be the fearfully frozen eyes of a Viking boy. The boy shakily took out a wooden sword. Pathetic, thought the Drake and he decided to leave his victim alone so that he could continue his raiding mission.

Suddenly the Drake heard a shout of a Viking and his instincts told him to fly upwards immediately. Something long and sharp whizzed past below, missing his body. Ha. Pathetic attempt. Even if he didn’t fly out of the way there was no chance the spear would have got him.

<<But how dare you attack me!>>, the dragon roared, filling the skies with flames of blue terror. He let the fire in his jaws grow larger and hotter, before releasing it in the form of a blue fireball that flew right above the heads of the Viking boy and another older one, probably a man, both fleeing fearfully towards their ruined home. Glowing his body in a frightful blue to make himself even scarier, the Drake fired multiple fireballs. Yes, he was tempted to obliterate them all, but he decided to miss his living targets on purpose. And the result was still somewhat entertaining. <<Yes, go and flee before I change my mind and decide to destroy you all!>>, the fearsome winged beast growled.

But the Drake was not too interested in taking too much time in excessive and meaningless destruction so he flew up and away from the demolished area in hopes of catching a certain large prey with four legs.

Flying high above he scanned below and was disappointed to learn that he was a little late as most of the dragons had taken away much of the livestock. He spied a Gronkle below carrying off a huge cow. Knowing that he was not the type to steal from another dragon, he flew away in search of his Zippleback comrade.

<<There you are!>>, exclaimed the Drake when he spied the two-headed flying lizard approaching him in the darkening sky.

<<Yes, alive and well, with the biggest prey of all time!>>, replied the Zippleback.

Seeing his comrade carrying a cow in his claws created an idea in the Blue Drake’s mind. <<You go and rejoin the others; I will go for the next best thing… to steal>>, he roared.

<<And that is…?>>
The Drake narrowed his wings before divebombing again towards a building beside the burning barn house. He landed in front of a door, which he blasted opened to reveal many wooden shelves. The four-limbed creature entered in the narrow interior of the building and smiled to himself when he saw that on the shelves there were wooden containers containing something that was appreciated only by few dragons — cheese.

The blue dragon stood on his large hind limbs and hastily knocked down a few of the containers, then he picked two of them up in each of his foreclaws. The long-bodied dragon hurriedly backed out of the narrow building, turned around, and was surprised to see a cow clumsily running past him. Deciding that he had done enough damage to this particular area, he leapt off from the ground, opened his wings and disappeared to the sky for his next prey. He had his reasons for not stealing that one last cow. One of which was that if he did steal that creature, there could be nothing to raid in this area the next time.

Whooshing through the cold winds, the Blue Fire Drake increased his flying speed, knowing that the dragons were about to leave the island and that the darkening clouds were going to bring rain soon. He flew southwest and was intrigued by an enormous building near a hilly area, the kind that he had seen before — a palace or castle of the Two-Leggeds. A Viking on a galloping horse was on a long pathway that led up to what appeared to be the entrance of the palace. With one swift swoop, the Drake knocked over the metal-covered Viking and snatched the horse before the animal reached the entrance. The blue dragon quickly turned around and while flying upwards, he fired multiple fireballs at the armoured Vikings on the ground behind him… obliterating them. These he had to destroy because according to what he had understood so far, these were Two-Legged soldiers.

<< Time to leave >>, said the Drake to himself after shooting down a spear shooter from one of the high corners of the palace. The blue-winged reptile shot towards the sky, glad to escape the stormy clouds and rains which had started to cover the island. He looked behind and soon the island behind him was nothing more than a tiny blurry dot, bluish and greyish.

It had been a successful raid.

— Clavierdepixels

Written in SCEF Style 2.1
16 - Dragon’s Den
(Official How to Train Your Dragon soundtrack)

Now We are Free
(soundtrack from the movie Gladiator)

This soundtrack expresses the Yellow Zippleback’s bittersweet joy of the thought of finally being able to close his eyes in peace, and leave behind, a painful meaningless war.

10 Ride into Midnight
An instrumental from the music album Another Star in the Sky by David Arkenstone.

When I was writing this chapter, I liked to imagine that this was the « battle song » of the Blue Dragon and the Yellow Zippleback when they were raiding Lelondell.

Here’s a YouTube link.

Oh, maybe you might prefer Kalax - The Ride (Into the Midnight) ? I like this one very much too.

The dragons in this story sometimes say « drag’ » or « drag » (when communicating among each other) as an informal short form of the word « dragon ».

<< Text >> is the « translation » of the special language the dragons speak among themselves. And yes, the main quotation marks for dragon speech in this story are different. Note that << >> are not double angle guillemets ; they are less-than [<] and greater-than symbols [>] — doubled.

<<non-breaking space + text of dragon speech + non-breaking space>> (SCEF 2.1)
<<text of dragon speech>> (SCEF 2.1.1) (no spaces)

For the dragons, personal names and the way to introduce oneself all work differently.

Please leave a review to tell me what you think of my story so far ! It can be a detailed review explaining why you’d prefer this vs that, or it can be as simple as a « like » or « j’aime » button. :)
Far away… above jagged snow-capped mountains… A pair of wings were gliding around, floating on thick icy clouds. A blue fireball appeared in the sky for a brief second, fading immediately afterwards.

The Blue Fire Drake’s eyes had been scanning over the features of the land from above for hours and hours.

«No sign of a certain sleek, black, rogue dragon. What good is having speed if I am unable to find him in the first place?», he said to himself.

In a frustrated anger, the Drake fired another fireball that shot over the clouds again. Impossible to fail now! He must find him now or else the Queen…

Flapping his large dark blue elegant wings more vigorously, he pointed his elongated head higher and he flew upwards.

Higher and higher above the clouds the Drake went, entering a vast, serene, light blue hemisphere lit by a single, unreachable, burning bright ball of yellow fire which was simply insufficient to warm the dragon’s cold-blooded reptilian body. He was too high up over the Mountains of the North-West, too high up in the atmosphere.

The winged beast scoffed to himself. «It would seem that I need my fire.»

A blue flame suddenly coated his entire being for a moment, so fiery that it almost burned the suspended water droplets. Almost.

Having let out some of his inner fiery emotions, the Blue Drake stopped flapping his wings and let them glide higher and higher on the winds, and he let himself relax a little, for a little moment. The lone creature pondered deeply as his eyes swept across the beautiful, endless skyscape of light blue light…

Let us see… It had been several weeks since her Majesty had tasked him with hunting down the Black Dragon and the chances of him succeeding in doing that before she lost her patience… were getting slim.

The past few days he had been cautiously searching, from high up in the clouds, the heavily fortified island of spear shooters and catapults, and green pastures and forestry hills… Then Yellow
Zippleback said most of the dragons reported that the Black Dragon was last seen near the chain of tiny islands west of Red Queen Island. So, he had searched all the islands, but again, without success. And he had just finished searching much of the westerly side of the mountains which always seemed to be misty. By now, after several weeks since he started, he had already searched almost the entire north-western part of the Archipelago. However, there was only one part he had not explored: the east. Directly east from Red Queen Island. He would pass by the tiny islands again, to be sure.

<<This is going to be a long journey.>>

Hours passed by as the Blue Fire Drake flew…

Through cloudy and cloudless skies…

Stopping regularly at any island he spotted to rest his wings…

Scooping up fish from the vast sea…

Tracing foamy lines on the sea’s bluish-green surface…

Asking hot-tempered scauldrons about whether they had seen the Black Dragon, to which they replied no — in a somewhat suspicious manner. The Blue Drake was starting to wonder if some of the dragons he interrogated were lying.

Regardless, a little island had appeared in the Blue Drake’s field of vision; and the sun was low on the horizon, casting rays of red and dark orange light everywhere. Soon the dragon was encircling the island, looking down below and marvelling at the pristine white beaches, now enhanced with beautiful hues. The land appeared very rock and sandy, with a few clumps of trees and grass here and there. It was beautiful.

And the sunset was equally beautiful. The Drake raised his head to marvel at the sky, as he glided around. The sunset was indeed especially beautiful here. Suddenly his eyes spotted something moving across the sky from a cloudy area of the sky, from the east. It was black, and it was shooting down at a steep angle towards the island. At top speed. The Black Dragon?

Indeed it was. The Blue Drake smiled slyly to himself. He increased the speed of the flapping of his wings.

In a few moments the Black Dragon was almost above the island… followed by the Drake who rapidly descended his altitude by gradually narrowing his wings. He swept down towards the island — until he was meters above the beach — and directly underneath the large black-winged creature who had a smaller set of wings near his tail.

Quick as a flash, the jaws of the Drake opened and out came two small comets of blue fire that shot right towards the underside of his target’s entirely black silhouette.

The black-winged dragon suddenly did a series of evasive barrel rolls which just avoided the fiery comets.

Impossible! thought the Blue Fire Drake.

The Drake quickly changed his strategy and flew upwards in a circular vertical loop fashion and being upside down now he attempted to pin down the elusive creature.

This would hurt slightly.
Wings fully closed, he violently collided right into the Black Dragon who didn’t have time for any evasive manoeuvres this time. The Drake’s front paws grabbed his waist and his sharp long jaws hunted for his very short neck as the two winged beasts — now entangled — crashed to the ground.

They tumbled across a grassy area of the island. The similar-sized Black Dragon struggled, attempting to push the Blue Drake off with repeated kicks from his rather short four limbs and he succeeded. The two dragons separated for a moment. The Blue Drake fell backwards, and snarling viciously, he sprang back onto his adversary relentlessly.

And two rows of sharp teeth attempted to grip his blue neck. With a swift swing of his clawed paw, the Drake smacked the neck of the black beast who shrieked in pain and retaliated by pushing him backwards. But the Drake evaded the kicks, and just managed to finally pin down the Black Dragon… with forelegs on his smooth and scaly chest, blue wings on black wings, and hindlegs on his adversary’s tail.

<<They call me the Blue Fire Drake, and I am here to capture you and take you back to the Red Queen !>>, the blue-winged reptile snarled right in front of his adversary’s face, unusually wide and flat like a salamander’s.

His enormous front-facing green catlike eyes showing no fear, the Black Dragon roared back, <<I am the Night Fury, and I will never again answer to her bidding, or to anyone’s !>>.

Purple fire formed in his jaws and shot at the Blue Drake’s face, but the Drake fired at the same time. Purple plasma blast met blue fire, resulting in a huge explosion that threw both dragons backwards.

The Blue Drake picked himself up, shook his dazed head for an instant and turned to face the Night Fury again. The sleek black creature which resembled a cat or a bat opened and closed his wings rapidly, displaying his massive wingspan while growling menacingly. The Drake stayed relatively still and silent instead, assuming an icy reptilian stance. Only his jaws were flaming with a toned-down blue flame.

They circled each other, face to face. 

<<I’ll never surrender>>, snarled the Night Fury, his large green eyes narrowing even further.

<<Never ? Do not make me kill you !>>, snarled the Blue Fire Drake.

<<Don’t make me kill you !>>

The blue winged beast fired a powerful shot at the defiant black-scaled dragon who fired as well. Their fires collided and counteracted each other, and a huge blast ensued. They fired again. A wall of collision of fires. The Drake fired again and the Night Fury jumped up in the air, avoiding the fiery comet.

*Four more shots left, enough for a fiery blow torch,* thought the Blue Fire Drake. *His most destructive weapon of all.*

*His final blow.*

The dragon breathed in deep and started charging his fire, letting an eerie and low growling sound.

A constant stream of blue fire blasted out, forming a sword-like flame that almost reached the
Night Fury, who had spread his wings to fly upwards. The Blue Drake followed suit, and he swung his neck around to direct his disintegrator flame as close as possible to burn the agile black creature.

A high screeching sound from the Night Fury…

A plasma shot exploded on the side of the Drake’s jaws, sending sparks of purple everywhere that stained his vision for a while. He winced, and his long sharp teeth and jaws felt sharp spikes of pain. His blue flame died down.

The two dragons hovered in a cloudless part of the sky, flapping their wings rapidly, facing each other.

<<One blow is insufficient to deter me>>, snarled the blue dragon. <<Any last words ?>>

<<Why are you doing this ?>>

That question did not sound pathetic and the black dragon was not pleading for mercy. The Drake was a bit perplexed. <<Because the Queen has ordered it>>, he roared back.

The Night Fury asked once more, <<Why are you doing this ?>>

<<Because… the Queen has ordered it.>>

<<Why do you want to forever be her mindless puppet ?>>

The Blue Drake was enraged. <<How dare…!>>. He prepared himself to fire, then stopped himself. <<Mindless puppet… Slave…?>>. The dragon shook his head, feeling dizzy.

<<Why don’t you resist this fear ?>>, asked the black dragon again.

<<Because… because she will kill me if I do not>>, replied the Blue Fire Drake, his chest feeling heavy with crumbling emotions… But he hardened his heart. He alone must survive. <<And that is why I must kill you !>>

<<Great. Just as I thought>>, went a sarcastic voice with a hint of disappointment. <<Again.>>

The Drake’s jaws filled with fire and a shot flew right towards the black dragon who expertly dodged with elegant wing moves.

<<You are better than this !>>, shrieked the Night Fury in an almost pleading, desperate tone. The sleek creature turned around and started flying away.

The Drake readied his wings and gave chase, firing mini comets of fire left and right near the large tail fins of the dragon in front of him. The black Night Fury barrel-rolled left and barrel-rolled right, avoiding shot after shot. They pointed their heads downwards, descending from the skies and flying straight towards the island’s beach.

<<Ha ! Are you out of firepower ? Why are you not defending yourself ?>>, taunted the Drake.

They flew across the island, just two meters above the beach.

<<Why do you resist being yourself ?>>

The Drake stopped and landed himself abruptly on his four limbs. He stood in silence and
rapidly blinking eyes stared ahead. His vision, though clear as crystal, somehow managed to get even clearer. The Night Fury’s words ranged in his ears… “Why do you…”

“…resist being…”

“…yourself…?”

In front of him was a sleek and intelligent-looking being, who had just landed on the sands, now bathed in the twilight. The black-scaled creature had a body similarly sized to his own, but not quite as reptilian. The four-legged winged creature let go of his defensive posture and sat in a friendlier posture: back limbs folded behind, front limbs upright and unbended. He retracted the rows of his teeth of his now toothless jaws — a strange ability. His large green eyes stared ahead, stern yet soft, distrustful yet hopeful, afraid yet bold. His exposed torso, tall and upright, supported a short neck — that on one side, had a large cut with a streak of dark liquid leaking out. It was barely visible in the dim rays of the red and dark orange light of the beautiful sunset in the background.

The Drake felt his heart melt with guilt. His eyes watered, slightly blurring the horrifying and beautiful scene in front of him. Images flashed in his mind, of him helping to care for Yellow Zippleback who had his shoulder wounded by an arrow — that was him being himself. And now… this…

<<What have I done ?>>. The blue dragon’s low voice wavered a little when he spoke the last word.

The dragon in front kept staring straight at him with his large beautiful eyes that seemed to appear somewhat surprised and relieved. His bizarre-looking four ear flaps that were large and tall extended from the top of his flat head.

The Drake had more discreet winged ears on his sides instead. He neatly folded his dark wings on his back. <<I feel strange. What have you done ?>>

<<I’ve just convinced you not to kill me>>, the expressive black dragon replied dryly.

The Drake stared downwards at the sands, now bathed in darker shadows as the light of the sun gradually disappeared. <<But what should I tell the Queen ?>>

<<Maybe you can tell her that I’m not so much of a traitor as she thinks>>, said the Night Fury. <<Sometimes I help the other dragons fight. I intervene indirectly, when the battles get too… ferocious. I simply refuse to constantly refill her ravenous, unending, greedy appetite.>>

<<She would never…>>, protested the Blue Drake.

<<Or maybe you don’t need to go back and tell her at all.>>

The Blue Drake did not immediately reply. <<And be like you? A traitor ?>>

<<What’s wrong with being a traitor? What’s wrong with resisting fear, and desiring and embracing freedom ?>>

The Blue Drake couldn’t answer as the Night Fury leapt from the sands and flapped his bat-like wings that were enormous for his size.

<<Have I wounded you badly ?>>, the Drake said to the black dragon hovering in mid-air. He wanted to sound more concerned and remorseful but was unable to, perhaps due to extreme
feelings of guilt.

<<Don’t worry about it. It’s just a scratch. Just a scar. Part of the price of freedom.>>

The Drake had his blue eyes fixed ahead to the hovering creature above, and he did not say a word.

<<By the way… resist the fear>>, the Night Fury added quickly after which he began accelerating to the skies. Eventually he was out of sight, leaving the Blue Fire Drake standing alone on the island, now surrounded in darkness.

Sometime later… when it was pitch black…

The Drake was resting. His body was lowered, his belly resting on the soft sands of the beach. His forelimbs were stretched out in front, supporting his chin and neck. His gaze was fixed ahead, towards the dark waters of the empty, empty sea.

The night was getting colder and the skies might open and pour down rain at any moment. But he simply kept lying down under the starless, dull cloud-covered sky, and made no movements save for the blinking of his eyelids. On the outside — a still appearance. Inside… a torrent of conflicting emotions.

He was supposed to back at the Nest by now, with the other dragons. He should have left hours ago. The Red Queen would be furious if he returned empty-clawed, without her prize. She would punish him. Terminate him permanently. He was supposed to obey her or die.

Supposed to.

He still felt an urge to again hunt down the elusive strong-minded Night Fury and save his own life… And pay the price of guilt?

What did that dragon mean by the price of freedom?

Is it worth it?

What if he became a traitor like him who does not seem that treacherous after all?

“COME TO ME…”

“COME AND SURRENDER YOURSELF TO MY WILL…”

Her words rang in his mind. Reminding him.

“YOU LIVE TO SERVE ME…”

Tormenting him.

“YOU BELONG TO ME…”

Controlling him.

…

…

…
An eerie hum or buzz in the air.

Dragon wings appeared everywhere, all around the blue dragon as he kept flying. Blurry silhouettes of dragons in the mist soon became dragons of all shapes and sizes, their colours toned down by the darkness.

Unlike the Blue Fire Drake, each dragon had something in their claws. Carrying a cow, a monstrous nightmare hurriedly and rudely flew past him and cut into his wing-path. A deadly nadder was carrying a sheep. Another was carrying a big fish that resembled a dolphin or shark.

The Drake picked up his pace and squeezed through any open spaces he could find without cutting into anyone’s wing-path, by opening and closing his wings repeatedly and zipping here and there.

Suddenly every dragon dived downwards steeply. The Drake followed suit but was met with twisting rock towers emerging from the dark waters below. He ascended back up as there were too many obstacles.

There was something ahead far into the distance.

An island.

Circled by a veil of seemingly perpetual fog and jagged towers of rock, a lone black and tall mountain loomed in the distance, with a visible red glow of lava between cracks and crevices. The rocky island became closer and closer. The narrow cone-shaped mountain appeared to be an enormous pointed volcano reaching into the clouds.

Something suddenly crossed the dragon’s foggy unclear mind, together with a sense of déjà-vu. *Where is he flying to? Why is he flying?* He felt like he needed to be following everyone who was flying straight to the island.

Like he was supposed to.

Instinct told him to turn back and go the opposite direction, but for some reason he ignored it. His wings flapped up and down almost autonomously… taking him half-unsurely across the barren, grey landscape around the volcano, and into an opening on the side of the volcano, through the winding tunnel crowded with other dragons… until an enormous cavern with ominous rock towers partially covered by a reddish mist filled his view. The walls of the cavern had jagged openings everywhere where thousands of dragons flew in and out — each hauling in his or her kill for the…

**RED QUEEN OF DEATH.**

**Déjà-vu…** thought the Blue Fire Drake feeling more and more disturbed. *I have seen this before. I have been here before. I have been controlled by her before.*

Anger formed in his heart. Again he had lost control of himself due to…

**Her.**

Avoiding more stalactites, the elegant flying beast glided across the cavern making a wide
circle while taking in the view… of thousands of dragons resting on the platforms of the rocky structures… of thousands of dragons dropping their cargo of food into the spacious floor of glowing red mist… which concealed pure danger in the form of a ravenous beast of a colossal size.

_I should not have come here. Especially without her wanted Night Fury._

The Drake increased his speed and his eyes searched for an exit, deciding whether to listen to his conscience which told him, “Escape now or never!.”

<<Why have you come to me _without anything_ to offer me ?>>

The blue dragon felt a chill in all the bones of his long spine when _she_ suddenly spoke in her booming voice.

<<Where is that Black Dragon ? That Night Fury ?>>

He refrained from replying, and he tentatively pointed his head to the one of the narrow cave openings, which showed nothing but pitch black outside.

<<You wouldn’t dare to escape your punishment now, wouldn’t you, my slave ? Your punishment would be _even more_ great and terrible, and then I would end you.>>

It was too late to turn back now. He was _not_ going to hunt down a fellow dragon ever again. Now he must betray her to save his miserable life. No matter what his own opinion of his life was.

_He must escape. Now._

The blue dragon started flying straight towards the cave opening. He flapped his wings more boldly.

<<How dare…! _STOP HIM._>>

Every other dragon turned his or her eyes towards the Drake, now with his heart pounding heavily.

<<Concentrate all fire on him. I will NOT allow another to betray me.>>

_This is madness_, thought the Blue Fire Drake. _Why is instinct telling me to do something so life-threatening ? Now I have no choice but to trust it._

Every other dragon turned his or her eyes towards the Drake, now with his heart pounding heavily. In an instant he had thousands and thousands of winged fire-breathing enemies.

A red monstrous nightmare flew in front of him, aggressively blocking his escape. A stream of yellow fire formed right in front, blinding his view with a destructive substance that illuminated the dark cavern… A destructive substance that was not hot enough to cause much damage to the Blue Fire Drake’s extremely fireproof skin, however. One direct hit to his face was just a light slap.

But then fires from all directions came exploding on his skin. Again and again. He could hardly fly straight as impact of fireball after fireball knocked him.

Repeatedly.

All he could see was fire. Yellow fire. All he could feel was pain from the combined impact of the dragons’ blasts.
It covered his body, threatening to burn his wings and saw them off. His altitude was descending rapidly. He was no longer flying straight due to the extreme number of fiery shots he was enduring.

Then dragon after dragon came with their claws and jaws.

*Is this the end?*

No, *He has not yet activated his fire jacket.*

Suddenly a massive blue flame hotter than the other flames, engulfed the Drake’s skin and it threw off the crazed mind-controlled opponents, who shrieked and roared due to the extreme heat. They fell away from him in all directions.

But one deadly nadder’s spike managed to pierce his back. The Drake shrieked in pain. He was almost invincible to external fiery attacks, but his weakness was sharp, poisonous projectiles. He finally lost control of his flight… and landed at the edge of one of the rocky cliffs that was just above the mist — the red mist that acted as the fake floor that concealed the bloodthirsty Queen.

<<*Yes, bring him down so that I can finish him.>>

<<*Never>>*, choked the blue dragon. Fire and smoke surrounded him. He struggled to get back on his feet. He looked upwards to see a swarm of winged beasts flying straight towards him. He bent his limbs, and with a sudden powerful sideways leap, he dodged most of them. One who tried to push him over the cliff received a whip of the Drake’s extra-long needle-like tail, sending the victim tumbling off the cliff.

The blue reptile flapped his wings and started a difficult vertical ascend while barely avoiding a green cloud of zippleback gas. There were so many explosions his vision of the cavern was jerky and blurry. He opened his jaws and fired multiple shots at the other dragons, toning down the intensity of each shot to save the more powerful ones for…

A scauldron spewing boiling water at him which he dodged. And a group of deadly nadders pouring down extremely hot magnesium flames and shooting their pesky poisonous spikes.

The Drake barrel-rolled out of the way and gave three of the nadders a sweeping blue flame as he continued his vertical ascend. Soon he was near the dark cave opening.

<<*What are you doing, you fools? BRING HIM DOWN!*>>, *boomed the Queen’s voice.*

<<*He’s too fast and resists most of our blasts!*>>, yelled one dragon.

The Blue Fire Drake increased his speed even more as he entered the cave twisting opening that had no light save for the light of reptilian fires. He fired blasts here and there and opened and hid his extendable large blue wings, squeezing thorough any gaps between wings.

The entrance was only a few meters away! But that was when he heard a chilling warning of the consequences of his treachery:

<<*…hunt them down, both of them! In every corner of this world…*>>

With one last blast of blue fire the Blue Fire Drake exploded his way out of the side of the volcanic mountain, out of that terrible, terrible place… and into the starry night sky.

He looked behind… and saw that many dragons were still relentlessly chasing after him. The
Blue Drake turned to face the front again, and he shook his head slightly from side to side, having enough of this madness. With one deep breath, he plunged straight into the dark waters and swam underwater for as long as his lungs could handle it. Then the dragon breached the watery surface, and he flew away to wherever his wings and his heart wanted to take him…

Which was someplace far, far away from any being.

Solitude. The other price of freedom.

Author’s note:

* The original soundtrack of a Japanese anime *Kuzu no Honkai* (Scum’s Wish) portrays feelings of emptiness, loneliness, and longingness very well. Even unworthiness, worthlessness, and guilt to an extent. And I think the OST (except the opening and ending theme songs) fits this part of the story. Note that the anime’s theme is completely unrelated to this chapter.

* Sorry, Night Fury.

* Written in SCEF Style 2.2

Yes, this is a new version again (previous version is 2.1), that tries to reduce the « gap » between the versions on Archive of Our Own and FanFiction[point]net.

Basically, it’s now « “like this” ».

first level : « … » (French double angle guillemets, with non-breaking spaces)
second level : “…” (English double curly quote marks)
third level : ‹…› (Swiss single angle guillemets)

✗ <<non breaking space + text of dragon speech + non breaking space>> (SCEF 2.1)
✗ <<text of dragon speech>> (SCEF 2.1.1) (no spaces)
✗ <<text of dragon speech>> (SCEF 2.2) (no spaces)
Emotions

Author’s note :

✶ Be prepared, we’re entering into the gloomier, darker parts of the story. Sorry.

✶ 10 - Aspen in January, Winter (by Michael Gettel) Narada Equinox
A calming and slightly melancholic instrumental.

✶ The Empire
Composed by French composer Philippe Vachey, this is a soundtrack of an old PC video game from 1997, Little Big Adventure 2 (also known as Twinsen’s Odyssey). (It’s a PC from my childhood.)

I like to call this OST « Lelondell : From Kingdom to Empire ».

――――― «‹‹ ››» ―――――

14. Emotions

――――― «‹‹ ››» ―――――

That one single attack had been more serious than expected. It had caused a serious breach in our island’s once-strong walls of defence. With most of the catapults and spear shooters destroyed, the dragons came back repeatedly, plundering over what was left of the villages. There was nothing much that our Lelondish soldiers could do other than to carry out frequent evacuations of us peasants to the Secret Hall (and of the nobles to the Palace) and to deliver out rations and supplies.

It was too unsafe to stay in our newly reconstructed home and barn so my family and I were ordered to gather our belongings and stay out of the line of fire — and stay in a small cramped makeshift shelter in the Secret Hall. (We could not afford a decent compartmentalized room.)

Every day a soldier would come to our door and check our supplies and provisions. It was a weird experience being survivors in a crisis like this.

One day, Dad told us that he wanted to go out of our makeshift shelter and check on the house and the barn. For some reason Mom and I didn’t reply. I was sitting quietly on an old stool, resting my head on the little table which was currently our multi-purpose table. Mom was resting on the only bed we had. It was a straw bed large enough for only both of my parents so I slept on the floor with only layers of cloth and a stuffed hay pillow. Because the floor was made of cold smooth stone, I constantly had backaches and neckaches that gave me countless of sleepless nights. Not that I could sleep anyway with the dragons attacking outside of the huge safe doors of the Secret Hall.

« Ahem. Hédie, Rodène. »

I lifted my head and looked at Dad who was standing tall near the door, then at Mom who seemed fast asleep. I still didn’t say a word.

« I am going to check on the house », said Dad in an impatient tone.
« I don’t think you’re allowed to do that », I said in an uninterested tone even though deep inside I was worried that Dad actually wanted to help them fight the dragons. That would be very dangerous and fatal.

« I know, a soldier would insist to escort me. Tell Mom I’m going out. »

With that he went out of the door. Hours later he came back with some interesting news…

« The barn’s devoid of anything but the house is surprisingly intact and untouched. »

Mom stopped slicing the loaf of bread on the multi-purpose table. She didn’t say a word. I, on the hand, was lying on the bed, wanting to release out a string of sharp angry words. But I dared not explode in front of Dad so facing the high ceiling of the Hall I said out a monotonous sentence with suppressed emotions instead:

« So they just wanted to steal our food and are willing to kill us if we are in their way. »

« This is how you react to good news ? » said Mom suddenly, and she ate a slice of bread.

« You call this good news !? » yelled out Dad and I at the same time.

—–——

Much to our relief the rainy season arrived along with autumn. But with it came a new dragon species that wreaked havoc on our soil. The one place the dragons rarely raided, the vegetable farms, were now severely affected. As for our barn, we had to rebuild it from scratch, using my parents’ diminishing reserves of gold coins.

But it was finally over, the dragon crisis. Everything was somewhat back to normal and we were living in our reconstructed home, with a barn with only one newly bought cow. The layout of our home was almost exactly the same as before, thanks to the fussiness of my mother who had fully recovered from her head injury.

As for me, I wanted to blot out the entire painful experience, like ink spilling out from a toppled ink bottle, staining and covering a page from the biography of my mind.

But of course, as things often are in real life, it’s impossible. Unlike parchment paper, memories can’t easily be destroyed.

—–——

I strode to my home impatiently. The front door swung open ; with long steps, I entered in.

« I want to learn some sword-fighting », I said to my father, who was resting on a chair. I tensed my lips, expressing the firmness inside.

In surprise, Dad shook his head and blinked his eyes rapidly. « I thought you hated it », he said.

I continued staring straight at him without a word. The man looked away and shrugged his shoulders, « Oh! Very well then… I was hoping… »

We went out to a grassy area, near the wall of my parents’ room. After some preparations and a few swings of wooden swords…

« Calm down… Control yourself », Dad said to me.
I followed all the Viking swordsman’s moves, but this time, not of a clumsy weakling. With anger locked inside, my speed drastically increased. I swung around my wooden sword slightly faster than my father — almost every time. My unconventional ways tended to take him by surprise.

But I failed in a difficult move. I grumbled at myself. And then I failed in following exactly in another move. I spat at myself, fist punching the other.

« Rodêne, I think you’re too hard on yourself. »

I placed back my sword into the sheath and stated, « I thought you said I need to be hard on myself ! »

Dad went speechless for a while, before saying, « Yes, but… you need to be patient. I think you have done enough for today. »

So, my impatient father was the one who said that. A little tired but still determined, I said, « It may be enough for you, but I’m going to continue by myself. Now where’s that standing pole for sword training ? »

« The pell ? I have it in the storeroom in the barn house, but you need to dig up a hole and plant it. »

Without any acknowledgement or even the slightest nod of the head, I went around the corner of the house and towards the barn house, wanting to get the pell and the shovel immediately. After entering the stinky old building, I approached the red-painted door of the little shed beside the stables and opened it. Unfortunately, I suddenly realised that I could barely lift the heavy pell.

I was unwilling to tell my father that I didn’t have the strength to carry it and I was unwilling to ask my father to plant it for me, because I wanted to do it myself. However, I also didn’t want him to see me struggling with rolling it around.

So I decided to dig the hole first and roll the pell over to it late at night when he would not be around to see me. Late at night… I had never done anything alone late at night before. It was something new to me, this new feeling of taking matters into my own hands.

—-(<>)—

With my harshness to myself and my fiery determination I excelled through my father’s tough lessons. I had learned how to disarm an armed attacker. And with that useful standing pell acting as a wooden dummy, I had quickly learned how to cut wood with the proper technique, how to handle sharp weapons the safe way, etc.

Because my always-tired body got in the way of my self-development program, I simply ignored its cries and continued on.

« Relax… Rodêne », Mom attempted to calm me down, with a hand on my clenched fists.

« Détends-toi un peu. »

With heavy breaths, I turned my head sharply to her. « Comment est-ce que je peux… me détendre quand il y a ces quatre gangsters-là, là-dehors, qui sont parfois plus pire que les dragons ? ». The Cœunettian words flowed out even more smoothly in my anger.
Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my father shaking his head in a worried manner. I ignored him and went towards my bedroom. The door was pushed open. I stormed off inside and threw my wooden training sword onto the straw bed.

"Why must my wrist always have to...!". My hand grasped the always-aching part of my body with a diameter that obviously was too small to be strong.

_Not strong enough._

I stood while glaring at myself at my mirror’s un-shiny reflective surface that was full of stain marks.

_Not fearsome enough._

So my short sleeved dark blue shirt was missing a nice collar. And I wished I had a long coat.

« Il est temps pour une change de... d'identité ! |Time for an identity change !», I announced to myself in Cœunettian.

At the lunch table...

The blonde Viking lady had a worried expression on her face all the while, keeping silent and not really eating. « Aujourd’hui c’est ton anniversaire. Alors... tu devrais être content, oui ? Dis-moi, qu’est-ce qui peut te rendre plus heureux ? |Today is your birthday. So... you should be happy, yes ? Tell me, what can make you happier ?! »

"Anniversary of my life". Hmph. It’s not worth celebrating.

« Nothing », I replied quickly. « As if I could be “heureux” |happy| after all that has happened », I said sharply and my spoon dipped into the already cold soup. Then I remembered about wanting a long coat. « I want a coat... a long leather one », I said stiffly, replacing my usual shyness and un-confidence with bluntness and impoliteness.

« Say please. Where are your manners ? » said my father suddenly as he walked passed by.

I kept silent and continued eating without a word. For some reason, words like “thank you” and “please” were still buried beneath my sulkiness and my anger.

« No need to listen to him. It’s your birthday present, anyway... » said Mom, giving me a smile.

« About time I had a good birthday present. After that stupid cake disaster that year », I spat, still sour over my twelfth birthday.

She sighed. « Sometimes you need to forget about the old things to enjoy new ones... ». For some reason, she refrained from over-apologising and instead gave me words of wisdom.

I kept silent.

« You know how to sew one, yes ? After Mr Stonberg... »

« No I don’t ! You’ve never taught me that before » I spat and then realised that was too sharp. I--I couldn’t be sharp towards my soft-hearted mother.

——<>——
After a long, painstaking cooperative experience with thread and needle, Mom and I went into her room which had a larger mirror.

Mom watched me as I put on my new coat, a simple but sleek dark brown leather coat with the fur lining on the inside. Fiddling with its long edge that went all the way down to my knees, I turned and faced the relatively clean mirror compared to mine. I went fiddling with my high collar. I looked much better, more stylish, and most importantly, more intimidating.

I admired my new look in the mirror, unable to hide the obvious satisfaction.

« I can tell that you like your present already », said Mom.

I glanced up nervously at her hazel eyes and back down again. « Thanks… Mom. »

The golden-blonde lady smiled at me, and without a word she left my room.

—‹‹››—

Autumn was long gone. The weather was cooling too, as winter had set in.

The cold breeze had stirred me up from my slumber. I got up and combed myself while looking in the mirror. Hmm. My new coat complemented my already dark attire. Then I noticed the dry brittle look that my lips had; the result of letting them be at the mercy of my teeth — and my emotional anxiety. Peeling the skin off my lips using my teeth had become a real bad habit. I sighed. I went out to the kitchen table to have breakfast.

A rye crispbread topped with some cold blue cheese was in my fingers. My thoughts eventually started dwelling on the insanity I had gone through the past few months. I sat pondering, feeling a wintry breeze coming from the opened main window behind my back.

My free time had been summarized by rigorous, half-insane, daily attempts to drastically change my weak, un-strong body — that had always failed, since years ago, in anything related to fight and defence. Pushups, sit-ups, whatever… My fear for swords had now been overshadowed by my obsession to fight my fear of dragons.

I searched my feelings. The shock of seeing a person I really cared about facing death so closely and escaping had caused a tiny change within me. The fact that it was caused by evil flying creatures that had no conscience exposed me to new feelings of vengeance and bitterness. The fact that I was always under the whims of everyone — especially the gangsters — because I was too weak to stand up for myself had awakened a strong sense within me, to make myself stronger and more powerful… And more feared.

At the same time, a tiny voice told me that I was doing something wrong. One look in the mirror was enough to prove it.

Ah, whatever, it's nothing.

Then suddenly I remembered Cadilla. I had not seen that sweet-natured girl for some time. And because of the long absence, I was a little afraid of what she would say.

« {sigh} Hopefully she wouldn’t mind if I visit her. »

I went back to my room and reached for my Detachable Skates under the bed. As I held them in my hands, I suddenly spied a brown object, fluttering in the wind, near my window overlooking the white scenery outside. With a closer look, I was surprised to see a neat, rectangular piece of brown
parchment paper tied to one of the wooden-metal window frames. I placed down the skates onto the floor and reached out to take it. Oh, it was a written note.

—⟨⟩—

Dear Rodène,

I hope you and your family are all right. I’m terribly sorry we couldn’t meet earlier in person. My parents didn’t allow me to leave the house during the crisis and I’ve been rather busy helping my father when the vegetable farms were destroyed by the dragons. Don’t worry, my family and I are fine.

So, let’s meet at the edge of the Great Pond of Eau, shall we?

— Cadilla Fleurstrom

P.S. : Don’t forget to wear your thickest winter coat and bring your detachable skates!

—⟨⟩—

With a constant smile, I gazed at the note for a long time. Somehow, she managed to write her full name in a more beautiful and curved version of our blocky and inelegant Norse runes… although it was a little harder to read at first. And she even managed to remember the full name of my little invention, the Detachable Skates, or perhaps simply, detachable skates. Then I suddenly remembered something. Cadilla’s family had told the Kettlons to make sure that we had much-needed supplies and food during this winter. Mr Kettlon would arrive at our doorstep every day, sometimes just to stop by and say hello. I blinked my eyes. Unlike Mom, I was so deep in anger and negative emotions that I forgot all about this little act of generosity.

I felt bad. What if she knew I was actually feeling terrible inside?

After folding the note and popping it into my pocket, I hurried out of the house, ready to have a snowy and icy experience full of the colour white.

At the edge of the Great Pond of Eau…

Woodland trees all around, Cadilla walked closer to me. With one smile, she made me forget all about the bad things that had happened. I forgot about the tiny coldness around my heart. A snowflake fell onto her left shoulder, leaving a white dot on her light tan-coloured blouse.

« You look different », she said, still smiling shyly. She stood staring around me.

I gave a nervous chuckle. « Is it a good different? A good difference? » I asked, bracing for criticism.

« Nice coat. Makes you look… elegant. »

I spied a faint genuine smile. « Thank you », I said. « But you… you are always elegant. »

She blushed and tried to brush it off by saying, « Well, anyway… err, I’m sorry I couldn’t get you anything for your birthday… I planned it all, but things got out of hand and the dragons… so… ». She finished her hanging sentence with a slight tilt of her head and a cute smile.

« Ah, nice excuse that you cooked up just because you couldn’t remember my birthday? », I teased.
« Of course not! How could anyone forget “the fifth day of the ninth month introducing a certain person with an over-inflated ego?” ». She pouted and teased back. I laughed. She was the only one who could insult me in a funny way.

I dropped my voice and said softly, « Hey… I didn’t get you anything for you also… So it’s fair. By the way, this coat is already my present from my mom. »

She smiled. « Well, I do have something for you », she said, her slender hand reaching into a hidden pocket on the underside of her earthly dark brown coat that extended almost halfway down over the length of her skirt. It was a piece of paper. With both hands I took it carefully and was thoroughly surprised to see the same sketch of that cute willow warbler bird that she had shown me a few months ago, earlier this year.

« Wow, you’re giving me this? But it’s your drawing! »

« Well, I don’t really know what to give you, so uh… I remember you liked it very much ». The girl, having her hands interlocked, stretched her arms downwards shyly.

I gave a short laugh. « Yeah, funny that you remember that. »

Now I felt bad for not remembering for giving her a birthday present at all. All I remembered doing last August was mope around and be upset. I made a mental note in the imaginary calendar of my mind: August 25.

« Anyway, that’s enough talk… It’s time to skate! » said Cadilla cheerfully, snapping me out of it.

A few minutes later…

Our skates carving patterns onto the ice, we were “zooming” around each other on the Great Pond of Eau; with me finally being able to catch up with her in this dangerously but fun slippery sport.

I gave Cadilla a smug expression, with my hands behind my back. A year ago I would be struggling to stay on the ice. But now, my skill had increased. Let’s see if I surpass her level…

Wait a minute, she’s going to… and she isn’t looking in front!

« Cadilla watch out! »

Grabbing hold of her hand, I spun her in a wide circle to stop her — barely — from crashing into someone. « You just missed crashing into him… because of me », I said after releasing my grip on her.

{!!}

« AaAAAAH! » we yelled and screamed together. A crowd of skaters were about to collide into us!

I seized the girl again and guided her at top speed zigzagging between the many adult Vikings who were skating speedily across the Great Pond left and right. We zoomed out of the crowd and I, still holding her hand, guided her to a stop.

« YEAH! » I exclaimed with a single clap of my hands, as we were finally safe and sound.
Cadilla was speechless. She blinked her eyes vigorously while looking at me, « H--How… did you do that? »

« I’m surprised by myself too » I said, obviously very pleased with myself. But an embarrassing feeling overcame me, and I shrugged my shoulders, giving a shy laugh.

Later…

Cadilla and I had decided to stop skating and rest for a while, especially after that skating incident. With both us sitting side by side on a flat-topped rock, I was telling her about me excelling in my father’s sword training, but the moment I said the word “sword” she stopped me and said:

« Uh… it’s “sword”. The “w” is a tricky one because it’s silent. »

I facepalmed. « Why do I always make this mistake…? »

« Well, maybe this will help you remember », said the girl. « If you say “sword” with a “w”, you’re actually saying another word : “sward”, S-W-A-R-D, which means the upper layer of soil, usually covered in grass. »

I looked at her. « Really? Sword, sward, sword, sward… Okay, err but why don’t you I hear any “r” sound when you say it? »

« That’s just the way I… my family and I pronounce words like that. Personally, I’ve never heard of anyone say it the way you say it… » — she said and quickly rushed in a nervous laugh — « Uh, no offense! And err, so you were saying that you installed a wooden pell for training? »

I continued telling her about my sword training and I finished with « …and so, my father said he will give me a metal sword early next year ». « See? Told ya! You have potential. When you plant a seed, it takes time to… »

She did not finish.

« Rodène? »

I did not answer but kept my eyes fixed over to the direction of a group of boys in the distant greenery…

« Have… have I said something wrong? » she asked in a soft voice.

« No… » I replied, and realised that the smile on my face had dropped itself. Seeing that the gangsters did not threaten us, I relaxed a little and said, « Let’s arm ourselves with snowballs ». I cupped my hands with some snow, glancing one more time around at the trees. Cadilla seemed to be wondering what was going on.

…

We had had a few games of battling each other with snowballs. Cadilla, exhausted, was resting on her knees. She raised her hands in the air and pleaded playfully, « I surrender… »

« Ha! » I gave a smirk.

My snowballs had destroyed her snow fort into ruin. Her snowballs on the other hand… I was too quick for them. Having her at my mercy, I pretended to shoot one more directly at her face.
« No ! No ! Rodène stop ! », she cried playfully, covered her face with her hands. I stared for a while. I felt tempted to act a little “crueller” just so that I could see her being so… cutely vulnerable… and I walked closer to her. Looking down at my opponent I said in a dark tone:

« Shall I upsize the snowball or double a regular one for a better exploding effect ? »

« No ! Please no ! », wailed the girl.

Either she was great at acting or she really meant it, I wasn’t too sure.

I threw the snowball victoriously into the air. « I win. »

« Yeah yeah… » she said pitifully, rolling her eyes.

I watched as the snowball landed on the white terrain soundlessly. Yep, I was not going to allow even my best friend to overpower me. I shall not be overpowered by anyone.

Cadilla sighed, as if she was not having the fun that she intended to have. In the same kneeling position she remained sitting, hands on lap. My heart softened. Suddenly I regretted having the thought of “I shall not be overpowered by anyone, even my best friend”. I knew what it was like to be beaten to a buttery mess in a game.

« You can throw a snowball at me », I said to my defeated opponent.

« Huh ? »

« Just throw at it me » I stated.

« But you’re the winner. »

« The winner gets to dictate the aftermath » I insisted.

The girl unsurely took one snowball and threw it right into my face.

{boOffF}

I decided to make a fool of myself by falling backwards and landing like a starfish onto the white fluffy snow.

« Ooo no ! The winner’s dead ! », I sang playfully and played dead. « AcK ! ». She and I laughed at the way I stuck out my tongue.

I realised that, no matter what, I could always be myself around these two people : Mom and Cadilla.

—‹‹››—

Hugging my pillow, I slowly sat up on my bed, still as a frightened statue. Not daring to move an inch. At all. I kept silent for a long time, pondering. Nowadays I had trouble sleeping, probably because of those dreams that kept getting crazy and crazier. I started to become quite obsessed with controlling my own dreams that I would often wake up quite exhausted. Mornings were never the same anymore. And sometimes I wished I was living in a dream so that I could control everything.

The reason for all these was simple. I was nervous… In a few weeks’ time a new year would begin. As much as I tried to stop myself, I kept thinking something terrible was waiting to happen.
Something terrible just around the corner.

I can’t believe I am already fifteen years old.

—‹‹Shift in POV››—

One winter’s morning…

The doors of the Palace of Argent swung open, revealing a man, blond hair to the shoulders, a lone feather on top of the helmet, being escorted by a knight on either side. Then another man, blond hair to the shoulders too, a lone feather on top of the helmet, being escorted by a knight on either side, came behind the first. And another followed the second. With strides of dignity they marched out, parchment in each of their hands.

Saluted hands of the soldiers all around met them as each of the three made his way towards the stables where the squires and the horses were waiting.

In a blink of an eye, the knights were off on the horses, on the snow-sprinkled evenly paved road that led straight out of the Palace’s doors, and to the junction that marked the beginning of the rugged roads of the village, now completely buried in snow. And on that junction, the riders split up, each going a different way.

—‹‹Shift in POV››—

A spoon of mine was stirring in a bowl of barley porridge that had already gone cold. I sat alone at the table, staring at my least favourite breakfast. Normally there would be some warm milk in it, or maybe some berries, nuts, or chopped apple pieces, but we didn’t have any of those, unluckily.

My ears picked up a commotion outdoors. I took one last reluctant slurp of what I considered to be a beggar’s gruel, I got up from my seat and went for the door of the house.

{Whooooosh !!} a cold breeze greeted me, sending a shiver down my spine.

« ... !! {...} ! »

That was all that my dreamy morning mind could understand behind that wooden door, a jumble of voices and a very loud sing-song voice.

« Wait. Where’s...Where’re they ? », I asked myself suddenly, realising that my parents were not at home. « [opening the door] Maybe they’re outside…? »

And indeed there was a commotion outdoors, with Vikings crowded around. Oh, it was a royal announcement. In the winter ? Kind of weird.

« Hope I’m not too late… », I said, running towards the crowd. Oh. So they were all at the plains near Fallen Rocks. Everything that used to be green and grassy was now white and cold. There was no snow falling, and the sky seemed clear.

The entrance arc of the Market could be seen in the distance as I ran, and then I bumped right into someone’s back. The person moved backwards and crossed his arms.

« …it is now therefore prohibited… ». The announcement was still going on.

« Out of my way, peasant boy ! » said the man that I had bumped into, and whom seemed disgusted with my presence. It was none other than Mr Tilton, who unlike Cadilla’s father,
preferred to be addressed as “Lord Tilton”.

« My apologies, sir… lord… » I spoke out a forced-out phrase and walked quickly away from his fancy attire of high grey leggings and long red cloak.

« ...as Lord Bauchroy…! » went whoever was speaking out loud to the crowd, I couldn’t see.

Giving up on trying to see ahead of the many tall adult Vikings, I went around the circle of men and women, trying to find an opening, or…

Much shorter teenagers — Malcost and Nork. I walked right behind them, hoping that they didn’t notice me, while straining my ears to understand the rather thick accent of the speaker…

« …any forms of activities involving ice-skating are STRICTLY prohibited! », shouted the messenger with a completely vertical feather on his headgear; his grey horse on his side.

*Hey, what kind of a law is this!*, I thought, tempted to say it out loud.

« …Failure to comply would result in the COMPLETE SHAVING of the head, save for all women and girls, and those who could not! » read aloud the messenger, parchment paper in his hand.

The crowd gasped.

As I whispered « Seriously? », the two Nailekten brothers beside my right spied me, while I spied Cadilla on the other end — at the same time.

« Hey! » said Malcost and he prodded Nork. They turned around.

I placed on a finger on my lips, and stared coldly at them.

« …Lord Bauchroy has spoken… his injury of the foot was due to two children, who had by chance, virtually collided into his lordship…! »

« Hey, maybe he’s one of those tw — » shot out Nork suddenly and brought out his finger to point at me…

Nervousness overcame me when my fist enclosed the boy’s finger firmly. Then anger filled me inside as I gripped his finger tighter, threatening to crush it. So that younger insolent of the two — had to tease me. No, he was selling me away. Almost ruined me. I felt a repeated patting on my shoulder. Turning around revealed Cadilla with an extremely worried look. The girl grabbed my elbow and started to pull me away from them and the crowd.

« It’s not safe here; let’s get out of here », she whispered. We trudged away heavily with silent footsteps in the snow, to crouch behind a cluster of natural boulders of Fallen Rocks, while still being able to hear the speech.

« …our most high and majestic King Handeron, and our most high and beautiful Queen Tisla, it is decreed wherefore, in addition to this, the already mandatory dragon training for boys only that will be carried out next year, Reading School is to be enforced on every child, including girls, thirteen and above starting from tomorrow…! »

My ears wished they could block some parts off. Most high, beautiful, and majestic?! How vain! I was as ignorant of religion as the average Lelondell, but I felt that over complimenting the
mortal, possibly corrupt, royals was disrespectful to the Norse gods.

« I hope they don’t arrest us two » whispered Cadilla, still with a shaky look on her face, the announcement rambling over the background.

I said nothing, suddenly switching back my thoughts to the reason of the skating ban. The “two children” were me and her, who nearly collided into a group of skaters just a week ago.

« …additional or further information may be obtained by the consultation of Mr Nosten, official keeper and caretaker of the Library of Lelondell… »

My head went lower under the high rocks, with fear of being seen by anyone. « So this Lord—err… whatever — » I whispered heavily.

« Bohshhh-roy » she pronounced slowly. « Bauchroy. My mother knows him. »

I looked inquiringly at the girl, who said, « That man is always influencing the King, to pass over ridiculous legislation, rumour says so ».

« But… how does he have control over — ? »

« The King’s weak-minded », she answered simply. « And that’s just one of the rumours. »

I continued staring at her. « You... know about this sort of thing ? »

« It’s best for you not to know... » whispered the wealthy daughter of the probably politically powerful Fleurstroms.

Her brown eyes still appeared worried. I wanted to place a reassuring hand onto her hand, but I was too shy for some reason. Instead I said, « At least your mother knows him, so even if they find us out, it won’t be… wouldn’t be too bad. And also, the fact that the announcer didn’t mention anything about “arresting the two children” means it probably won’t happen ».

« {sigh} I hope you’re right. »

One of the new laws that the King and Queen had decreed sent shockwaves throughout the entire island : Reading School, a drastic attempt to “increase the level of literacy of the next generation of Vikings”. It meant academic learning on all late mornings except on Fridays and weekends, and that was asking quite a lot for us peasant teenagers who already had to help our parents in (usually) difficult manual work. And most of us children already knew how to read and write on a basic level, as we had already been tutored at home.

And what ?! A spelling reform to “simplify or fix certain irregularities in the Norse language” ?!

Apparently, the whole list of changes can be viewed on a royal document in the Library of Lelondell. The royal announcement stated that for the “necessary linguistic changes”, there would soon be a plaque installed in the town centre near the Market, and another plaque just outside of the Library.

Needless to say, this whole academic thing was unpopular with many, especially since it was to start now during the winter, the one time when people were supposed to spend time at home with their families, and go out skiing… no, skiing was now “strictly prohibited”.
“Dragon-gangsters…” I glared at myself in the mirror as if I was glaring at Thustle. “Here I come.” And that — Nork — could have made both Cadilla and I imprisoned. No sense of sensitivity at all. I wished those boys could all disappear just like in one of my dreams. Never mind, I now wore a scabbard that held my wooden sword, so I could protect myself if I had to.

My mind switched over to what I would be facing today. The very idea of being in class was foreign to me. However, that was not the worst part. All those teenagers including myself, would probably be in the same classroom. And most of us clearly could not get along with each other. The very thought of it was unsettling.

I rushed over my morning routine, plus breakfast, and set off for the door… to find a certain chestnut-haired girl at the door.

“I thought you were going to be late for the first day of Reading School”, said Cadilla.

I gave a pleasantly embarrassed smile at her, who was in a slight teasing manner. My packed lunch in hand, I strode outside in my new slightly haughty manner. I wasn’t going to let my nervousness be detected by that sensitive Cadilla.

We were walking together to the Library of Lelondell. My long strides were too quick for the girl to catch up with me. So, I switched my gait to a relaxed stroll to match her speed.

“Rodène, you seem awfully quiet today.”

I slowly turned my head to hers without compromising my walking. I managed a weak smile. Truth was… I was hiding my nervousness, and something else. For the first time, I had to hide something and put up a front, a shield. I was hiding my nervousness and my internal weakness from passers-by, little children throwing snowballs at each other, and the older Vikings going about… everyone.

We reached the Library of Lelondell to find that the Nailekkten brothers, Kindt, and the twin daughters of Mr Tylens were all just about to enter the stone-built building, with the normally heavy and rugged outward appearance somewhat softened by the snow that had just started to fall. Garend and his father were ushering and greeting us inside. I already knew Mr Nosten was the one who would be teaching us. Smiling politely, I greeted the elderly librarian whom I was quite familiar with. However, Garend’s brother Laurem was not with them. According to Garend, that twenty-year-old young man was not required to attend this new mandatory Reading School. Instead, he was…

Oh, Thustle and his elder sister Jessyllka Tilton had just arrived. He greeted everyone in his best behaviour as he shook hands with Mr Nosten. Pff! That the two-faced noble boy was simply putting up a front to fool the adults. Then I realised that I was also putting on my best behaviour…

In any case, I knew that the gangsters would try to embarrass me in front of everybody. And I would not allow myself to be under their wicked whims. Not anymore! They had done… enough damage to me, inside.

I put on a stern, unsmiling face as I blended into the crowd. Passing by the large candle-lit room of bookshelves on the right, we walked deeper into the stone-walled stuffy old building and entered a corridor. We passed by a very long passageway on the right (that led into the Garend’s living quarters) and faced a wall with a painting hanging crookedly. Mr Nosten gestured us to an opened door in the right wall. The boys rushed rudely inside while the rest and I calmly walked to
A foot belonging to Kindt Lapis appeared to trip me up, but I was on guard. I turned sharply on one foot and outstared him while sitting down at my designated chair. Satisfied with the probably sixteen-year-old’s shocked reaction, I gave a threatened look that could have stated “I may be younger, but do not mess with me”.

Still with an unsmiling, no-nonsense mood, I had analysed the surroundings, and found that I was right in the middle of a total of six threats; threats such as Thustle and his gang and the gossiping girls. As for the un-active Jessyllka — unknown.

I was sitting in the second row of the ten neatly arranged tables and chairs, sort of bridging the gap between the boys and girls. Or being sandwiched in the middle by the boys and girls. Jessyllka was on my right — adding to my nervousness. The long-bearded librarian turned away from us to face the chalk board again.

With intense boredom alleviated a little by curiosity, I had been watching Thustle all along as Mr Nosten had his back towards us while he scribbled something away on the board.

The boy was in the front row, and he kept turning around in his chair to spy glances at his gang members. He looked even more bored and restless than me.

Unsurprising, really.

“Pay attention, Thustle.”

Thustle jerked up from his daydream to see the two grey eyes of Mr Nosten staring at him.

“My apologies, sir”, the blond noble boy apologised to the elderly father of Garend in his most polite manner. He then placed his elbow on the table and rested his chin, obviously unhappy.

“I know the answer! I know the answer! I know…”, called out Garend Nosten, who was sitting at the first row, raised his hand. The bookworm was fiddling his hands as if he was about to burst, out of excitement.

“Yes, son… but please give others a chance.”

The man gazed across us six boys. “Anybody wishing to give an answer?”

I shook my head. Thustle hastily stopped his bored expression. Malcost shrugged his shoulders. Nork continued sitting as still as a statue. Kindt was on my left in the same row. I could tell he was struggling to stay awake.

The man gazed across the four girls on my right side. Illy and Nillie were busy stroking their hairs in quiet confusion.

“Excuse me, Mr Nosten, could you repeat the question again?” Cadilla spoke, breaking the silence.

“I shall not repeat this again. What do you think is the reason our Queen Tisla does not have a successor after her?”, Mr Nosten patiently repeated the exact same question.

“Can the answer be found in a book?” said Nork.
« Of course not. »

« Then how do you expect us to answer that… » said the sleepy spiky haired Kindt, both hands struggling to support his head.

« I would like to know your level of pre-schooling knowledge. »

The elderly Viking was stroking his greying beard (down to its tip) while chuckling to himself, as he waited. I stared downwards at my antique oak table, at the little label stating my name on the corner. « This is hard », I muttered to myself. Harder than Clue Hunt… Wait. The Kettlon couple working in Cadilla’s home was left childless. Their first (and last) was taken by that cold, wintery…

« The Storm of Vadorf ? » I spoke out.

« Obviously wrong, Roddy » said Illy, one of the twins. (Actually, they were not twins, but simply an older and a younger sister. Whatever.)

« Sorry, Rodène, but why did you come up with such a thing ? » said Mr Nosten with a look of curiosity.

« Ha ha, smarty pants » teased Malcost.

I jerked sharply to my left, giving a quick fiery glare to that curly haired boy at the back corner. « Because many infants perished that time. So maybe the children of the royals… »

The learned man slowly nodded, « Hmmm... That could be one explanation. »

The freckled-face boy stood up. « Dad, can I ? May I ? »

« Okay, it seemed that nobody could, so go on ahead. »

« The truth was that nobody really knows the answer why King Handeron and Queen Tisla do not have a child after them », the plump Garend announced a string of words, with his relatively stubby arms outstretched.

« WHAT !?? » chorused the rest of us all.

« Sir, what kind of question was that ? » said Thustle.

« A trick question », said Mr Nosten. « Rodène gave a possible explanation that made the most sense. Well done, Rodène. »

What a tense, uncomfortable, restrained atmosphere…

…

« Miss Jessyllka, could you kindly pass the parchment papers around ? »

On my right was the slightly wavy haired blonde, seated in a dignified manner with hands on her lap. Hmm… How about Cadilla ? I turned my eyes towards my friend. Oh she was sitting in a much different manner, much more relaxed but still modest and reserved.

« Me ? », asked Jessyllka unsurely.

« Yes », replied Mr Nosten.
The girl uneasily stood up. She looked shy. She walked past Cadilla — who was staring at her — and went to a stack of blank parchment papers on the front desk.

The blonde damsel went around distributing the papers. She looked slightly shorter than Cadilla even though her age seemed to be about sixteen or even perhaps seventeen. Her light-green skirt looked quite pretty and it complimented her light-blue blouse.

When she placed the last parchment paper and a writing charcoal down on my desk, I heard Mr Nosten said:

« Now you may all wonder why I didn’t hand them out myself. To be — »

« Why didn’t you ? » interrupted Nork Nailekkten. Again that disrespectful…

« I’ll greatly appreciate it if no one interrupts me when I am speaking » went a sharp rebuke from the librarian.

Nork kept fearfully silent and glanced at Thustle on his right. This satisfied part of the anger inside me. Ha. That should teach him.

Then the elderly teacher continued, « To be a leader, one must learn to serve. To be a leader, one must be smart and perform outstandingly. Who knows ? One of you may be next in line for — »

[Thustle and his sister Jessyllka leaned forward eagerly from their chairs.]

« — the throne. »

Humph. Another weird information of Lelondish politics that I could care less. Wait. I shifted my focus away from those two and eyed the extremely wealthy Cadilla Fleurstrom at the front right. She was already a nobleman’s daughter. What if she became a princess or something?

The class went on, getting quite boring. I did not pay attention, until…

« Now I am sure that all of you are aware of the recent announcement of the spelling reform », said Mr Nosten waving an authoritative finger around in the air.

I brought my eyes back to the front again. Finally something that might be interesting.

« The official royal document for the list of amendments to the Norse language is in the front of the Library. They are going to install a plaque[…]. »

I already know that mister. Now just get on with it, grown-up Garend…

« […]we are going to go through the changes now. If you may, miss Cadilla, please pass the papers around. »

Sometimes I wonder how Mr Nosten managed to write all those papers. Wait, maybe the King has his royal scribes, or something.

Cadilla got up from her chair and walked over to Mr Nosten who handed her the stack of papers in his hands. I was glad that Mr Nosten had not called me out to the front. I wouldn’t want to be in the centre of attention, with so many people staring like that.

Just like what I’m doing now, staring at Cadilla. I liked her fashionable reddish-brown winter boots that matched the colour of her hair, and the way she walked on the hard stony floor, with her
signature slightly springy and lively gait — made even more graceful with her favourite dark brown long skirt and long elegant legs…

Cadilla started distributing the papers around where the boys were sitting at my left. They had been inaudibly whispering and winking at each other for some time, and I thought I saw them doing that when Jessyllka was handing out the papers. I wondered what they were whispering about.

*No, actually, I don’t care. Probably superficial boy stuff.*

I noticed that Illy and Nillie were not paying attention at anything else at all even when Cadilla placed the papers on their tables, as they were busy whispering to each other while endlessly combing their hair. I wondered what they were talking about.

*No, actually, I don’t care. Probably superficial girl stuff.*

On the subject of staring, I turned my head to the right and began to observe Jessyllka who was sitting just on my right. The teenage girl had her chin resting on the back of her hands with interlocked fingers, and her elbows were on the table. Actually, her head was tilted slightly… so it was more like the side of her face was being cradled by her hand-bridge of interlocked fingers. And she had her eyes fixed on Cadilla as the girl walked over from the boys to head over to where the girls were sitting.

Cadilla went to Jessyllka’s table and stood still in front of her. Jessyllka removed her chin from her hand-bridge and placed down her hands on the table. The girls’ eyes met for a moment. Wordlessly Cadilla put down the paper and turned around to head back to her table in the front row. I believed I spied the blonde Jessyllka giving out a sigh and shaking her head ever so slightly.

*Was she expecting something?*

*A little weird…*

Well, never mind. I turned my attention to the paper on my table. *Wow, there’s a lot of words…*

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**Linguistic and Spelling Reform of the Norse Language in Lelondell**

- Written by the members of the newly appointed Royal Council of Linguistic Matters of Lelondell (RCLML)
  
  By order of
  
  King Handeron and Queen Tisla
  
  of the
  
  Kingdom of Lelondell

---1. *debris/débris*

It is sometimes thought by the populace that “*débris*” is the correct spelling but the general consensus is that “*debris*” is the preferred spelling, the view also held by the RCLML.
After much debate, the members of the RCLML have agreed that the word should no longer be a Cœunettianism especially with the spelling already adapted to the Norse language with the loss of the acute accent mark over the “é”, and that the pronunciation should follow suit. Therefore, pronouncing the final letter “s” in “debris” is now preferred, and the way the syllables of the word should be divided now is “deb-ris” not “de-bris”.

However, if one wishes or tends to speak using Cœunettianisms, with a more Cœunettian pronunciation, the spelling “débris” with a silent “s” for the pronunciation is still accepted.

2. naïve/naïve/naïf & naïveté/naïveté

There has been much confusion over the correct spelling of this word, yet another Cœunettianism. Unlike “debris”, the general literate populace has the tendency to spell it as “naïve”, with a diaeresis — or more commonly known in Lelondell and in Cœunette — a tréma (itself an accepted Cœunettianism); which is an almost nonexistent diacritical mar […]  

4. past participle of “read”

——–<>—

I stopped reading and covered my face in my hands.

Urgh... what is this?
Feelings of distrust and caution made me think that Thustle was somehow waiting… to get his hands on me.

Therefore, I tried out many ways, any way, to avoid him and his gang each time after class. I would stay back with Cadilla, Garend, and Mr Nosten; long enough to bore the book-hating boys. Or I would quickly escape to the Harbour nearby in the safety of the many adult Vikings, and perhaps try to talk with Laurem (Yes, try, that odd brother of Garend never talked much). Or I would keep a close distance to the off-duty soldier as he walks from the Library to the Palace of Argent. Or I would rush out Garend’s front door at full speed and fool them in thinking that I would be running straight to my house. But all the while I would be hiding around the corner, smirking at their stupidity.

Yes, in this new year, it was time that I stepped up to my game of outsmarting Thustle and his gang.

One late afternoon during springtime…

« Got you now. »

« Finally. »

« You’re dead, Rodêne. »

Thustle Tilton smirked in satisfaction seeing that I had been cornered near Mont Point Beach. The four gangsters surrounded me, blocking both sides of the narrow alley behind the Garend’s Library.

« What do you want? », I spat with eyes giving a glare. I had been trying to avoid any interaction with them to control the inner something that was threatening to explode out from me. I had enough of being hurt by them… all these years.

« Pretty simple actually, smarty pants. Fancy poem you conjured there just now. »

« I thought you hated reading », I said. « Jealous? ». Instead of fearfully avoiding eye contact like last time, I widened my eyes and stared into theirs — sharply.

Thustle gave a scowl. His blue eyes sparkled coldly. « Just beat him up », the boss ordered his boys. Chuckling evilly and rubbing their hands with glee, the three inched menacingly towards me.

So they wanted to play, eh? After all these years of bullying, it was time I EXPLODE!

My fist met the filthy mouth of Malcost, my leg kicked Kindt to the ground. Nork had no time
to back away as I had grabbed him by the collar. I flung that young teen idiot towards Thustle. And that was all just a warning.


« Ahhh… Getting more interesting heheh… » chuckled Thustle, without the slightest hint of fear. « Upping the challenge, eh ? »

The muscular boy swung around to my left and blasted my face. I staggered backwards slightly, in stinging pain from that iron-hard blow. But I resumed my defensive stance, while the inside of my head spun. Then aggression took control of me and I spun my arms wildly… that missed him.

« Ha ! You missed, sucker ! »

Ohh, that tore it… He had just insulted me, with his unpolished filthy mouth… And no one gets away with that !

Kindt was spied suddenly appearing from behind. My legs sidestepped out of the way and he collided into Thustle. I seized the chance to kick both of them to the ground. But Malcost hit my left shoulder. Ignoring the pain I used that left arm to grab Nork (who failed to grab me). I used him as a human shield and pushed him towards his brother…

But someone pushed me and I fell down onto my right knee. Thustle stepped onto my chest as the boys began ambushing me on the ground. Suppressing my howls of pain, I summoned all my hate and anger and… used my fist to hit Thustle’s leg. He howled. With a sharp yell, I threw them all off me.

I drew out my wooden sword, and resumed my threatening stance. « I have a weapon ; you don’t. You want to know how pain feels like ? », I snarled as if fire was coming forth from my mouth. I smiled, enjoying the bewilderment on their faces. They backed away slowly. But I had other plans.

« One… ». I lunged forward and pretended to stab them. They quickly backed in shock and fright. « Two ». I started chasing them, who bolted farther and farther away into the distance.

Exhaustion overcoming me, I stopped to rest. Radiating inside me was anger… and dark satisfaction. Looking downwards revealed that my left knee was bleeding slightly. I could not return home yet ; I could already see my mother’s horrified face. I limped towards the beach. Hoping that no one saw me, I lay on the sand. As much as I had wanted to cut that despicable leg of Thustle, I deliberately hit him with the flat, blunt side of my sword.

« The next time you come for me, I’ll cut you. So you better watch out. »

——<>——

At Reading School…

I was at my table listening to Mr Nosten rambling about some boring histories of the many kings, queens, and important noblemen who achieved great deeds of defeating enemies — mostly dragons. Our class of ten was especially quiet today, unsurprisingly.

« …and so, that was how Prince Erdin became a legendary figure in the history of Lelondell… »

Ever since that day when I fought with Thustle and his gang, I was still in a fiery mood. Under
my serious steely black eyes, I could imagine, was a locked-down, spiky, poisonous hate for the five “dragons” around me.

*One finger on me and you’re gone.*

That would be what I would say to them if they dared to disturb me the very next time.

*Why do I have the feeling that someone is spying glances on me? Cadilla? Jessyllka?*

...

I was writing quick notes that summarised the information that I had just digested. Then I heard Mr Nosten said,

« All right all of you, I know that you are wishing to have a little break. We shall pause here for a while. »

Thustle and Kindt sighed in relief and sat back in their chairs. I, too, sat in my chair for a while as I watched Mr Nosten and Garend, who went out of the classroom, probably going into their personal rooms. Cadilla’s seat was empty; she had gone out of the classroom, I suppose.

I felt greatly disturbed with the absence of my two friends, and by being in the middle of so many potential threats all around me, including Nillie and Illy, and Thustle. The gang had sprung up from their chairs and had formed a circle as if they were having a secret meeting. I strained my ears to hear what they were saying.

« […] Hey, why not we ambush that jerk? »

The blond simply crossed his arms and replied to Malcost something like, « Now’s not the time. […] girls […] »

« Blehhh! What’s the problem? We can still […] » started Kindt with an evil vengeful way.

*Always up to no good, those boys.*

« […] couldn’t do anything to Rodène […] Mr Nosten […] »

« Time to disappear then », I said to myself. The classroom had become unbearably noisy, with one of the boys scribbling nasty stuff on the chalkboard (including an insult which said “Roddy/Rodeen/Rodena The Coward”), and with the girls gossiping with one another. I stood straight up from my chair and strode through the classroom door to escape away from them all, and walked towards the library room up front. Perhaps I’d go out to get a breath of fresh air. It was getting miserably cold in here.

Eh, maybe not. I casually took out a book from one of the few shelves of Garend’s library. It was entitled: Dragon Mysteries of the Deep. The dusty book placed onto the wooden table, I turned the first few pages. A picture of a scary-looking sea monster struck my interest.

Still standing, and with the book lying on the table, I said, « Wow… Let me read the description below… What’s this… uh… ». I stopped talking when I spotted a word written with curvy lines that stood out so obviously from the usual easy-to-read blocky Norse runes.

Chauldron (pronounced as “shohl-drawn”), originally from the Cœunettian word chaudron that literally means “cauldron”.
« What ?! » I scoffed in amusement. « Showl-drawn… show-drenn… Anyway… ». I continued quietly reading in my mind the text below the title :

“This venomous sea monster likes to inhabit the mysterious waters east of the Rentt Isles. It is noted for its ability to scald its victims by spurting out boiling hot seawater from its cauldron-like stomach. This extremely dangerous dragon…”

« No wonder they named it like that », I remarked to myself.

« Um… hello ? Hi, Rodène. »

I turned behind at the sound of a girl’s voice from my left. Huh, Jessyllka ? She walked nearer towards the shelves. « Err… Yes ? », I replied, feeling surprised that the wavy-haired blonde actually talked to me. And she never really spoke to anyone.

« Looks like you… err… finally showed a thing or two to Thustle », began Jessyllka uneasily. She felt her elaborated light blue and white skirt with nervous fingers.

I gave a shy but pleased suppressed chuckle. Afraid of the gang overhearing, I leaned forward a little, and kind of whispered, « You don’t… I — I… trust that you don’t like him ? »

Jessyllka gave an amused scoff. « Me, liking him ? Why, sometimes I wonder whether we two are even related. »

« Maybe you’re not », I said. « Maybe Thustle’s just a loud-mouthed… » I trailed off.

« Bully ? »

« Muscle. » I finished.

Jessyllka gave a confused expression.

« It rhymes. Muscle ? Thustle. Thustle the Muscle Bully », I said and realised that I had just made a terrible, dumb joke just because I felt really awkward and nervous talking to Jessyllka for the first time. Then to my surprise, the no-nonsense girl actually tried to suppress a smile.

« Thustle the Muscle Bully !? » repeated Jessyllka in comical disbelief.

I simply did not know what made her suddenly so friendly with me. Was it really because of the “injured Thustle” incident? And this was the first time I actually made her smile. My curiosity of that mysterious girl was overcoming me.

Still smiling, Jessyllka noticed an open book on the long dark wood table. « What are you reading ? »

« Oh, cauldron. »


« Oh no, not really. It says here [I pointed at the Chauldron] that this dragon may be great for boiling water to make tea… », I said casually, then in a dry manner, « The kettle is its stomach, unfortunately ». The iciness began to thaw. The seemingly no-reaction girl started joking about cooking with the Chauldron.
“Why not cook the Chauldron?” I added with a mischievous chuckle. The funny thing was that I personally felt that my current jokes were a little dumb, but I liked the way she smiled and laughed differently than Cadilla.

Just then, Cadilla walked in the front door, to see us two standing and talking. “Cadilla!” I called out cheerfully to my best friend. I expected her to join us near at the table; instead, she walked passed us while saying:

“Enjoy yourselves.”

What a sarcastic remark. In an attempt to read her mind further, my eyes followed her face as she disappeared into the corridor. She was obviously not pleased... but with what exactly? However, Jessyllka seemed to have not noticed anything. She kept smiling at me, telling me that my “jokes are so dumb they are very original”.

“…How did you become such an expert in rhymes?” the girl continued, still unaware of whatever tension I was feeling.

“Uhh… reading?” I tried in vain to stop the conversation that Jessyllka was trying to have with me. “Yeah [I nodded awkwardly]… Err… I think we should… err…”

She seemed to have gotten the wrong idea as she took the book from the table and started to read it together with me.

“Err… I don’t think we should”, I began.

“Why not?”

Actually, she’s right. Why not?

But…

Ugh. How could I make it clear to her that I wished to speak to Cadilla personally without her interfering? How could I say that without hurting her? I resorted to pretending that I forgot something back in the classroom, and started to hurry over but…

Jessyllka said, “Why the hurry? You can go always there later.”

Great. This is not working.

Suddenly, we both heard Mr Nosten’s voice, “All right! Get back to class!”

Luckily. I walked along the slightly dim corridor, faster than the older but not-very-tall damsel. As I entered the classroom on the right, I saw that some of the teens had already settled down.

Cadilla turned her head away the moment I entered. I walked closer towards her but then backed away. It was clear that she did not want to even look at me.

What exactly had I done wrong?

The class went on forever and nothing went inside my head. All I had in mind was that when this was over, I would go straight to Cadilla and talk with her.

Finally, Mr Nosten closed his book and dismissed us. Everybody got up from their chairs. I immediately walked over to Cadilla’s.
"That was boring, don't you think?", began Jessyllka facing me.

She effectively blocked my eyes from Cadilla. All I could see was the hoard of the six students squeezing away into the doorway.

"{nervous laugh} Yeah! I — I err… need to go — »

"You know, you don't strike me as the hurrying type. Nervous, yes, but… »

After a great deal of effort, I successfully convinced Jessyllka that I had to hurry home for some "appointment". Leaving her, I rushed out in front to the library, just in time to get a fleeting glimpse of a brown skirt and dark purple footwear disappearing into the distance. My heart panicked and I started chasing the girl, across the Triangle (the spacious area outside of the Library and the Stadium), and across the paved roads; and then we entered the green area around her house.

"Wait… Cadilla! I need to talk with… », sputtered my words as I finally overtook the swiftly running girl. I stopped to rest, seeing she was not likely to run away to any other place, because we had caught up with each other at the Well of Eau, one of the main wells of Lelondell.

"I don't want to talk with you."

That hurt a lot. It must had meant that… she was already hurt, perhaps terribly. I tried again: « Cadilla, please. Let us discuss exactly where things went wrong, okay? Please ». I was horrified that my best friend was actually angry with me.

For the first time. How scary.

Standing side by side with a tension between, Cadilla and I were leaning forward, against the curved stony walls of the very large well with a high roof. Not a word got out from my cloudy torrents of rain in my minds, and I felt the same was happening to her. With arms resting on the cold and uneven edge of the stone well, we silently stared at the three well buckets, which were equally positioned from each other so that they formed a triangle. They were fixed above a large cylindrical hole that disappeared deep down into the watery darkness.

If there was one thing that could break my heart, it was this: the feeling of being rejected. I had spent much of my early childhood trying to fit in with the boys, but failed, and was left with that overly talkative Gared. And now I was in danger of losing Cadilla, just when I thought I could expand my circle of friends by including Jessyllka. If I lost Cadilla, I would really have no one left. I would be alone… frie—friendless….

My eyes were watery, at the thought of being hated by the one person that had always been my friend. I forced back a sniffle, and backed away from the well for fear of contaminating the water. « I’m sorry Cadilla, I apologise. If there is anything — »

« Rodèn? » Cadilla interrupted me.

« Y-yes…? » I weakly replied in a wavering voice.

« Okay, we can talk », she said, and she turned around to lean her back against the well.

I followed suit and leaned my back against it. Now we were facing the woods that hid Cadilla’s garden. I stole a glance at the girl on my left who had crossed her arms. But that sad face of hers forced out an unconscious stammer of mine. It was enough to make me cry but I forced myself not to. With watery eyes, I swallowed a huge lump in my throat, and looked away.
"I think I’ve overreacted…" said Cadilla.

I looked at her face again. I widened my eyes, staring at her. She looked guilty.

"I was just…[sigh]…upset of the way you seemed to…[softer voice] enjoy Jessyllka’s company…{almost inaudible} instead of me…", she said.

As if I was frustrated with myself, I said, "I was stupid… she started talking to me out of nowhere. I thought she wanted to be friendly and I was like “Okay, weird, but why not?”. I was just… I just don’t know how to, you know… " I trailed off, not daring to ask her further of why she was so upset. Maybe it was a girl thing that boys could not understand.

"Okay, so err… will you for— " I started and stopped abruptly.

She did not answer immediately. Then with a weak smile she said, looking at me, "All right, I forgive you ". She seemed genuinely sincere.

"Thank you ", I said quickly and timidly. I uneasily spied glances at her face which no longer seemed too sad. A heavy container was being lifted off my heart.

Unfortunately, a huge part stubbornly remained, as I saw her walk away from me towards her house nearby, in a silent manner never seen before from her. In a manner uncharacteristic of her.

Several minutes passed by…

A sudden feeling of thirst seemed to wake me up from my unhappy daydream of aimless thoughts and from my aimless stares into the greenery of the woods. I stopped leaning against the cold wall of the well, stood straight, and stretched my arms, feeling a little stiff. I turned around to look at one of the well buckets and wished I had brought my own bucket so that I could drink some of the fresh groundwater now.

I sighed and made my way back home, under the warm afternoon sun, which made me sweaty and exhausted all over again. When I reached the house the first thing I wanted was a mug of freshly boiled groundwater, but Mom came along and asked me to get some from our little well nearby the house.

She passed me a wooden bucket. When the lady had gone into the house I said to myself, "Fine… ", feeling too tired to argue. With reluctant tired steps, I walked past the barn house and towards the little well just at the border of the grain fields of wheat, barley, rye, etc.

This well looked like a mini version of the Well of Eau, except that it did not have three buckets, just one. I started to turn the handle in a sunwise direction, and down went the wooden bucket hanging on the extremely strong rope. Great. My arms… Now not only my legs are aching, after running so much, I grumbled inwardly, annoyed that all this was also part of my “improve body strength” personal project. I turned the handle in an antisunwise and brought the bucket back up, water full to the brim. My hands grasped the handle then suddenly I realised that because I still didn’t have a cup, I couldn’t drink the water now.

"Ah whatever ", I said in annoyance, unable to bear the thirst anymore. I held the bucket Mom gave to me under the well’s bucket and filled it up a little. I carried the bucket and stopped to look around to see if anyone was around, intending to simply hold it up high and pour the water into my mouth, something which someone shouldn’t do at the well. Okay, nobody. So, I held it up high and tilted it and it filled my mouth with cold fresh groundwater, but more water than expected came splashing down, drenching my face and my jacket and all.
Instead of grumbling over the cold shower, I felt a little relieved surprisingly. It was the perfect “stress-reliever” for this crazy day. The weather was surprisingly quite hot anyway. I wanted more. So after removing my jacket and dropping it onto the grass, I did the same thing again. I liked how the cold shower sort of “freezes away” my unhappy thoughts, clearing my cluttered mind. I didn’t dare to take off my shirt though and decided to stop and go into the house for a proper bucket bath in the washing area in the back of the house. I poured more water into the wooden bucket Mom gave me and carried it into the house.

(Yes, bucket baths, not those time-consuming luxurious baths filled with sweet herbs, beer, or tea, that only the wealthy people of Lelondell could afford. We peasants preferred a much faster and simpler method which used less water. My family and I did have one of those common, cylindrical wooden bathtubs, but instead of sitting in it, we would use it as a huge water container, and there would be a bucket or a dipper in the tub for us to dip into the water and drench our bodies with.)

Sometime later…

After dressing myself in my usual attire of a dark blue tunic and a pair of dark brown trousers, I reached for the new hand-crafted comb that I bought at the Market a few days ago. Combing my black hair, I stood staring at myself in the bedroom mirror, feeling so refreshed after that bucket bath. So clean, so light… It made me almost completely forget that I even had problems with Cadilla and Jessyllka at all. However, I still was not technically “happy”. My mood was still at “neutral”, neither negative nor positive. And I felt confused after apologising to Cadilla. Craving for something fun to do to cheer me back up to a good mood, I decided to take the poem that I had written at school to show it to Mom after lunch.

I went out of my bedroom and put the parchment paper down onto the little table behind Dad’s chair. I sat down sheepishly, knowing that I was quite late. My father seemed to be grumbling about something all along:

« ...I’m telling you, this is way too much. »

My mother set a dish down onto the uneven square table and said, « But what can we do ? It is the orders of the king ».

The man in his late forties sighed deeply. He picked up his spoon in a manner as if he was not going to use it for eating. His eyes turned directly to me and he said, « Every year the tax on us peasants keeps on increasing. It’s just unfair ».

« Shhh… we do not want to have an unhappy meal », my mother said softly and she sat down, finishing her pea soup.

The dairy farmer wiped his mouth with the collar of his dark green tunic, as if he wished to cut off all complaining and communication.

« Rodêne, j’ai mis de côté pour toi quelques tranches de jambon. Rodène, I saved a few pieces of ham for you. »

I was barely concentrating on my food. The tense atmosphere was threatening to make me moody again.

« Err, merci Mom », I said, reaching for my fork.

« By the way, how is school ? Did you get to talk to new people ? », asked Mom, seemingly
trying to change the topic to a more positive one. Well, she had chosen the wrong topic.

I was really tempted to say, *Oh no, school was terrible today and I’m trying to forget the whole thing but you have just reminded me of it,* but of course I never did because of Dad being in such a scarily bad mood here at the table.

« Err… okay. Nothing special », I lied. My thoughts revolved back to the problems of today. I was still quite confused and emotionally jarred, from what I thought was a friendly chat with a new friend(?), to an issue with my best friend. What exactly had gone wrong ? Had I really made Cadilla so upset ? Maybe girls were more sensitive than I thought…

« Rodêne, your ham ! » went my mother. « Heeloo ? », she said in a singsong manner to liven up the mood. « Stop thinking too much… Eat », she said, but not in a nagging manner.

I forced myself to smile a little for the sake of my mother, and savoured a few treasured pieces of ham with my soup. Mom would always say that I needed to “stop thinking too much”, a concept I could not understand.

After helping my mother to wash the dishes, I picked up my poem again from the table, looked at it, and heaved a sigh. I was moody again and didn’t feel like showing it to Mom. I walked into my bedroom and closed the door, intending to lie down and rest for a while. And ponder.

I placed the parchment paper onto my study table and walked towards my bed. « Now… what should I do…? », I muttered to myself and lay down onto the inviting soft surface of the bed. I felt that I needed to do something to make it up to Cadilla after that incident. But how ? But what ?

« Maybe I could give something to her… » I began, but brushed it aside with a « Nah… that wouldn’t work… What will… what would a rich princess want from a poor dairy boy? ». Then I wondered why she even liked me in the first place. Maybe after what had happened…

« Wait, what am I even thinking ? » I asked, annoyed at myself. I jerked out of my negative, pessimistic thoughts. I stopped staring at the ceiling and turned on my side so that I could face my study table while lying on bed. Maybe I could still give her something, like a token of friendship or something like that…

« A token », I said, liking the idea. That would mean something small.

« Girls like small things, right ? » I tried to reassure myself. « Oh wait, {eyed upwards} I like small things too ». How stupid.

I lay on the bed in silence, as my mind wandered off-topic about the fun times Cadilla and I had together, about how we did gardening under the sun, with the wind behind our backs… And with the wind smacking her long hair into my face… (Okay, *that* was not good.)

And then I got it. I tiptoed out my room and saw that my mother was sweeping the floor. I walked nearer and asked,

« Mom, err…where can I find a ball of yarn…? — I mean string. »

« Mais pourquoi ? But for what ? » she said as she simply kept on with her work. She dragged a chair out from the table and swept underneath it. « Sewing ? You ? And why is it that you stutter even when you are talking to me ? Something is wrong ? »

« Err… good observation, but… it’s a project that I’m working on », I replied, trying to keep my uneasiness in check.
« Ma boîte à couture {pointed to the meal table}… elle est sous cette table. »

« Bwhat–a–cootewh, boîte à couture… », I repeated, making fun of Malcost’s particularly terrible-sounding Lelondish accent. Haha. He even had the word mal meaning “bad” in Cœunettian…

I bent down under the table to find a little chest. My mother somehow managed to keep things, cramped as there were, organised. And then I found another larger chest beside that little one. Hmmm… my father had said one time that the large chest belonged to him “a long long time ago”. But he somehow did not like me touching it, for some reason. Resisting my thoughts of curiosity, I opened the smaller chest and found all sorts of — neatly arranged — sewing stuff. I sort of snatched the sewing box, and went back quickly and silently into my room.

I immediately whipped out a pair of scissors and placed it onto the table. I pecked inside the chest and, messing up the order of the little boxes that my mother had fussily arranged, I searched in vain to find… that there was no blue string or even a pink string.

« Errgh ! And I thought that we can’t afford purple. »

In the end, all I could do was cut out a length of a quite coarse, almost-white string from a ball of yarn. I sat on my wooden chair and started working at my personal table…

After messing around with many pieces of string, knotting and cutting them, I sat back exhausted. I held a tiny piece of string that looked like a loop. Blurring out the background of my very messy table, my eyes focused intently on the little object on the middle of my palm. So, I had managed to make a “string-tie” with a hoop that could be tightened and loosened. It had a slip knot that slid across the string (tightening the loop), and an overhand knot at one end (to stop the slip knot from sliding off the string).

I made another one and realised there was one problem. « Can they even work as hair ties for her hair locks ? », I asked myself. « What if she tried them on and did not like them ?

Now why did I even want to make hair ties for Cadilla ? She already had gorgeous braids on the back of her head, and two long un-braided locks and two neat strands of hair that flowed down the sides of her face. But those un-braided locks of hair would often become messy all over her face after a long day of hard work or play. Although she never complained about it, I would always think of making a tie that somehow stretches around that cute little lock of hair — easily and neatly, like an instant hair tie. Unfortunately, an instant stretchable hair tie like that only worked in my imagination; finding something stretchable in daily life proved to be impossible and I had forgotten about the entire thing… until now.

I could not find a way to test them, to see if they could actually tie strands of hair, or simply slip off. And asking Mom would be too embarrassing… so that was out of the question. Then suddenly I got it: I would cut lots of thin, smooth string and bunch them together to simulate a long lock of hair. So I did that and I tied one of the ties around it. Unfortunately, it did not work. No matter much the loop was tightened around the lock of strings, I found it too easy to pull the loop off. So how could it tie up ends of hair ? How disappointing.

After pondering for a long time, I decided to make something different: a bracelet. But since making a string bracelet made of plain old white string would be too boring-looking, I got up from my chair and reached under the table for my little brown sack of Lelondish coins. It was time to do some shopping at one of the clothing shops at the Market.
Later…

Okay, so I had just got back from shopping, and it had taken me far longer than expected. I went back into my room and closed the door and sat on my chair to rest for a while. I had just bought three long lengths of strings, dyed purple, pink, and blue. The seller insisted on me buying all three balls of yarn, but the purple-dyed one alone simply costed far too much. (Purple dye was extremely expensive in Lelondell, because it was made from a certain part of a dragon, I think…and purple happened to be Cadilla’s favourite colour.) It took an impressing amount of haggling and good argumentative points to buy only a certain length of them each. Still, my entire purchase had costed me quite a lot, 7 bronze calas in total, almost one silver cala.

Anyway, enough about that. « Time to work », I said in a workaholic mood.

…

I had just finished my beautiful string bracelet. I got up from my chair, stretched my arms, went outside to find that my mother was already preparing dinner. « Oh wow, how time flies… », I said dryly.

After dinner, my father went to his favourite armchair to rest, while my mother immediately scurried around the kitchen for washing up and stuff. I couldn’t blame him really, after such a hard day at the barn, although luckily Mr Whean was always there to help. It was still a pity that I couldn’t help my parents enough, because I had to go to that super-boring Reading School.

Then I realised that there was no school tomorrow. Okay good, I would be able to go to Cadilla’s and give her my “apology presents”.

—〈〉—

I had done my morning chores and some barn work. For some reason, memories popped back up, of how Cadilla once voluntarily helped me with my barn chores, so that I could spend more time with her. After a while it had become too awkward and she had stopped doing that. Interestingly, what had happened eventually was that my parents had allowed me to do less barn work, seeing that Mr Fleurstrom was paying me decent wages just by me working in Cadilla’s garden and occasionally in the vegetable farms.

Wait. I just realised something. If Cadilla suddenly decided to dislike me, I would lose my gardening job and would go back to doing lots and lots of boring, smelly barn work.

With all these overly negative thoughts in my mind, I set off for the Fleurstroms’ house. Impatient and nervous, I strode past the many fields of cattle and wheat, to find… there was nobody at her house except Mr Kettlon. He was walking near the front door, between the vegetable farm and the stone-built house.

« Morning, sir », I politely greeted the young man who worked for Mr. Fleurstrom. My hands were behind my back concealing my little secret package.

« Mornin’, sonny ! », Alker cheerfully greeted me in his usual, informal way. The servant, who looked like a farmer in his early thirties, had a slightly bushy but neat and straight sandy brown moustache.

« I… err… is Cadilla up ? »

He appeared to give a light-hearted chuckle. That sweet little girl you say ? Well, not yet ! You can wait for her in that garden set my lord just installed ». The man gestured towards to behind the
house, where Cadilla’s garden was.

I smiled back and went along the walls of the right wing of the house and got a glimpse of a set of table and chairs around the corner. So this was the garden set. I went back to the cheerful man. « I… err… don’t think I should… » I began uneasily, having seen how new and beautiful the garden set was.

« Nah… don’t you worry ’bout it. You’re an honoured guest after all! »

I gave him a shy, polite smile, and he walked away to the vegetable farms resuming his farming, and his humming.

« Honoured guest… » I muttered to myself as I walked nearer to the dainty little shelter over a round table and five elaborate-designed chairs. « …for having “fun work” in her garden regularly… That’s nice… », I continued muttering, as I admired the design of the chair, with its elaborate metal framed arms and legs… that supported a comfy-looking wooden seat with a…

« What’s nice? »

I gasped and turned to find Cadilla had appeared from the corner on my right, with an amused smirk on her face. I frantically tried to hide my surprise gift behind my back, hoping that she had not seen it yet. She looked cheerful, as if she had forgotten about the entire incident. What a stark contrast to yesterday.

« I’m sorry for trespassing on your territory… err… these [gestured head towards chairs]. »

« You said that last time! », she accused me cheekily.

I gave a toothy cheeky smile without saying a word. « Last time? When? What do you mean? »

« Are you hiding something from me? ». She leaned closer then pointed a finger at me. « I could tell, you know. »

I stiffened, struggling to fight against the growing comicalness.

Her brown eyes mischievously gleaming, she pushed me backwards gently with her finger. « You can’t hide secrets from me. »

She walked closer to me and I walked backwards from her.

« Yeah… actually I can », I said, giving another little toothy grin. « Okay, fine, you win ». I extended out my hand and started to say something but stopped awkwardly.

« What’s this? ». She gave a curious look at the neatly folded brown parchment paper box which concealed my little gifts.

« It’s for you. »

« For… me? »

« I — I… Just a token, you know ». I set the little parchment paper box down onto the table and watched her lift up the parchment paper lid carefully. She took out two white tiny rings of string and placed them in her palm. The girl looked confused.

« Okay, they’re for your hair. »
« Wha…? », she exclaimed, getting amused.

« Okay, err, I just want to see whether it will… they will work or not, you know… err… stretchable hair ties…? »

Cadilla placed them down onto the table. Her fingers reached into the little box and took out a string bracelet. « I’m guessing that this is a bracelet? », she asked.

« Yeah, err, string bracelet. »

She examined its design for a while. The bracelet had purple and pink strings twisted around its main string, which was white and had special knots which made its length adjustable. The girl loosened it and wore it on my left wrist.

« I know, it’s a simple design, but if you don’t — »

« It’s really cute Rodène, I like it. »

« Huh? Really? »

She simply smiled without saying a word. Then she picked up the two hair ties, tightening and loosening it while I watched her with nervousness slowly weakening me. Oh, splendid… I should’ve asked my mother before giving these to her…

« You could tie the ends of your hair here… Just a suggestion, you know… I… If you don’t like it you can simply keep it — or something… ». I watched her tying the end of one of her two thick locks of hair that always hanged down from her face.

« Calm down… », Cadilla said in a mix of amusement and annoyance.

« Okay » went my timid reply. « The problem’s that they are not purple-coloured and they might easily fall off and… »

« Excuse me for a moment », she interrupted. The girl hurried off, disappearing to the left wing of her house.

—«Shift in POV»—

Cadilla Fleurstrom ran into the front door of her house and passed by her mother with a « Sorry, Mom… Busy ». (This resulted in an annoyed forty-year-old Cella Fleurstrom.)

The girl skipped up the stairs on the left and turned into a corridor. She hurriedly walked straight towards the end of the corridor and opened the door on the right, which was the door to her light wooden-panelled bedroom. She entered the room and opened the large window opposite her bed to let the bright morning sunlight in, and she walked over to her mirror fixed on the wall, near the foot of her bed and near her wardrobe. The wealthy daughter of the Fleurstroms smiled at her reflection in the tall mirror that reached the floor.

« It’s as if he knew exactly what I always wanted », Cadilla muttered amusedly to herself in slight disbelief. This string bracelet, although simple, had a wonderful colour combination that involved her favourite colours. And she now had a simple but elegant way to tie the ends of her two locks, in a cute fashion that made them look like brushes dangling down. Pity that they were plain old white in colour. The girl took her left stretchable hair tie and suddenly found out that it slipped off too easily.
« Oh, well. He did tell me about this though », said the disappointed girl. « But now I think I know what he likes… I should also braid these two locks, not just the back ! »

Then Cadilla gasped when she realized that she had forgotten to thank Rodène. She ran all the way back excitedly, back to the garden set behind the house.

—«Shift in POV»—

I was standing nervously beside the overly magnificent chairs because I was too afraid to sit on one of them. My mind was in a state of anxiety, especially by the way Cadilla ran off so abruptly like that a while ago.

Then I suddenly caught her voice from behind me :

« Rodène. About this string bracelet… »

I turned around and with my eyes downwards as if I was apologising. « Yeah I know. Not good. »

« What do you mean “not good” ? »

« Huh ? »

« The bracelet’s gorgeous ! », Cadilla said through blushing smiles. « Thank you. »

I did not know what to do next. I was so into the act of giving it that I didn’t prepare myself for the after-giving-it part. « Err… what about the hair ties ? », I asked.

« Well, the hair ties don’t really stay on… However, they’ve given me an idea. You’re going to like it ! ». She pushed my head cheekily and continued, « Sit down, mister. You look tired already… And it’s still morning ».

« If you say so », I said, still confused about what she meant by “you’re going to like it”.

« I insist », she said.

I finally sat down. Phew ! « Thank you, Cadilla. »

« Rodène, I’m the one who should be thanking you for these gifts », said the girl shaking her head.

« Yeah, sorry. »

« No need to apologise », she sang in a teasing manner.

« If you say so », I said defeatedly.

We sat at the garden set without saying anything for a while. Then Cadilla asked, « By the way, I like that folded parchment paper box. It even has a lid ! How do you make it ? ». We sat at the garden set without saying anything for a while. Then Cadilla asked, « By the way, I like that folded parchment paper box. It even has a lid ! How do you make it ? ».

I smiled, liking the idea of teaching the art of parchment paper folding to my best friend.

❅ ———— «<<< >>>» ———— ✤

* drawing/portrait of Cadilla Fleurstrom (15 y. o.)
In Lelondell, clockwise and anticlockwise do not exist, as there are only sundials. (Clocks did not exist in the Middle Ages until the 14th century.)

sunwise = clockwise
antisunwise = anticlockwise

The word « antisunwise » does not actually exist. I coined the word for the story.

Contrary to popular belief, bathing was actually quite popular during the Middle Ages, and the wealthy often took luxurious baths. However, it is not clear to me how exactly did peasants and the common people cleaned themselves.

Interesting fact : Vikings were known for their excellent hygiene as they bathed at least once a week.

Ribbons and elastic hair ties did not exist until the 1700s and the 1800s.

The cala is a unit of currency in Lelondell. There are gold, silver, and bronze calas.

10 bronze calas = 1 silver cala
The rains poured down on the characteristically gloomy land of Lelondell, and they had always brought mixed feelings upon its inhabitants. It would bring forth waters that cleansed the earth, waters that nourished the plants and crops, and waters that would somehow leak through the roofs of the houses of the not-so-wealthy… like the roof of my house.

But a rainy day could also sometimes mean…

« No school! », I sang out loud in high spirits. (Interestingly, it had been required to go to Reading School be it rain or shine, but since most teenagers never turned up for class when it rained heavily, they sort of relaxed the rules.)

I was staring dreamily through a half-opened window, from the comfort of my bedroom, thankfully without any watery leaks. True, our island seemed to favour the rain rather than the hail, but, the past few days had been especially rainy. It was indeed odd, as the rainy season would typically be somewhere around in the autumn. Instead, we were having a very wet February this year.

« Oh, well, the weather’s never predictable », I muttered a phrase that I heard Cadilla said before, and then sighed as I continued my daydreaming. I had waited for Cadilla’s surprise for some time, and when she finally showed me, it was more than what I was expecting! Leaving the two shorter bangs as straight and neat as before, and the rest of her hair as beautifully braided as before; sometimes, she braided her two front locks of hair, its ends tied together with a purple-coloured version of my (so-called) stretchable hair ties. (I wasn’t sure how she managed to make them stay on, however). Other times, she simply left her two straight locks un-braided, just flowing down gracefully. She looked simply gorgeous.

As for school, it was… okay, still boring. No, quite hard actually. We had been learning for some time the Cœunettian alphabet, spelling, basic words and phrases, and at first it was learning simple fun stuff like…

“Je suis lelondais et je vis sur l’île du Lelondell.” (I am Lelondish and I live on the island of Lelondell.)

“Les Lelondais parlent le norrois. Au contraire, les Cœunettiens parlent le cœunettien.” (Lelondells speak Norse. On the contrary, Cœunettians speak cœunettian.)

“Le Lelondell et la Cœunette sont deux royaumes insulaires différents.” (Lelondell and Cœunette are two different island kingdoms.)

“Mon amie Cadilla, c’est une Lelondaise qui habite au Lelondell.” (My friend Cadilla is a Lelondell who lives in Lelondell.)

…and then the monsters called grammar, word order, and complicated boring subjects reared their heads. Imparfait. Passé simple. Passé composé. Subjonctif. I often found myself asking Cadilla or even Garend for help. The boys once called me a “pseudo-Cœunettian” and that I should
change my name to a more Norse-sounding “Rodenn”; it did not help my self-esteem.

There was something odd about this Cœunettian learning class that was making me ponder a bit. Why we were forced to learn the language of a southerly people that we proud Lelondells officially disliked? To make it more complicated, I had been noticing this since years ago: most Lelondells, especially the wealthy snobbish ones, disliked fellow Lelondells who had Cœunettian accents. That would include my mother and me. I had never seen Cadilla or Mr Fleurstrom with this kind of prejudice, though. Thankfully.

—«Shift in POV»—

Cadilla faced herself in her mirror of her dressing table again. She had lost count how many times she smiled to herself. She could hear thunder outside as if it was ravaging angrily at the countryside and her garden below, but inside her heart was peace, and a strong something that seemed to make her blush.

« I can’t believe it. I’m… » the girl muttered to herself and she tried to cover her mouth, as if she was shy of looking at herself. Blushing? Her? Gracious!

Her footsteps gave tiny creaks on the light wooden-panelled floor as she walked closer to the large window of the somewhat elongated room. Opening it revealed torrents of rain that drenched down on her flowers and plants directly below, giving them life—and love. She loved the rain—even the sound of it being amplified when she opened the window of her bedroom, which would always fill her with constant, calming sensations. She would cosy up by herself indoors, watching the raindrops fall outside her window, while spending hours sketching some drawings, and painting with colours. And of course, there would always be a nice cup of warm herbal tea by her side to take sips from. And there would be lots of warm fluffy blankets. And biscuits. Blueberries. Sweet chestnuts.

Other times when she felt a little melancholic inside she would love to head outdoors and deliberately stand under the rain, being drenched and being partially sheltered under a tree…and she would dance in the rain. She would feel…free. And then her strict and stern mother would catch her and scold her, telling her that she could do better than being a “simple country girl”.

At this thought, her smile dropped.

« “A simple country girl”. But, Mother, that’s what I…feel I am! », she repeated an argumentative statement that she had used against her mother some time ago.

Cadilla closed the window and went across the room. The teenage damsel sat down on her bed with a sigh, saying to herself, « I simply can’t get along with her ». Her mother, Cella Fleurstrom, was a traditional lady of the upper class, who would often say “We’re supposed to belong in the upper class, Cadilla…Someday you’ll grow up of all this and be a lady”.

The girl sighed again. True, she often behaved more like a common un-aristocratic girl who loved flowers, than any sort of a girl belonging near the top of the hierarchy. She did not like to be served on too much. She did not like to be spoiled, as she was afraid of becoming a rich, selfish individual who was born with a silver spoon in her mouth. Leave that sort of thing to Jessyllka, she thought. That girl and her noble family had quite a number of servants going about in their mansion.

Actually, Jessyllka wasn’t always like that. It was only after she…

The girl with long reddish-brown braids shook her head to rid herself of that memory.
Anyway, she would often voluntarily help Mr and Mrs Kettlon, the two adults who worked as servants for her family. « There’s nothing better than lightening the load of the “lower” and less fortunate », stated Cadilla, in a manner as if she was making up her own quote of wisdom.

Then the girl remembered of what she told Rodène after he taught her how to make that cute little paper box-and-lid: “Umm, Rodène ? I just remembered that I wanted... I mean, I was supposed to go to the Soap Shop for an errand”. Truth was... she rarely, if ever, was asked to do any errands. Most of the time, she was the one who asked for an errand, to lighten the workload of the hardworking Kettlons.

Cadilla’s thoughts somehow snapped back to her mother, about how the lady always tried, in vain, to teach her all about... « The art of being fashionable ». She gave a tiny huff. « Only according to her. »

The worst thing was that her mother seemed to not approve of Rodène coming over to visit her. The only reason that the lady complied was because of her more understanding father, and only because “we could do with a little more help at the garden”.

With her thoughts on Rodène again, Cadilla’s fingers felt her two braided locks. She managed to secure them naturally at the ends without needing any clips or ties, and those stretchable ties were actually ineffective and unnecessary. Still, she decided to use the ties as some kind of “decoration”, securely fastening them with the “hair knots” in the ends of her locks. The ties looked quite nice, especially after she copied Rodène’s design using purple string, and figure-eight knots instead of overhand ones.

« Is there another reason of him giving me these gifts ? Other than to apologise to me, which was, uh, cute », she asked herself a loud thought that had been circulating around in her head for days. Then her thoughts took a negative turn. Maybe Rodène wanted her to change her look, to become “more beautiful”, as her mother would always tell her to. Maybe he wanted me to...


« Seriously, am I the only girl who wants to stick to the untouched natural look sometimes, then mildly enhance it other times ? »

Not that Cadilla never cared about her looks at all — in fact she would spend hours and hours caring for her long braided hair using her favourite selection of different-sized wooden and bone combs and her favourite hairbrush. She would make sure that the skin of her visage was as devoid of blemishes as possible. Although occasionally lazy to do it, she would even put on those rejuvenating facial masks and facial cream that her mother had given her. What else ? Ah, special bath and facial soaps reserved for the wealthy. Charcoal powder. And once in a while... a little touch of luxurious lavender perfume that no one seemed to notice.

It’s complicated.

And still her efforts were “appallingly insufficient” according to her mother’s opinion.

The more she grew up, the more distant her mother seemed to her, with her mother’s ideas never agreeing with hers. She looked at her reflection in the mirror again. Her mother, Jessyllka, and the other girls may have their eyeliners, lipsticks, overly flashy dresses...

« Trends ! I won’t give in into others’ preferences just to fit in... Try forcing me... I’m just going to be myself ! »
Late, and a little soaked, I pushed open the doors of Garend’s library-home with both hands. I quickly greeted the talkative Mrs Nosten, hurried into the quite narrow corridor of the stone-walled stuffy old library, and went straight to where the door of the class. I had been unlucky enough to get caught in the rain on the way here. I was late because I forgot that they had tightened up the rules again, of coming to class regardless of rain or shine.

I paused my hurrying for a while, taking a deep breath while facing that painting hanging crookedly on the wall. A hand of mine reached out on its own and straightened the painting. I could hear Mr Nosten’s lectures coming from right inside the class behind the door on the right. Then I stiffened myself, and entered the miserable-looking four-walled room of chairs, tables, and annoying teenagers (except Cadilla).

All eyes were upon me as my muddy shoes made wet steps on the cold, stony floor. « Sorry Mr Nosten, the rain got me along the way ».

« Take a seat, Rodène ».

I sat down, then immediately realised that I had forgotten to scrape off my soiled shoes. Too late.

« Looks like cow dung got you along the way » said Kindt on my right.

I glared sharply at that always annoying spiky-haired blond of fifteen, as my ears picked up the laughter of the other boys. Then I softened my glare as I was not really in the mood for anger. Instead, I felt disinterested. Disinterested in everything.

« All right, looks like we are all here. So we shall continue » announced the long bearded elderly teacher. Nowadays he wore a new long dark cloak that made him look like a wizard, with a brown beard that was greying. As he spoke, he walked to and fro along the front of the classroom between his ten young students and the chalkboard. « Now, I know that many of you would like to know an important fact — the connection between dragons and the rain ».

So, apparently we were finally officially learning about dragons directly. You would think that learning about how to defeat our most feared enemy was the priority, not what the enemy already did.

Mr Nosten turned directly to the older girl of the two sisters and said, « What do dragons think about the rain, Miss Illy ? »

« Err… yes ? »

« Or more precisely, what does one usually say about the dragons when it rains ? », continued the teacher.

The brunette with the same age as Cadilla glanced nervously at Jessyllka on her left (who was not paying attention at all). « I… err… I simply don’t know sir. »

« Well you should pay attention as I have stated it earlier. »

I could hear Garend in front, his whispered chattering growing louder.

« …Oh come on, it’s so simple really… »
Completely ignoring his nerdy son, the elderly Viking stroke his long brown beard and paused for a while.

Then Kindt exclaimed, « Why not ask Rodène ? He told me he knew the answer ».

I opened my mouth in disbelief with a « Whah ??? » as all eyes turned to face me — again. What a liar. What a jerk, placing me in an uncomfortable centre of attention.

« Well Rodène ? », Mr Nosten asked a little impatiently as he faced me.

« I… I…[glanced at the snickering four boys at my left]… I don’t know. »

Illy and Nillie Tylens started giggling.

« Then why did you tell Kindt that you knew the answer — ? » began Mr Nosten.

« I really don’t know how to answer it ! », I sharply stated, with my voice being a little off. But that only generated more laughter from the teens. I was being humiliated in front of everyone — twice. And I thought that Thustle and his gang were tired of bullying me.

« Everyone ! », began the elderly man, but the teens ignored him. It was only when he boomed « ENOUGH ! » that the class of ten became silent. « Right now let us go back to our lesson », he said in an annoyed tone. « If a dragon’s head is wet, its ability to light its fire is severely hampered. Now, any questions ? »

« I have a question… What is the meaning of “severely hampered” ? » asked the youngest student, Nork.

The teacher face-palmed and asked weakly, « Garend, could you explain everything for him…? »

Thustle groaned loudly. The impatient, muscular gangster grumbled to himself and I heard him said something like, « […]rain, no rain, who cares ? Just bash ’em on first sight. »

My thoughts wandered off elsewhere, ignoring that chattering nerd in front of me going all up and down in his lecture. I was sick of the boys, who constantly kept teasing me with the sole purpose of spoiling my unhappiness. And the fact that they had always succeeded in doing so made me sulky. Throughout the lessons my sulkiness was persistent. But then I suddenly noticed something had been going on all along. One person was staring at each other without the other person knowing. There was Cadilla glancing constantly at me… Kindt eyeing occasionally at Jessyllka… and… Jessyllka staring at Cadilla. But she was also staring at me.

I immediately turned my eyes away from a seductive smile that I couldn’t believe was being directed at me.

« Can we go already ? », whined Malcost, who was scratching his black curly hair restlessly.

« Okay, okay class dismissed », the teacher said quickly, as if he was afraid the class might turn against him any minute.

Still sulky inwardly but making sure my face was expressionless, I strode out of the classroom far ahead of the rowdy boys and gossiping girls, only to find a certain curly blonde-haired girl with a flashy, light blue and white dress at the end of the corridor up front.

« Hi, Rodène. »
Oh. Not again. Not that selfish Jessyllka again with that annoyingly mysterious smile, overly long fluttering eyelashes, and that pale-white face. Too bad, Jessyllka. Nice, but fake. She had been bothering me for the past few days, constantly. And for the past few years she had almost completely ignored me. Why not the other way around?

Sick of socialising with anyone, I simply walked past her with a « Sorry but Cadilla and I planned to meet up after class ». I was also afraid of Cadilla being upset again if she saw me interacting with Jessyllka in the slightest. Therefore, I needed to be blunt to drill the idea into that insensitive brain of hers.

—‹‹Shift in POV››—

With the gradual disappearance of the rains came the steady appearance of the sun, which broke the gloomy weather spell and re-introduced something which felt more like springtime.

« Sunshine. Finally! » Cadilla burst out happily. The fifteen-year-old girl descended the stairs in a swift and grace manner.

« Morning, Father », she greeted a middle-aged lord that was sipping some herbal tea at the breakfast table.

Kent Fleurstrom’s grey eyebrows were bushier than ever, but his hazel eyes below them gleamed. « That’s what I want to see », he said. « A happy, beautiful young lady. Go on, help yourself to Mrs Kettlon’s pancakes. »

Cadilla smiled shyly and went across the white table. She plopped a pancake onto her plate and set it down on the table.

« Miss, here’s your favourite bitter orange syrup sweetened with honey », said Eylina who appeared from the kitchen. The dark-haired lady set a tiny metal jug onto the table.

« Nice to see you enjoying my pancakes, Cadilla », she said after a while, when the young mistress had taken a few bites of the pancakes, with and without the syrup.

« Well, I do love your pancakes » said Cadilla through smiles.

After having breakfast with both of her parents, the girl got up and as if she was desperate to go outside (she was), she opened the front door and was about to burst outdoors, but she went back and waved with a…

« Bye Father! ». Then she skipped straight out of the house.

Sitting at either end of the perfectly square table, Kent and Cella eyed at each other — a little awkwardly. The wealthy adult couple shook their heads slightly at their daughter’s increasingly bizarre behaviour.

« Why, just yesterday she argued with me. In fact, it was just last night », began the elaborately dressed lady of forty-two, breaking the silence. She pushed away her finished plate in a dignified manner.

Kent Fleurstrom was amused inwardly as he took into consideration of his wife’s refined behaviour versus his adolescent’s. They had the same brown eyes and even the same chestnut hair colour; but their ways of thinking were becoming completely different, and it seemed to continue becoming more different each day as Cadilla grew taller, ever-mirroring the slender physique of the younger Cella that he used to know.
I hurried along the green meadows, which had shrunk in size compared to when I was a child.

« Of all the days to have school. Oh well, at least I’m finally learning how to kill a dragon », I muttered to myself as I resorted to run instead of simply hurrying along. I said that last sentence casually, but for some inexplicable reason, it hurt deep inside. I hated them, they hated me, why, then… did it feel so wrong ? I’m confusing myself !

I whizzed past a relatively young milkmaid (okay, my mother) who was sitting on a stool milking a cow. I stopped abruptly when I saw a familiar, small four-legged creature.

« Heyhh ! {pant} isn’t that the… {pant}… calf we just got ? » I said, struggling to catch my breath.

My mother simply went on with a work and nonchalantly replied, « Yes ». The calf nuzzled its nostrils against the back of the very busy lady.

« Now, now… why is it that you cannot see that I am busy here ? Shooo ! »

The young animal seemed to say, I don’t care… ha ! ha.

I bent down towards the white and brown calf, as if I was greeting it. « She’s quite cute actually », I remarked.

« He », my mother corrected me in a nonchalant manner.

« Oh. »

« Yes, pity that the mother disappeared. Then this poor thing here got stuck at the fence. »

« Sharp, “fire-torn” ones… » I added, remembering the broken-down fence that the dragons blew up.

My mother turned away her head and went on with her work. « No school… today, right ? » she asked, seemingly wanting me to help around with the daily chores.

« Actually… yeah… sorry », I replied, feeling a little guilty that I could not help her more.

« You need to go… may be late… »

« Uh… Yes ! », I replied with my voice sharp and off. « Ok bye. » I continued in a timid manner. I was experiencing a drastic change to my voice and I was not used to it. I sped off, passing by my father and the house on the right, and whizzed past between our neighbours, Mr Whean, and Mr Stonberg.

Along the way, I spied a certain individual, dressed in a manner that would camouflage in the greenery. Well, except for the flower-petal-like puffed sleeves of hers that were of a striking orange colour. As beautifully as usual, her braided hair was flowing down all the way down, and she called it the “Double-Ladder-Feather-Waterfall” braid. Only Cadilla could proudly have this kind of hairstyle so befitting of her.

« I know you’re there », said Cadilla without turning behind.

I turned my head towards the left where the Market of Lelondell was, pretending as if I was simply being deep in thought while watching the busy market life go on.
« Stop acting, silly », said the girl and she walked to my right. « We’re going to be late. Care to race ? »

I smiled mischievously and immediately sped off straight ahead without waiting. I could hear her call out,

« Hey ! I haven’t given the signal yet ! »

We ran past the Malcost and Nork’s house, and past Illy’s house and —

{CRASH !}

I crashed myself into a wooden wall of some house. I had no idea how —

« Hahaha… What a loser ! » went a sharp voice from a certain boy-who-loves-kicking.

Rubbing a stinging point on my head, I tried to get up from the dirt ground and my eyes met the mischievous… no cruel… blue eyes of Kindt Lapis, along with Thustle who was… walking arm-in-arm with Cadilla !

I felt crushed. I stood and watched the back of that long-legged Kindt, as he strutted haughtily off into the distance.

« I’m a real loser… right ? », I muttered, and looked downward. and I walked slowly towards the direction of the Library. I now meant to arrive there a little later than usual. « Late, I don’t care. Let all their eyes stare on me again ! »

...

« Rodène, for your punishment for being late, again, you are to stay back after class. »

The girls gasped while the boys booed. All eyes turned to me. But I simply gave no reaction. Instead, I could imagine that my face was a permanent defiant…

« Do you understand ? », Mr Nosten leaned closer to my eyes.

« Yes », I stated. When he turned his back away from us to the chalkboard, I added with a whisper, « Whatever ». I knew Thustle and his gang was already laughing away, inwardly. Matching my mood, I gave my most intimidating outward appearance.

« All right, fourth question. What is the shot limit of a dragon that has poisonous spikes, and what is the name of that dragon ? », the teacher with his long dark cloak asked the class of ten.

Garend was about to answer when Mr Nosten interrupted, « Son, no answering ». Then he said to the class, « Please write it down onto your paper… [sternly eyed at Nork] quietly.

I wrote down a neat two-lined answer onto my paper :

—‹‹››—

Spiky Sadder

Shot limit: either six or seven

(I can’t remember its exact shot limit. Tip for remembering : the letter S.)
When Mr Nosten saw my answer, he announced to the class in a manner as if he was teasing me, « What kind of an answer is “Shot limit : either six or seven, (I can’t remember its exact shot limit. Tip for remembering : the letter S)” ? »

I looked around. All the teenagers seemed to laugh or shake their head. Even Cadilla.

« So, you would rather have me answer it wrong. I believe a vague answer is better than a completely wrong one », I stated, in a new sharp voice that was little louder than my usual soft voice. Apparently he, too, was in the “humiliate Rodène” game. All right then, humiliate away.

Mr Nosten went backwards with a face as if he was saying a silent “hmmm” and then he stood silently in a thoughtful but shocked look.

The long-bearded teacher walked towards the chalkboard and wrote the answer down : A Spiky Sadder’s shot limit is six.

« Excuse me, sir, may I know why do we need to learn all this ? I mean, why not just teach us how to deal with one ? » began the impatient Thustle politely.

I placed both of my elbows onto the table with a silent “hmpff”. I knew that that two-faced noble boy was simply painting a covering of politeness. Inside, he was rotten and rude, only revealed to those “weaker” than him, like me.

(And I already knew how Mr Nosten would answer it.)

« …father used to say, “I believe in learning before the job” », Mr Nosten answered, « Now if you would kindly stop, all of you, in asking unimportant questions, I would like to continue ». The dark-cloaked wizard-like senior teacher gazed across the four girls who were sitting quietly on his left below. « Now, we shall have a few more lessons… before… [boring teaching tone] A Spiky Sadder has the ability of firing six shots of extremely hot flame, and an ability of shooting deadly spines… poisonous ones, from its tail… »

As we learned more about the light-on-its-feet Sadder and the lazy and clumsy Ronkie, I could not help but think that those killer features that the monsters possessed were designed… to kill us. It was unbelievable that as a young child, even though I feared the dragons, I used to sympathise with them. Now I wanted to kill them… Wait… there was it again. My stupid hyperactive conscience that preached “don’t give in to your anger”. I wished I could throw it out of the window. Wait… did I really want that…?

After forever…

Chin on hand, elbow on table, I was watching the students happily going past me. They were free from class, I was not.

« So long, bookworm ! » said Thustle, in a voice that was low enough for Mr Nosten to not hear. He walked passed me.

« Bookworm equals sissy » added Malcost. The curly-haired boy of fourteen smirked straight at me. He attempted to outstare me while making a face when Kindt and Nork barged into him with an « Out of the way ! »

Cadilla went over to me, after the boys had left. But I simply sat deathlessly still… with a
depressed anger.

« Sorry that you had to stay back. »

Still not moving, I replied, « Sorry about just now ». I had failed in defending Cadilla from Thustle, again.

« Hey… don’t be… »

…I went out of the classroom with Mr Nosten behind me. That lecture about “punctuality and manners” was even worse than the forced French lesson before it.

I entered the dark corridor, and seeing Mr Nosten disappearing into the passageway on the left that led into his personal quarters, I quickened my pace to head to the door. Passing by the blonde girl dressed in white and blue on my left, I headed straight for… wait a minute, why is Jessyllka still here ? I paused and I glanced for a second to my left at the elaborately dressed girl of fifteen, who had spied me and was about to talk to me. But I simply started off straight for the door. All I wanted was to retire in my bedroom and pretend today’s bad day never happened. I was about to go outdoors when I heard a…

« Wait !! Rodène ! »

I stopped and stood still for a while, blocking the opened doorway from the bright outdoors. If Cadilla saw me…

« Bye », I said coldly, and was about to head out when I heard her said :

« Why do you hate me ? »

Jessyllka had walked towards me. She seemed to be pleading or even a little upset. More than upset.

I closed the door and turned towards my left. Nobody deserved to be hated or ignored. I was an individual who was suffering from being hated, anyway.

« I don’t hate you, you know », I said spying a glance at her green eyes. I walked back deeper into the Library, passing by her wavy braids on the left.

« But why do you seem to ignore me every time ? » said Jessyllka. Her eyes followed me as I walked around, hands behind my back.

I stopped walking and faced the girl directly. « Actually, you had been ignoring me for the past few years », I said, without any attempt to soften the blow.

« I’m sorry, Rodène », she shamefully apologised, eyes looking downwards.

I softened my stance and my tone. Maybe she was trying to change. Maybe I should stop judging her as being “aristocratic” and rude, simply because I knew she was Thustle’s sister and was from a notoriously snobbish noble family.

« And actually it’s because of Cadilla, who doesn’t seem to like you very much » I said in a quiet tone, in reply to her first question just now.

The girl looked upwards. « Cadilla ? »
« Yes. »

« Oh », she paused continued, « You know… you shouldn’t be friends with her ».

« Excuse me…? » I stated with a sudden rising voice and glaring eyes, which made her look frightened.

« Sorry, I didn’t mean — »

« Why ? What happened to you two ? », I interrogated the blonde who happened to be indeed some sort of an arch-nemesis to Cadilla. I crossed my arms intimidatingly.

With her frilled light blue skirt and her white laced blouse, the stylish blonde looked slowly downwards. « It is a long story », she said.

« Why not you two settle your differences once and for all ? »

Jessyllka took a step backward. She walked in the direction of the dusty old shelves. « Let me tell you something about this Cadilla girl… » she began.

Curiosity overcoming me, I walked towards her and stood with my ear positioned nearer to her, just in case she wanted to whisper.

« Err… yes ? », I said.

After all, I had only met Cadilla when we were thirteen. I did not know much of her backstory — she was mysterious in many ways, even after I introduced the Secrets Sharing game.

« She is hot-tempered, and I mean, very hot-tempered » said the blonde.

I opened my mouth involuntarily. Cadilla having a bad temper ? And I thought I was the one with the emotional instability. « How ? Examples ? », I asked.

« You are very curious, I must say », the green-eyed blonde gave an amused smile.

Thankfully that girl had given up on that fake, fluttering eyelashes and that overly enhanced pale-face complexion. Now her face looked… prettier.

« All right, one time we both got into an argument. She was… she ripped my dress, pulled my hair, and that was just part of the story » said Jessyllka, who paused for a while as if reluctant to continue.

« All right, all right, all right… I don’t want to hear any more of that », I interrupted her hurriedly with both of my hands up, palms facing each other. « Do you two still fight ? »

She brought up a curled finger to her nose for a moment, in a cute way, and said with in a voice laced with what sounded like embarrassed honesty, « No… to tell the truth — »

Just then, the door creaked open to reveal… Cadilla Fleurstrom !

The chestnut-haired girl looked completely bewildered seeing us two talking together face-to-face in this dimly-lit library. Aghast, she was speechless for a while. « How could you… », a tiny and hurt voice finally went out from her. Then she disappeared out of the Library with a —

[BANG !]
It happened so abruptly. I was too shocked to react. My head was facing the closed door, but my eyes glanced at Jessyllka on my right (who did not react in the slightest, as if her point about that girl’s temper had just been proven). I struggled with that heavy dark oaken door, feeling it heavier than usual, and burst out of the Library to chase after that fast-running damsel.

…

Hands on knees, I stopped to rest near Cadilla’s house. She was nowhere to be found. Dejected, I turned to go back home.

Upon approaching my house from the south, I was greeted with fires that had been put off. Black ashes and smoke were slowly rising; it was a scene of devastation…

« Rodène ! »

I ran towards Mom. She was frightened and she held my hands tightly, and nothing frightened her more except dragons. « The house… », she began. The lady in her late-thirties hesitated to continue.

« Mom, what is it ?! »

« They stole all the cows and most of the cheese… »

« All the cattle ? » I asked in disbelief. We had given up on raising sheep and focused solely on the dairy-producing cows… « What about the calf ? »

« The storehouse is destroyed… » continued my mother worriedly, not replying to my last question.


« At the barn… » she replied in a manner as if she was completely devoid of energy.

I went around the right corner of the house and saw three dejected men standing around near the front door of my parents’.

« …lightning raids are getting completely out of hand ! » Mr Stonberg was saying in his usual gruff voice.

« Rodène ! » Dad exclaimed in relief.

« What happened exactly ? », I asked him somewhat timidly. As usual, my eyes were not daring to meet my father’s.

« They were stealing the cattle and the cheese and we tried to fight them but it made things worse », he answered quickly.

« I could have come ear— », I said, feeling angrier and angrier inside.

« Nonsense boy ! You would have been killed ! » a slightly plump Viking said. It was Mr Whean.

« Maybe… » I admitted half-heartedly and I left them.

I walked towards the barn directly in front, or what was left of it. The food storehouse at the left was non-existent. As for the barn house, its roof had collapsed within. I went into the entrance that
was still standing and noticed that the dark wooden door was lying on the ground near my left foot. Dropping to my knees, I said out loud, « Why must everything be so… harsh !? ». I felt defeated and I could not do anything about it. I felt pure helplessness and frustration.

« Blue Fire Drake… », I whispered with pure hatred. I knew that it was responsible for ALL this, somehow. Everything was trying to make my life difficult. Why?

« WHY ?! », I shouted out. I didn’t care who heard me. I didn’t care who saw me. The frustration turned into sadness, then the sadness into something bitter and cold.

I went about in helping my parents rebuilding of the barn. I seemed to be alive on the outside, but I was not in the inside. Inside was a ravaging storm, as negative flashbacks of my life and negative thoughts replayed in my mind:

The dragons hated us Vikings for some reason… I did not have any support from my peers... I was bullied by boys and girls alike… Cadilla somewhat brought flowers and fun into my miserable life. But Thustle had a very different idea of the meaning of the word “fun”… The dragons nearly took away my mother… Thustle and his gang would kick me when I was already wounded on the ground… So I eventually exploded… The final and worst ? Cadilla misunderstanding me when I tried to expand my circle of friends by including Jessyllka, which I didn’t know Cadilla hated so much…

All these had accumulated in my heart as one big negative emotion that I was unable to describe. But I could label it, and it would be… dark fire.

Wheeling a barrel of bricks, I went for my father, who was taking a break from the clearing-the-barn project. (We had to start anew). I found him discussing something with Mr Whean near what used to be the entrance of the barn.

« Whean, I think we need to build a stronger barn. »

« I agree. »

Apparently they were considering on building a much stronger barn, out of heavier logs this time. But unfortunately…

« The other neighbours refused to help me. They said “We have enough troubles already !” ». I turned behind to see a young lady. Yes, I called my mother young, because she was, even at thirty-nine. However, she looked anything but cheerful and youthful now.

« Not even say, bread out of sympathy…? », asked Mr Whean a little hopefully.

The lady shook her head. « They said to me, “No payment, no deal”. And Mr Stheen… no… he is in debt — heavily, after his wife — »

« All right, I understand — stop please ! » interrupted Mr Whean. « Of course, I cannot ask help from my poor brother. »

My father shook his head in disappointment.

« That means…? » I began, raising an eyebrow.
« We have to dig up our savings to buy some logs from the Forest of Lilianity ! » interrupted my father. Enraged, he kicked a stone on the ground and it bounced away into the rubble. « And not to mention the food that was… »

« Why not we simply cut down some logs from the Forest ? », said Mr Stonberg who had approached us. The grey-breaded Viking crossed his arms.

« You seem to forget, Stan, that the king owns the Forest — »

« Hmph ! The king ! » replied the muscular blacksmith bluntly with a roll of his eyes.

I was standing there quietly, listening to the adult conversation all along. A thought formed in my head : Typical Lelondish selfishness ! Typical uncaring people in power.

« Now Rodène, you don’t need to listen to this ». My mother pulled my right arm away gently.

« But I may have an idea ! » I said aloud, stopping the heated discussion of the three men. They all looked at me, with Mr Whean in mid-gesture.

« Why not we buy from Mr Fleurstrom ? »

The rather plump Mr Whean began, « Ah, I haven’t thought of — »

« That », interrupted Mr Stonberg. « At least Lord Fleurstrom’s more generous than Lord Tilton. »

Lord Tilton ? I thought in disgust. I had heard that the nobleman was a calculative and manipulative individual who loved to benefit from charging high prices, all for his selfish aims and his huge mansion.

« All right, now your job is tell Lord Fleurstrom » ordered my father interrupting my thoughts. He still looked scarily stern from all that stress.

Which brought me to Cadilla… and I just had some issues with her.

…

I was running past in between the charred wooden houses of the vegetable farms and the edge of Milky Cliff. Wait, charred and broken down ? Even the farms had not been spared. And the dragons had probably stolen the poor working horses as well.

I went straight to the front door of a magnificent stone-wood building that faced the east. Nervousness increasing slowly and steadily, I stiffened myself and ranged the bell hanging from the wooden ceiling of the porch, and waited with its cord pinched between my fingers.

Mrs Fleurstrom answered the door. This was worse than I expected. Needless to say, she was much more intimidating than the housemaid, Eylina. I felt that the wealthy lady never liked me somehow.

« Excuse me, ma lady, I wish to… err… Is Cadilla or Lord Fleurstrom around ? »

« You can find them at the garden set », went a seemingly uninterested reply.

« Thank — »

{Slam}
I sighed and said facing the closed door, « I have a feeling things are worse for me now. »

I walked around the right wing of the symmetrical house. The house on my right, I walked slowly along and in between the neatly trimmed bushes of colour. I could hear voices from around the corner to the right.

« … I still don’t know how to handle this. »

That was Cadilla’s voice.

« I know, but […]earn. These sort of things […]nd to happen. […]part of growing up… »

I knew it was wrong to continue eavesdropping, so I pushed my reluctant self around the corner. I thought I saw Cadilla seeing me from a distance. She gestured to her father to pause their conversation and the back of the man turned around.

I walked closer and meekly towards them sitting in the dainty garden chairs, guessing that they had been talking about me. I stood standing with my head slightly bowed and my hands clasped without a word. Not daring to meet the eyes of either one of them, I stared around at the beautifully designed table.

« Have you come to tell us something, boy ? » began Mr Fleurstrom, ending the silence.

« Yes, err... I… sorry Cadilla, for the misunderstanding that day ». I was facing more to the elderly lord instead of the teenage girl. Cadilla did not respond. She stared straight into my eyes, in such a way that made me feel a little scared. And then she said,

« You know, I don’t think you came all the way to tell me this. »

That sharp tone of hers. Ouch. Mr Fleurstrom exclaimed in disbelief, « Cadilla ! What happened to Slow ’n’ Sweet ? ». And I was already wounded in my heart.

Regardless, I swallowed down every emotion and said, « It is correct, Mr Fleurstrom… I didn’t come here only for — actually it’s just that… My father told me to ask you about purchasing logs and — or food. I humbly request that you agree to it. »

« So, your father wishes to purchase logs and food from me. »

« Yeah. »

Instead of telling me to bring my father here the nobleman said, « Very well. In fact, I’ll [got up from chair] make sure Alker see to it immediately ». He walked around the corner and disappeared.

Left alone with Cadilla, I started, « Cadilla I — »

« Don’t talk to me. »

I sighed a little and simply stood beside her, who was sitting in quiet anger. We did not speak for a few moments. The barn problem was being taken of… and now I had to deal with an angry friend. What could be worse…?

« I need to tell you — »
“Don’t talk to me. »

« The barn », I said, trying again with a method to stimulate a feeling of sympathy. « My barn’s gone… yes I came here to ask about buying logs for the rebuilding. There was a dragon attack. Everything’s fine, Mom and Dad, but we lost all the cattle and the barn house… the storehouse ». My voice was starting to waver. If I hear one more harsh word, I would run away and pour out my feelings in solitude, somewhere far, far away from everyone…

Silence.

« So please let me speak, please » I said.

« Okay fine », she said at last and gestured to me. « And please sit down. »

I took another seat and sat down while saying out a weak « I was… ». What I was going to say was risky but I felt that I had to say it out. With more courage, I let out a string of words, pronouncing them as quickly as possible because they were uncomfortable to say : « At first I thought Jessyllka could be my fr— another friend of mine but I didn’t know you and Jessyllka are like enemies so I — err… I sort of became curious. I tried to stop her from hating you but it failed ».

There. Voilà.

Cadilla nodded her head with a hint of confusion and with a slow « A–ha ? »

When did she become so intimidating ?!

« Okay, and… » I continued, forgetting what I wished to say.

« And...? »

« Err… I… »

« Yes ? »

« I… ». Oh great, she was distracting me. I paused for a while to think up what to say and a better way to say it. If I said the truth in the wrong way, Cadilla might hate me forever. Then I got it.

« She thought I hated her. So, err… seeing someone upset, I talked to her, you know, sort of reluctantly »

No reaction. Oh, this was torturing.

« And then she said certain things about you. »

That got her attention. « Such as ? », she interrogated leaning over to my left a little.

« You err… fighting with her… pulling dress and stuff — You know, I’ve got a feeling that you… I mean her… no, both you are sort of exaggerating in a way. »

Cadilla looked downwards. « Maybe… »

She got up from her seat and walked away from me. Did I just say the wrong thing ?

« Just don’t do that anymore please », she said. With that she disappeared around the corner.
And I was back in class… again…

I was sitting in my chair, gloomy and stern. Nobody around me gave me the feelings that I wanted… not even Cadilla. Her response that day was not exactly the most reassuring…

« What is the one dragon that is usually considered as “the most formidable”? »

« Spiky Sadder? » Kindt replied to Mr Nosten’s question.

« Ronkie? » said Nork. « Those acne-like skin looks like an effective body-shield. »

Suddenly I stated, « Blue Fire Drake! Why? Because it nearly killed me before ». All eyes turned to me. Some of them laughed and some gasped. I didn’t care. In fact, I said that statement deliberately to put myself in an uncomfortable centre of attention. This made me feel somewhat masochistic; I was purposely inviting my enemies to hurt me emotionally. Pain, insults, and taunts? Bring it on…

« Very good, Rodène. That is the correct answer », said the wizard-teacher with a sense of approval that I could tell was fake. He turned towards the board and started writing.

But I still had to protect my injured spirit inside. I sat still in my chair, imagining the whispers and the silent thoughts of the eleven all round being a cloud surrounding me, a cloud made up of taunts, criticisms, disapprovals, jealous feelings, or whatever. Then I imagined an invisible protective wall surrounding me, an unsmiling front, repelling every negative energy that threatened to hurt me emotionally…

« All right class! Now, read the board together. »


Me? I simply kept my mouth shut…

« Sir! Rodène’s not reading! » said Malcost suddenly.
« Master Rodène, would you kindly read together with us? Follow along what I tell the class to do! »

I reluctantly complied and followed along his childish and boring method of learning… Can’t I choose not to read and write them down instead?

And all I could get was “Blue Fire Drake: Shot Limit: 9”. Numbers never agreed with me anyway. Also, I was more interested in learning about the dragon’s weaknesses, and what to do you when you meet one, and Mr Nosten never even touched on those subjects. What a useless class.

One day, in the classroom…

« Now, I know some of you, {boys leaning forward} are waiting for this… » began Mr Nosten.
« The big moment », added Garend excitedly, sitting in the front row right in front of me. He had turned around to face me.
I eyed upwards for a second. Nothing excited me anymore. That plump nerd with his undersized fur jacket getting excited over *everything* was getting more than annoying.

« I would like to hand over my responsibilities to our sword-training expert, Laurem, at the Dragon Stadium » continued Mr Nosten.

« My brother ! » said Garend proudly with an excited hand-and-arm gesture. « Sur–prise ! »

« What the !? » exclaimed Thustle.

« And this is where you girls have to leave », continued the teacher.

« Where do we have to go ? Is he telling us to go home ? » asked the blue-eyed Nillie, stroking one of her “stylish” two light brown braids on either side of her head.

« The Beauty Program », said the older Illy who rolled her eyes at her fourteen-year-old sister. « Oh, you’re *so* immature, always asking silly questions. »

While the boys snickered and laughed, I noticed that Cadilla looked stiff and worried. I wondered what she was thinking about. *No actually I don’t feel like caring now.*

*Ouch.*

*No, I mean…*

The chestnut-haired damsel got up uneasily. She glanced back quickly at me, which took me by surprise, and then left the classroom with Jessyllka and the girls, just as Mr Nosten began detailing the process of the “Dragon Killing Program”.

« […] hope that you are all physically fit, as it will be physically and mentally challenging. Now, the requirements for next Monday are… a helmet, a shield, and a sword. You can buy them or make them yourself », Mr Nosten announced to us boys.

I found it weird that they were not going to provide us anything, and I did not have the money to buy anything. Luckily I could make all that stuff myself in Mr Stonberg’s forge, and I had a week to do it.

While the rest of the boys sprang away from the chairs, I simply stood up slowly and watched Malcost going ahead of the boys and blocking them from the exit. They were so excited that their conversations overlapped in a frenzy sort of manner. I ignored them and whatever nonsense they were saying and stayed around in the class, intending to go home a little later without risk of bumping into them.

So I stayed back with none other than Garend and his father, Mr Nosten. The teacher was busy sorting his papers on the table in the corner left of the chalkboard. Garend was chattering to me. As I stood with my hands behind my back, pretending to hear the super-annoying nerd’s excited rambling, I couldn’t help but wonder which was worse : him, or the super-dangerous gangsters in the corridor.

In the end, I got tired of Garend saying “Rodêne, aren’t you excited of…”. I strode through the door while stating, « *I am not excited over this whole thing.* »

I stood in the dark corridor for a while, and then walked towards the front. I knew the gangsters were never my friends and never would be. They did not seem to flat-out beat me up nowadays, but I could tell, by the looks on Thustle’s face alone, that they were simply waiting for the right
moment to strike…

And there they were, standing quietly and blocking the front door… from me. My eyes sweeping from left to right, I saw the crossed-arm muscular Thustle, the unruly haired Nork, the smirking Malcost, and… Kindt was blocking the entrance in the middle.

« Now what », I said in a bored tone. I wasn’t afraid in the slightest and was, in fact, anticipating this. I stood for a while putting up an expressionless face, then strutted straight at the lanky teen of fifteen.

Ignoring the silent eyes all around me, I glared straight at Kindt’s blue eyes ; who was also staring “intimidatingly” at me. Ha. I was the one who was more intimidating, coupled with me having the exact same height as him… finally.

« Don’t play tricks with me », I softly stated, seeing that this idiotic game of silence had gone long enough. This one boy was as rotten as Thustle, who would never hesitate to give me, an unhappy lad, mental torture, and physical torture in the form of a vicious kicking when I was already on the ground.

« Here’s the deal. You will make swords for us », stated Thustle with a proud wave of his finger and a proud tilt of his head.

« And we’ll pay for it » said the thirteen-year-old Nork with a toothy grin.

They all laughed.

« You shall pay me first » I stated in a sharp tone, with a slight lowering of my head and with eyes still glaring directly into the cold blue eyes in front of me.

Kindt simply scoffed and look away to his left.

« Deal ? » I continued in a louder and sharp tone, and looked straight at Thustle, who appeared to be not unexpecting this at all. Good.

« If that’s how you are going to… » began Thustle with an increasingly threatening tone.

Ignoring him, I calmly stated, « Now if you would kindly step aside, I’d like to go outside — »

But I was pushed back by Kindt. « Oh ! Okay », I reacted in a soft and seemingly nonchalant tone.

I sprang forward and (my left hand grabbing his right hand) elbowed his face out of the way and started to open the heavy door. Kindt staggered backwards, and as I started to go out in a flash the other boys yelled :

« He’s getting away ! »

Malcost rushed outside only to meet an iron-like fist of mine sending him backwards that knocked his head into Nork’s.

Ow. That smirking face of his was harder than I thought. I rubbed my knuckles and readied my fists.

…

I was running, squeezing myself through the crowded harbour, and then through the Market.
Walking across the long grasses of the area near Fallen Rocks, I soon reached Mr Stonberg’s smithy, near Mr Whean’s and my house.

Sometime later…

{Clang !} went the hammer onto the metal workpiece which I had placed onto the anvil. With a little feeling of satisfaction, I placed down the hammer onto the little worktable beside me, and held up the unfinished and half-shaped workpiece at eye level. Then I remembered that I should rest my eyes and I looked out at the bright scenery outside. I sighed. Part of me wished to run freely across the green grassy plains that were just outside, but the other part of me wanted to keep pushing myself forward until this project was finished.

It had not taken me long to get started, even with the messy surroundings of sharp and dusty tools and weapons all over the place. I suddenly felt another odd combined feeling that seemed to contradict each other again : gratitude towards Mr Stonberg who had taught me all this, and the opposite of it, as my learning sessions with him throughout the years had all felt like torture basically : forced and extremely unpleasant.

I had already broken up the charcoal with an axe, and put them into the furnace and had already shaped the basic design of the sword. Of course, I did not need to start making a sword from zero ; from raw, unshaped steel. There were many steel pieces, “ready-to-make steel bars” I called them, around the smithy.

Looking at the thin and long metal bar and weighing it with my hands, I started picturing a sword with my mind — in my own design. I imagined a single-handed sword that would be as light as possible. To do that, its blade would have to be really thin with a larger-than-normal fuller running across its length, meant to reduce the blade’s weight while not comprising too much on its strength. And yes, I was willing to sacrifice a bit of the sword’s sturdiness in favour of lightweightness, knowing that my fighting style was more of speed and deceptive moves — to compensate for my lack of muscle strength. I also played around with the idea of using an experimental cross-guard design that would shield more of the hand, but I decided to go traditional for this part.

And so, I got back to work, and took off my leather jacket because the heat of the furnace was starting to make me sweat. With the metal workpiece heated to an eye-catching glow of red, I started hammering out the tang (part of the sword) onto the face of the anvil, while taking care to avoid creating any sharp angles or broken edges.

Next I began the “drawing out the blade” process, which was basically lengthening the flat steel bar by hammering it strategically, with it over high heat of course. This was a long procedure which would take me several hours. Into every single pound of the hammer, I would release my stress and negative emotions, fuelling my progress. That reddish-yellowish glow, produced by every single reheating and pounding of the steel, strangely gave me a sense of being toughened up while remaining calm. Interestingly, I had never felt like this before even though I had been making swords since I was little.

The rest of the sword making had gone on very well, and at much relaxed pace that what that crazy blacksmith Mr Stonberg would force on me. Anyway, I had managed to create a narrow blade, convex in shape, with that larger-than-normal fuller running across its length. I had also oil-treated and tempered it by submerging it into the quench tank so that it was now made stronger with a little flexibility. Being somewhat diamond in shape with its distinct sharp edges slightly rounded off, the cross guard also looked interesting. At the end of the hilt (or handle) of my sword, a pommel had been attached, and interestingly it was slightly heavier than what I would normally
make for other swords, because I wanted it to counteract the weight of the blade a bit more. The reason I did not fuse the metal at the end and made a bolt and nut instead was so that I could exchange the pommel anytime, in case my “extra-heavy pommel for better sword handling” idea didn’t work. The only things left to do were wrapping and stitching leather over the wooden hilt, sharpening the blade with that grinding wheel and polishing the blade. Argh, there was still so much work to be done…

Finally it was finished. Leaving the sword lying on the table, I looked out of the smithy and saw that it was already dark. Without really knowing why, I sighed as I stared at the plains, now bathed in a melancholic blanket of post-sunset darkness. Then I turned back to the sword and picked it up from the dusty old table. Holding it in my right hand and gazing along its simple, straight, sharp metal body, I was surprised by how great the grip felt in the hand with all that leather wrapped around it, how interestingly balanced its weight was, and how powerful the double-edged weapon made me feel.

« Yes, powerful… », I said to myself, and found myself smiling — again. It was a smile that was actually fuelled by sadness and negativity. Then suddenly the realisation that I had been smiling like that quite often nowadays scared me and I dropped the double-edged sword. An eerie clanking noise disturbed the silence of the darkness of the smithy. I stood in silence, suddenly feeling very alone and sacred for some reason, and I looked around the shiny, sharp metal surfaces all around. Then I felt angry at myself for again having “fear”, another of those stupid feelings.

Weak feelings.

« Rodène ? »

{!} Heart skipping a beat, I quickly turned behind to see a certain tall man had walked into the smithy. So it was just Dad with his sharp and loud voice.

« Why are you still here ? You’re supposed to be having dinner already ! I was looking everywhere for you », said Dad with a hint of annoyance.

I tried to ignore the shock of seeing him appearing so suddenly, and bent down to pick up my new sword while saying, « Well, I err… I was making… this ! It is for school on Monday… and I’m a little… [stalled for a while] yeah ».

He seemed surprised, then pleased as he went closer towards me and placed a hand onto my shoulder. He said, « Now that’s you just starting to become a man. Don’t worry about the training, it’ll do you a lot of good ».

I felt weird with him suddenly being so, err… fatherly, and I handed him the sword, and his hand slipped off my shoulder. He took it and examined it for some time. He appeared to like the shiny metal surfaces of the diamond-shaped cross guard and the slightly-pointed pommel.

« Nice but not very balanced in the hand », he concluded.

I could not help but feel more than annoyed with another of Dad’s blunt statements, and I stated, « Because I have designed it that way ». I didn’t know why I reacted in such a manner, but I really felt cold inside.

I felt that my sentence alone was responsible for the uncomfortable silence that accompanied us two as we walked together across the pastures, back towards the house.

…
The next day, I ignored the feeling of wanting to relax and unwind, and instead pushed myself to continue my next project: making a stylish helmet. Yes, it was high time I made one that I was actually proud of. The one that Dad always wanted me to use for my training lessons, it was okay and did the job, but it looked very very unstylish.

It was late morning and I was at the smithy. I sat on the chair and sketched my designs on the little table. Normally I would perhaps call Cadilla to help me with the drawing, but nowadays I simply didn’t feel like talking to anyone, not even her. And I was certainly not going to talk to Jessyllka.

Two hours had passed, and I was getting frustrated. None of the metal helmet designs that I proposed were satisfactory. I had made a few helmets just to know how their designs looked and felt, trying on and testing out a variety of shapes and styles like conical and flat-topped ones, or the “mask” types designed to guard around the eyes and nose. But all of them were either plain ugly making me look dumb, or they were simply not fashionable. The only ones I found nice-looking were the stylish Lelondish ones that left only slits for the eyes, but I was definitely not going to sacrifice visibility over style.

Wearing another of my cone-shaped designs, I stood shaking my head while looking at myself in the mirror that I had borrowed from my bedroom. Just then, a familiar sharp voice made me turn behind:

« There you are. I figured that you’d be in the forge. »

Seeing Dad walking closer towards me, I quickly took off the helmet and began stammering, « I… err… do you need anything, or… »

« Not really. I was just wondering what you were up to », said the man. Then after an uncomfortably long pause he asked, « Why are you making a helmet when I already gave you one? »

My eyes turned over to the simple-looking helmet lying on the old, dark wooden table, with a design that basically resembled an upturned bowl with two strange, metal circular patterns on either side of it. Dad gave it to me years ago when he first started to train me in sword fighting, and I decided that it was high time that I said it out loud that I disliked it. « Err… I found it… its design quite boring simply, so I’m making another one », I said quickly.

True to his name, my father Lastern made no change to his stern face and he left without saying another word. I stood staring at the outside scenery of the smithy for a while. Oh no.

I knew that he was definitely not happy with me.

I blinked my eyes and pushed my tired reluctant self to continue brainstorming on my helmet project. I needed something that I could be proudly put on for my first class at the Dragon Stadium, something that those critical-minded boys and girls wouldn’t laugh and make fun of.

Another hour had passed and I had given up trying to create my own design, and instead had started working on a more traditional, Viking-style conical-shaped helmet with a slightly pointed top and a prominent nasal bridge. I decided against making one with long ear flaps because I preferred to go lightweight, at least for now.

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Lunchtime had been great, if I preferred to think of only Mom’s delicious food. Family interaction on the other, had been basically non-existent, even tensed. Dad and I had been eating our food as
silently as usual, with him probably being silently unhappy with me, but this time, it had not bothered me one bit. I had deliberately occupied my mind with creative thoughts on what designs should I use for my new helmet and new shield, and so now I knew exactly what to do.

Anxious to continue my projects, I was walking on the grassy pastures on our farm. Listening to the birds singing, gazing around at the scenery beautifully lit by the sun, and breathing in the cool air, I was in a mood that the optimistic side of me wanted to label as “completely happy”. But why am I not completely happy? I didn’t know how to explain it, and I couldn’t pinpoint the reason for my unhappiness, and so I decided that I should simply ignore the whole thing. There I was, confusing myself again.

Something caught my ear as my impatient footsteps got me nearer towards the open-air smithy — it was the boys! The boys, one of the causes of my misery.

« Why are they here…? », I began asking myself (even when I already knew the answer), and I prepared myself to make an intimidating entrance. I drew my new sword out from the stiff wooden scabbard wrapped in leather, and it made a dull and almost silent brushing {swishh} sound, not nearly as impressive enough as what I would have preferred. Malcost and Nork turned to look behind, Kindt was standing and leaning against one of the light wooden pillars and as I strode closer to the entrance of the smithy which faced the Plains, I spotted Thustle sitting on my chair with his legs on my worktable!

Instead of exploding this time, I sharply stated « You all are not welcome here and are not allowed to sit on that chair », figuring this time that a silent threat with the sword was better.

Thustle’s legs went off the table. « Oh, you mean this chair? », the muscular teen asked with a hint of mockery.

With three strides I went towards my enemy and stood directly over him, pointing my sword at his neck. « Do not play games with me. Get off the chair and leave, all of you. »

« Okay, okay… », he said, standing up. « But we’re not going to leave yet, you know. »

« Not yet, oh really? ». I nodded and smirked. « Then you just have to find out the hard way of how this sword works… », I said darkly, quickly positioning my sword, its edge horizontally, near to his neck. I heard the other boys coming closer behind me as if preparing to fight me.

But the boss stopped them with a raised hand gesture, and said, « There’s no need for weapons or harsh words, my poor friend ». Thustle placed a hand onto my hand gripping the sword’s handle and he attempted to lower it down but my hand moved back up again and gripped the handle tighter. « We came to offer you a truce and potentially a chance to join our gang », he said.

I blinked my eyes rapidly then stared harshly into his blue eyes. They have wounded me so much and now they’re asking me to join them?!


« This is a take-it-or-leave-it chance », said Kindt.


« Terrible name, right? », said Nork, starting an argument with his more enthusiastic brother.

« But why?! », I asked. « I have nothing but hate for you all! ». I lowered my sword.
« Oooh, tough hateful words, Rodène », said Thustle, exaggerating. « Look, we saw your fighting skills and we thought — »

« I take your compliment but not your offer. Now go away. »

« Just hear us out. »

« Now you’re pleading eh Thussie ? », I mocked in an exaggerated replica of Malcost or Nork’s voice, and yes, I didn’t care how out of character I was being. I didn’t remember mocking someone before.

« No… », he said stupidly and I smirked at the first time I had successfully made him feel uncomfortable.

« We’re just — », began Nork.

« Just being scared of me. Yes, I get it », I interrupted and found out their outraged expressions comical and satisfying.

« NO ! »

« Why would we be scared of a funny-accented skinny guy like you !? », said Kindt out loud and I sharply turned over to his direction. Calmly and carefully I placed my sword back into the scabbard as if nothing happened, then in a flash my hands grabbed that tall lanky blond and pushed him against the pillar.

« You’re asking me to join your stupid gang and yet you insult me ! », I yelled a string of sharp-toned words to his face and abruptly switched to a whispering that only he could hear. « Try saying “funny-accented guy” one more time. »

« So you want to fight, eh ? », said the spiky-haired blond in a small voice, probably because I had pushed his chest very harshly against the pillar.

« Just leave me alone, and don’t you dare insult my accent ever again ! », I said. (The weird thing was, Cadilla had once commented a little negatively on my accent before but that was different.)

« So I guess we won’t be able to buy your swords, then ? », said Malcost with a hint of disappointment.

« So this is what it’s all about, again. I told you, I’m not interested in doing business with you, or even the slightest bit of friendly interaction », I said releasing my hold on Kindt, who seemed to have just got his breath back, and his annoyingly sharp voice :

« If you won’t join us… »

« And I definitely see no reason to do that… », I said.

« It makes you still our enemy, or at least a competitor », finished Thustle.

Huh. Maybe joining them would make things easier for me. However, I did not say a word and just kept my defensive stance.

« Competitor, you say ? », I said after a period of silence.

« Well », said the blond bully. « Monday’s going to be the first training class and for your
information, my poor friend, it is the start of a series of competitive events that are going to very
difficult for all of us… ». He leaned uncomfortably close towards me and I exhaled out his bad
breath. « Especially if one is dead set on eliminating the others. »

I scoffed. Thustle was putting up his “educated” front again, and I said, « So, you were afraid
that me and my fighting skills would be a threat to you all, and so you think that allowing me to
join your gang would somehow be more beneficial to you, than ganging up on me and eliminating
me out of the competitions which you would usually do ? »

I drew out my sword again. « Now go before I…! », I said loudly and threateningly. For the
first time, I actually wanted to initiate a fight with them — to hurt them back as they had hurt me
all these years.

« Let’s go boys », said Thustle and they left, walking towards the grassy Plains.

« Yes, go, cowards! », I called out to them, feeling a sense of satisfaction of being able to “add
more fire to the blow”.

At this, the muscular Thustle lost his calm demeanour (probably fake in the first place) and
yelled back : « You’re going to REGRET this! »

« Oh no, I won’t », I said with a sly smile. « You will. You will regret messing up a huge part
of my life. »

❅ ————<< »>> ————

Author’s note :

✽ Rodêne, why do you keep watering the wrong root?
Rodêne, pourquoi continues-tu à arroser la mauvaise racine?

✽ Here are two diagrams (and links) for those unfamiliar with sword terminology :

Image nº 1
Image nº 2
The shiny surface of the mirror hanging above the bed served as a reflection of what the world would see of me — this time not of an awkward weakling, but of a cunning, handsome, male teenager with a distinctive sense of style who was about to start his first day of a long and arduous training on the art of wielding a sword.

I assumed a battle stance and liked what I saw: a new, hand-crafted sword in my firm, determined right-hand grasp; an oval-shaped wooden shield, light and easy to carry, held by my other hand; a nice-fitting Viking helmet on my head with its interior padded with comfortable layers of leather; and of course, I was also wearing my usual dark-blue tunic, “silent-walking” soft-soled shoes, and that elegant dark-brown leather jacket.

I liked the feel of my very own sword: its leather grip, its weightier-than-normal pommel in my hands, and its extremely-sharp, double-edged, extra-lightweight blade all made me smile to myself. I wasn’t quite sure about the design of my new conical-shaped lightweight-looking helmet though, with its slightly pointed top and a prominent nasal bridge.

Okay, I know I was being a bit vain, maybe even a bit narcissistic, but I couldn’t help it. I loved style. I loved to look striking and intimidating after being under the mercy by intimidating bullies for so many years. Being impressed with myself, now that was saying something considering I was always extremely negatively critical of myself… and what others say about me. But this time, in addition to my physical, wooden shield, I had a new shield for repelling out any threats or attacks designed to add salt to my vulnerable interior. This shield was invisible and imaginary; in my mind, it glowed blue in colour and it was constantly encircling me like a spherical cloud. Why blue? I didn’t really know, it seemed to be the colour that matched me nowadays.

I placed my sword back into my wooden-leather scabbard which made a scraping metallic noise. I had replaced the wooden mouthpiece (opening) of the scabbard with brass. Now, whenever I drew out my sword, there would be an impressive metallic “swing” sound effect, a little something that often set apart Lelondish swords from other Viking swords.

I turned to stared into my determined, black eyes in the mirror. « I am going to make an appearance, an entrance », I stated. « This is my chance to rise. Now try and stop me. »

Under the late morning sun, I set off for the Stadium.

…

An enormous square-shaped building loomed over the relatively tiny houses of the “Nobleland” area. I felt uneasy as I walked across the Triangle towards that building, as it was none other than the Palace of Argent, the place where the king and queen and the very elite of society resided. From afar I could see a group of teenagers gathering in an enclosed area smaller than the spacious Triangle, an area surrounded by the Stadium’s “ticket house”, the entrance of the
Stadium, a wall and a tower of the Palace which competed with the height of Mont Hill, and a rather small nobleman’s home.

I strode straight towards them, without a word. Some of the boys turned around. I spotted the faces of Mr Nosten, and Garend. And there was Laurem Nosten, the silent and serious-faced teen around six or five years older than me, whom I considered as a senior friend I was never able to make friends with.

Standing among the teenagers like Thustle and his three gang members used to make me threatened and frightened, but now, I stood cool and calm, even a bit haughty as I never said a word of greeting to anyone. Because… why should I?

I noticed that I was the only one with a helmet on his head; not even Laurem had a helmet. As if feeling that someone was already laughing inwardly about my unconventional helmet design that probably looked ridiculous, I took it off and held it in my right arm (my left hand was holding the shield). I leaned on one leg and put up a calm cool exterior that hid my inner nervousness when a soldier at the side of the gate pulled down a handle attached on the wall, opening a huge gate that revealed a dark passage a little wider than the gate. I expected the metal gate to make a rattling noise as it descended and disappeared into the stony, greyish ground, but the mechanism appeared to be well-oiled.

With a hand gesture the tall well-built Laurem gestured me and the boys into the Stadium. Standing still, I looked behind and saw Mr Nosten standing behind, not following us in. I looked in front again and followed Laurem and the boys, into the dark passage lit by torches on the stony walls. We passed by a passageway on the right and soon we reached a gate in front of a stone wall. Laurem went over to the torch on the right of it and he pulled down a lever on the stony brick wall. Et voilà, what seemed to be a dead end was revealed to be the entrance of the Stadium. The metal gate lowered itself and disappeared into the dark floor, followed by the huge stone slab that did the same, although more slowly. Bright daylight met our eyes as the stone slab revealed more and more of the Stadium’s interior as it moved downwards, making a slight grating noise. It felt somewhat unsettling.

My eyes ached for a split second as the drastic change of lighting and scenery. At first, all that I noticed was the grey, stony floor, and the grey, stony walls, then I noticed that the interior of the Stadium was curiously somewhat circular, although it seemed to have an oval shape when viewed from the outside. There was also a ceiling of metal chains like a spider cobweb above that made the entire Stadium look like a giant bird cage, but it was designed to keep flying dragons in.

« Wow ! »
« Whoa…! »
« This is going to be awesome ! »

With large strides I walked towards the middle near a rack of weapons, while the other boys (except Garend who seemed terrified), were getting all audibly excited. Not me. I continued putting up my emotionless composure, deliberately being different and cool. Set apart. Distinct.

I placed my wooden shield on the floor and placed my helmet onto it, and stood up. Slowly I spun myself around in a full circle, adjusting my feet in a somewhat fluid, dance-like manner, keeping my head tilted upwards and sweeping my eyes across the high walls of the Stadium to smoothly take in more of the interesting scenery, from right to left. I could see the huge tunnel entrance of the Stadium in which a large seating area sat right above it and right above the level of the metal-cobwebbed ceiling, followed by an interesting-looking corner of the huge Palace which
cut into the Stadium a little, then at the opposite end of the Stadium there was another large seating area, also above the level of the metal-cobwebbed ceiling. There appeared to be no tunnel or entrance at that end of the Stadium, only a curved wall with strange-looking levers and strange barred gates of stone. Still ignoring the noisy chattering of the others, I focused my eyes into the distance. Outside the Stadium, Mont Hill rose in the distance, and the sky-reaching mountainous tip of Mont Point could be seen even further away.

« **Attention everyone !** », said Laurem aloud suddenly, to us boys.

I turned around to look at him, taken aback by how strong his deep voice sounded. It was weird to see that always-silent young man speaking out so loudly, in a somewhat forced manner.

« We are gathered here to train ourselves in how to fight against dragons and how to defend our great kingdom ! », he said and paused for a while.

So, he was conducting a briefing session.

« We are going to learn how to attack and defend, using a variety of weapons. However, we will be concentrating on the sword… and shield… I am proud to be chosen as your instructor, but know that you must listen and follow attentively to what I say and do, in order to benefit from the training programs… »

Nice loud voice, but not a very interesting or inspiring speech.

« …[T]hese training programs are going to be tough, so that by the time you need to fight those dragons, you will be prepared for it ! To understand what I am saying, take off your shirts or tunics, all of you ! »

« Wait, what ?! », I said to myself, blinking my eyes and looking around to see the confused expressions of the other boys.

« You lot are going to have to get used to commands », said Laurem in a disapproving tone. « Now get to it ! »

« But what does this have to do with…? », I began asking in confusion and curiosity. I was really reluctant to take off my jacket and my nice dark blue tunic and lose that unique appearance that I so carefully prepared these past few days. Plus, what about the cold weather ?

« No questions ! This is the military, so do as you’re told ! »

*Oh yes, the military. Did I mention I hate being in the military…?* Grumbling inwardly, I started to take off my long leather jacket and I placed it near my helmet and shield. As my dark blue tunic was tucked tightly into my belt, I had to unfasten my belt. I looked around and I saw that the boys were already shirtless. Some of them (except Garend) were waving their tunics and shirts around… like typical boys.

« Get a move on Rodène ! », yelled Laurem in a military sort of way. « I give you fifteen seconds ». He started counting.

« Okay, okay… », I said, getting frustrated at the belt and the attached scabbard (of my sword). I removed my long-sleeved tunic and my undershirt, and at once I felt a cold breeze chilling my bare chest and arms. I frantically bent down to put my precious piece of clothing to where my helmet and shield were on the floor.

« Thirteen… fourteen. Just in time, Rodène », stated the instructor.
I walked over sheepishly to the group of boys, avoiding eye contact. It was an unpleasant, uncomfortable feeling, seeing my so-called male “comrades” like this, my own skin colour blending in with theirs, to create a “sea of shirtless boys”. No, it wasn’t about me being a shy skinny boy too shy of taking off his shirt. Okay, fine, I lied. I was shy and extremely self-conscious. My unique look had been taken away, probably to make me part of this military group of knights in training, a group I happened to detest.

I never felt so exposed and uncomfortable in my life.

« Now, stand in line, shoulder to shoulder ! »

The boys and I did as he ordered, but in a noisy manner.

« SILENCE ! Have I given you the permission to talk ? »

We shook our heads dumbly, unused to this type of training of loud orders and strict rules.

« Now Thustle, come to the front », he ordered.

The boy walked in front to face us, and Laurem pointed at his bare muscular chest, saying, « Now this is more or less what I want to see in you guys in the next coming months. This will mean that before we jump into sword training, we are to do lots of training to build up physical strength and build. How else are you going to fight ? »

« By using intellect and exploiting the enemy’s weakness, if any ? », I answered.

« I did not ask for your opinion, Rodène. »

« Err, I thought you were asking us a question…? »

« I did not ask for you to justify yourself ! »

« Oh, okay », I said defeatedly.

« I’ll let you off this time. But next time, for speaking out of permission, there will be a penalty of twenty push-ups. By the way, that’ll be our first exercise for the day. »

_Oh, push-ups. How I love them, those delightful exercises of raising and lowering the body in the prone position using just my skinny arms that threatened to break anytime !_

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Over the course of the next week, torture and pain seemed to be part of our lives, for me and the other boys at least. We had to do insane amounts of strenuous, physical training for five days a week, which left us little time or mood to do anything else. At first I nearly collapsed, but eventually the days blurred into one, with predictable monotonous activities : wake up, go to the Stadium, do countless painful push-ups, march in formation, run countless exhausting laps around the Stadium, lift heavy weights that made your muscles tremble… and repeat. (At least I was not forced to do all of that shirtless. Thustle and his gang however, seemed eager to take off their shirts, probably just to show that they were “more masculine” to anybody watching us in the Stadium.)

It was kind of ironic that it was soon going to be the month of March, and we indeed were doing a lot of _marching_. I really did not want to know what March itself would bring us…
I never felt more like a mindless machine, a machine no more sentient than a windmill being put to daily work and drudgery. It was only when I returned to the comforts of home and to the safety of my bedroom, that I felt that I was back to myself.

It was finally weekend, and that meant two days of allowing my aching, trembling body to rest after stretching it to the limits.

A knock on my door…

« Rodène ? Are you okay ? », asked a worried womanly voice, from a person I had been ignoring for no real reason — my mom.

I called out more harshly than I wanted, « I’m fine ! Just... leave me alone ! I’m resting !! »

« Ah. D’accord. |Ah. All right.| Come out if you need anything, okay ? », came the delayed response.

Clothed in only my shorts, I was sitting on the bed in the sanctuary which was my bedroom. Leaning against the wall and facing the study table, I sat in silence, wrapping my arms around my bare knees. My right hand felt and massaged my right foot, which was now the most aching part of my body. It was only in times like these that I could lose myself in my thoughts and daydreaming, pretending that I was in a better place.

I didn’t know why I pushed Mom away, I could have asked her to apply some ointment and massage my aching body parts… maybe later when I was ready to go out then I would ask her… {sigh} I felt so closed-off.

I was not going to lie to myself. I thought I wanted all of this… These constant, vigorous, harsh improvements to my body so that I could prove to myself and everyone that I could fight and protect myself and those around me, so that I could prove to myself and to Dad that I was a fighter, not a weakling.

But each day, even though I felt stronger physically, on the outside, what was inside was a completely different story. Pain, sadness, anger, vengeful thoughts… they made me feel powerful and aggressive, but at the same time, I felt… weak.

I decided to pour out my complicated and conflicting feelings onto paper, especially since I had problems talking to people nowadays. I got up from the bed, walked over towards the study table, and sat on my chair which now had a comfy folded blanket for a cushion. I prepared my four writing tools that consumed basically all of my savings : a writing charcoal, a quill, a tiny ink container, and a piece of parchment paper.

Words flowing out like a stream, I wrote :

I thought I wanted this,
This feeling of power,
Of being able to overpower,
My enemies and any threats.
I have worked hard to achieve it,
And now, do I feel satisfied?
And now, do I feel fulfilled?

It comes at a cost:
Every day a part of me fades away,
Bit by bit is lost.
The parts that feel more like the real me,
Kind, soft, gentle, funny,
Now replaced by a stronger self,
A stronger but colder one,
A colder and darker one.

I decided to add in more whenever I had the time and the mood. So, when the next weekend came about, I sat down again and continued writing down my thoughts, which turned out to be a poem with lines that I could not get to harmoniously rhyme no matter how hard I tried. Irregular, almost broken, imperfect rhyming was all I could achieve in this poem… and in my life…?

The stronger me is what I admire,
Being more impressive,
But I am afraid of this cold fire.
My own thoughts,
Now stained with dark spots,
They scare me.
But a part of me likes the spots,
Finds them addictive,
A part of me needs them,
And is unwilling to lose them,
They become me.
Dark fire.
I do not admire,
What I have become.
It had been a usual training day at the Stadium, with no changes except that instead of training on the first five days of the week at the Stadium, from now on the boys and I were to train “only” on the first three days of the week and on Saturday. Moreover, our strict instructor Laurem had started teaching us basic swordplay — using wooden training swords and wooden shields with each other, and real swords against the wooden standing pell in the middle of Stadium.

Mom had become too busy nowadays, most likely because of the tax increase. Dad seemed to give me the silent treatment which I deserved, as I was guilty of doing the same. So, dinner with my family had completely lost its charm and appeal. There was basically zero family conversation over the table. I felt like it made no difference whether I was having lunch alone during the daytime or sitting at the dinner table with my two parents; I would be lost in my own world anyway. I would be sitting in restless silence, anxious to finish my meal, with eyes staring into space, fingers drawing repetitive patterns on the table, ears passively droning out everything.

One evening, after dinner, I immediately went into my bedroom and sat down on my inviting chair. With the candle casting shadows of my writing hand onto the parchment paper, I started adding more lines to my melancholic poem:

I cannot let go of this desire,
To vanquish my enemies with fire,
At all costs, whatever it takes,
Even if means changing myself,
Drastically, painfully, insanely,
Using powerful emotions,

Dark oceans,

To drive me forward.

I cannot let go of this hate,
This revenge, bitter yet sweet,
Of every being that has wronged me,
That has brought pain to my spirit.

But I also cannot let go of the belief,
That this is not the real me,
The real me detests the darkness,
And is even frightened of it.
In the end, who am I?
Who am I now?
What should I do now?
What should I write now?
Why should I even write now?
Everything I write turns bitter anyhow.
I want to stop,
But I can’t,
I don’t know how.

I sighed involuntarily when I wrote my name below the poem.

— Rodène Statenson

〈 Spiralling Downwards 〉

By the time I finished writing, it was very late into the night. Stiff, I got up from my chair. I walked a few steps towards my window. No, in fact, it was very *early* before dawn, probably three hours into the morning. Luckily there would be no school or training tomorrow. I looked out the window, seeing mainly darkness and blurry dark shapes which I knew were probably trees or the neighbours’ houses.

All was quiet, except for my loud thoughts and my intense negative feelings. I felt so alone, like the only living being, an unhappy being in the world. Alone not just in this little kingdom, not just in the known Viking world, but in a world which stretched over to vast unexplored lands with different colourful cultures. I visualised lands filled with people who were more caring, warm, generous, with less regard to one’s social status or even one’s accent, so that I could be more like them instead of…

I looked down at my own chest.

This.

I dreamed of possible lands that had no dangerous fire-breathing dragons that threatened, if not, negatively affected life daily…

A spike of anger shot up in my chest, but it subsided into a growing heavy bundle of sadness, locked inside, and it was starting to cause physical pain in my chest. My nose twitched and my eyes grew watery, so watery that my vision of the dark outside scenery became clouded. The liquid covering my eyes burst, and trickled down my cheeks, and my vision was clear again. I turned away from the window and allowed my aching body to collapse face down onto the bed which was
beside me on the left.

My shoes were still on as I lay on my stomach on the bed. A whole hour seemed to have passed by as I tried to force myself to break down and cry.

« I can’t ! I simply can’t cry it ALL OUT ! », I shouted in frustration then got up. Sitting on the bed, I started spending a long time untying my shoes and taking off my socks. Dragging my stiff legs onto the soft surface of the bed, I began hugging tightly my bolster of stuffed hay. I let out a sigh as its softness against my chin made me feel better a little.

« I need help… », I said to myself. Then I thought of someone whom I had been meeting for a long time, someone I realised I was beginning to miss :

Cadilla.

I didn’t know why, but it seemed we seemed to ignore each other whenever life became too tough or busy for us two. I didn’t even get to know how things were going for her ! Was it due to the gap between our social classes ? Or was it due to her being “a person far too closed off and unwilling to share about her mysterious past”, as Jessyllka kept telling me ?

« I’ll talk to her tomorrow. Maybe she can help me. »

The next day, in the forest near Cadilla’s house…

« Now where is she ? », I asked myself, a curled finger of mine touching my lips. I had gone up to her house and asked Mr Kettlon and the Fleurstroms about where the girl was, and all Mrs Fleurstrom said was “That girl ! She’s probably roaming off to heaven knows where !”. Apparently, the wealthy lady did not seem to approve of her noble teenage daughter exploring our island kingdom on her own, even when the girl was already the same age as me, at fifteen years old.

My head still felt dizzy from having slept so late and waking up past noon, and I leaned against the Wooden Wall to rest for a while. I closed my eyes and deeply breathed in the cool forest air. Sunshine of the late afternoon sun filtered through the trees and bathed my sleep-deprived eyes with warmth. This little broken-down wall brought back many warm memories of how Cadilla and I first met, of how we played together, as simple children with simple problems. I felt it hard to believe that two years had already passed by. A sense of nostalgia began its presence in my chest, and it slowly changed into a sense of sadness which made my eyes watery. The fact that I was about to cry made me feel like a weakling, again.

I held in the tears.

« No… I cannot stay here », I said and looked around on all sides to see greenery surrounding me on all sides. The forest seemed so empty without her. I started to walk away from the wall that served as a symbol and souvenir of our childhood.

…

I had searched everywhere for Cadilla : the vegetable farms, the wheat fields, the Well of Eau, and even around the Stadium, and she was nowhere to be found. Instinct told me that she was probably feeling a little down. On the verge of giving up, I walked to the last place I could think of : the harbour.
There seemed to be more people than usual, so I felt a little self-conscious when I walked across the Triangle near the Library entrance. I combed my hair with one hand, while my other adjusted the scabbard holding the sword that I always brought along nowadays — for self-defence.

« […] Haven’t you heard ? »

Huh ? I heard voices from some villagers around me.

« No, I simply think that it’s a tall tale, with no truth to it », said another voice.

I turned my head around and saw two ladies, a knight, and unsurprisingly, the talkative brunette girl Illy the Gossiping Girl was with them. They appeared heavily invested in their conversation. I walked around them in circles, just out of their way, but near enough to hear the majority of what they were saying.

« […] Dragon Conqueror ? Wow, that is one epic title[…] », remarked Illy. She seemed cuter today for some reason. No, ugh, what am I thinking ? Her big mouth makes her unattractive, and this big-mouthed girl played a part in hurting me before.

Ah, stop. I should just concentrate on their conversation !

« […]All right, I must say you have a point. However, one must still take all rumours with a pinch of salt », said one lady.

« I’ve heard several variations of the rumour », said the woman with her shopping basket.
« Now, which one do you think is the correct version ? »

« Personally », said the knight in a deep voice, « I prefer the version with the big giant of a man leading an army of barbarians to the dragon’s nest […] ». The Lelondish knight had his visor up, and he seemed at ease conversing with them. I simply stood at a distance, detached, watching them continue talking. I almost wanted to get closer, but…

No, it’s too scary.

« […] and then they slew the Big Beast. »

I was surprised someone liked Illy hadn’t spotted me yet. Not that I wanted to be noticed…

« So what’s the deal with all this anyway ? How does the death of this big old majestic Dragon Queen affect us ? », asked Illy. « It’s funny because my father doesn’t even believe that there is a such a thing as a dragon’s nest, despite constantly hearing all those fishermen’s tales on his sea voyages. »

« Well, I for one believe that this might be the end of the dragon raids, even though my commanders still say that the dragons will keep on attacking us regardless of whether their queen or king is dead or not. »

« I really sincerely hope that is not the case », said the woman with the shopping basket. « I long for peace in our island kingdom. »

« So where does this Dragon Conqueror come from anyway ? »

« They say from the east, but I don’t know. »

« Huh ? Rodène ? »
Ah ! AH ! Illy spotted me !

No, no, no. I don’t want to talk to her. I don’t want to talk to anyone here ! I spied a glance at the brunette looking at me with curious eyes. Quick as a flash, I turned my back and walked away with large steps, all the way, until I disappeared around the corner of the Library.

Now totally out of sight from anyone, I felt a significant sense of security.

Oh no. Who is this now ?

I spied a tall blonde girl standing nearby, with her wavy braided hair tied in a half up crown style, or something like what I had seen before while, uh, secretly, casually browsing through a book of hairstyles when I was younger. She turned around and saw me. Oh, it was Jessyllka, with that new interesting hairstyle.

Oh no.

She walked over, in a lively gait. Standing beside me on my right, she greeted me with a sweet smile, « Hi ! Rodène~ ».

« H–hi…? », I stammered, not used to hearing a simple hello greeting and my name being said so charmingly and so… femininely cute ?

The teenage girl with her long light blue skirt leaned a little closer to me than anyone would normally do, causing a feeling, strong and unfamiliar and addictive, to rise in my chest. It was making me uncomfortable.

« How are you ? You and the other boys seem a little shaken by training so diligently in the Stadium, day after day », she said, appearing rather impressed as she spoke.

I stole a quick glance at her green eyes and avoided them as I said, « I… err… I’m very tired, yes. And honestly, I don’t like it very much ». I quietly took a step backwards and she replied :

« Aww… that’s too bad to hear ». Jessyllka slowly backed away from me, in a calm and relaxed manner. She gave that dangerously sweet smile again and said, « Now what if I tell you that there is a way… »

« Look I’m sorry but I’m actually in the middle of a rush here », I interrupted hurriedly even though her last sentence sounded interesting.

« Tsk, tsk, tsk. Always in a hurry… ». The girl a year older than me shook her head, head lowered slightly and eyes still staring.

Hmm. Nice perfume… It seemed more citrusy compared to Cadilla’s subtle lavender…

Ah ! Focus, me ! « I’m trying to find Cadilla, have you seen her ? », I said quickly and reluctantly.

The elaborately dressed girl seemed unaffected by how obviously I had been pushing her off. « Ah, of course ! She was heading towards Mont Point Beach », she said, continuing her expressive tone.

« Okay, thanks », I said hurriedly and began to leave, suddenly having a fear of Cadilla seeing me talking with Jessyllka.
And oh, by the way~

I turned back to look at Jessyllka who continued, « Do try to cheer your friend up a little. She looks really upset. »

Oh. I turned around again not knowing what to reply to her surprisingly caring comment. As I walked away in the opposite direction of her, I began pondering. Maybe Jessyllka wasn’t too bad. Okay, a bit flirtatious... but still, not a threat compared to Illy and Nillie. Those two information leakers — ugh.

Really? Ugh?

I walked to the corner of the Library and turned into a narrow alley. I never failed to be fascinated by the feeling of suddenly being surrounded on both sides by high walls of stone-grey bricks, and with a partial view of the beach and sea. I turned right around the corner and the beach stretched in view before me. Cries of seagulls and the sound of waves repeatedly hitting the shores and retreating reached my ears.

I had been walking on the soft deep sands for a while. I stopped, realising that I still did not see that missing mysterious girl-who-likes-flowers anywhere. I casually looked upwards and to my right and a huge building came into view — the prisons and dungeons. Because the building ran along almost the entire length of Mont Pont Beach, it gave the whole area a somewhat gloomy, forbidding look. I stood in front facing the high stone wall, noticing that there were no barred prison windows on the right side of the wall, while on the left side there were many rows and columns of small dark square openings...

So this is the first thing a foreigner would see if they visit Lelondell?, I muttered to myself.

I turned and continued my way to the other end of the beach. As I approached a clump of trees, the mouth of Mont River came into sight. I walked right under one of the trees and leaned my back against its smooth trunk, suddenly releasing how tired I was after going around nearly the entire island. I stood for some time, gazing across the bright blue sea...

Rodène? Is that... you?», went a familiar voice that shook away my disappointment.

I didn’t move nor answer, expecting Cadilla to walk right in front of me, which she did, blocking the view with her tall, beautiful silhouette that contrasted with the bright background. Her arms hanged down at her sides, fingers looking tensed. Her hair hanged down her elegant, elongated face. Her diamond-shaped face... cute forehead.

Then I noticed that she was wearing a different long skirt, having an interesting, almost unadorned fabric of expensive purple. Making footprints on the soft sand I walked towards her, then said, « I was looking all over for you ».

She glanced timidly into my eyes before saying, « You were? ». She looked downwards again.

Jessyllka was right; Cadilla looked upset. I could even sense it all around the girl with the gorgeous chestnut braids. I said to her in a soft tone, « How are you... feeling? You seem to be the opposite of cheerful... ».

The girl, still with her pretty head bowed, said weakly, « I’m... fine. Just a little... ».

We stood facing each other awkwardly for a short while. My concern for her was getting more than my shyness and I took her feminine hand and began a clumsily constructed sentence: « Come, err, why not we take a walk and... let's have a look at the river... okay? ». 
The girl looked at me blankly, then nodded timidly and we walked together across the sands, partially grass-covered, towards the mouth of Mont River. Soon we were standing near its rocky banks, and we let go of our hands. Across the river on the other side was a mysterious land area, thick with dark green trees and devoid of buildings.

« This is first time I am here, at this mouth of the river, err I don’t know how to call it », I said attempting to start a conversation with the quiet Cadilla.

« “This is the first time I have been here, at the estuary” », she said.

I looked at her who was on my left and said, « Really, is this your first time also ? »

« No, uh, I was just trying to correct your sentence. »

« Sorry. You know, ha, my sentences can be quite incorrect », I said, then decided that the sentence that I had just said also sounded… off. My Norse was worse than usual. Was it due to my lack of contact with people nowadays ? « Anyway », I continued, « You know, err, you can tell me anything that’s troubling you… if you want. As for me, to be honest, I’m not exactly happy nowadays ».

She gave a sigh and said, « I’m… I’m not used to sharing my feelings. »

« It’s okay, you don’t need to share everything. Okay, um, why don’t I start with myself ? ». My eyes staring over the lush greenery across the river, I said, « Sometimes, I feel that life goes by too fast and then we become busy, unable to enjoy simple things... simple activities. The dragon training is very hard on me. I also find that they expect quite a lot from us. »

« Yes, society expects a great deal from us poor adolescents », said Cadilla. « By the way, I think I do understand about your struggle with how society judges you on the way you speak. It’s the same for me too... somewhat similar, I mean. »

« Really ? How ? »

I thought she was about to reply immediately but she walked over to a large flat rock and sat down, crossing her legs, thigh over thigh, under her elegant purple skirt. « My mother is always commenting on the way I speak… », she began, while I stood by her side and listened, « …on how “excessively colloquial” or I sound. How overly casual and simple I look. I’m not supposed to cross my legs like this, which is totally illogical. »

« As for me, I think you sound great. I really like the way you speak. Your voice — », I spoke out a sentence and stopped it prematurely because I immediately regretted saying that.

She widened her pretty brown eyes, and cocked her beautifully braided head to one side in her typical Cadilla fashion. « You do ? »

« I... err thought you already knew…? », I said awkwardly. « Anyway, err, please continue. »

« Right. So… I was saying that she doesn’t like the way I speak, especially when my family and I are in some formal event and I say things like “I’ve got to go” instead of “I am afraid I must leave”. »

« And cute words like “littil” » I said, seeing whether poking a little bit of fun could perhaps cheer her up.

No. She only gave a quick smile which immediately faded away, then she said, « And now
here’s something that may concern you: apparently, she is one of those haughty Lelondells who are extremely patriotic of this island kingdom, and any foreign influences or people who are slightly different and unable to fit into society should be avoided or looked down upon.

Well, I knew that already… I think I remember her saying that before.

"I don’t really know where this discrimination comes from," she continued, "but it seems to have gotten worse over the last couple of years. You know, my parents and I sometimes talk about the recent happenings around our island, especially about stuff, I mean, matters that relate to royalty and royal decisions… you know things that the “commoners” are not supposed to know about."

The girl stared somewhere for a while then she uncrossed her legs. She placed both hands onto her lap and sat in a more traditional prim-and-proper ladylike manner. "So… the king and queen are proposing to trade again with what some crazy people call “our ancient enemy” and it has outraged lots of said crazy people. And the same time, to make things more complicated, there are more and more traders in Lelondell, who are trading illegally with Cœunettian traders. You’re following me?"

I nodded my head slowly.

"Ah! I’m probably rambling too much, am I?"

I nodded my head then realised my mistake immediately afterwards and tried to correct it by saying, "Um! I mean! No, no. I enjoy hearing you talk."

Cadilla did not seem amused. "No, I don’t think you are genuinely interested."

I gave a long sigh, not knowing what to say. She averted her eyes and looked away so that I could not see her face.

Finally I said, "Cadilla, it’s rare to hear you talk so much. Please continue."

She sighed.

"Cadilla, I mean it. I really don’t mind listening to what you have to say," I said and remembered something that would surely cheer her up. "Vous me pardonnez, oui? [You forgive me, right?]."

"Always with the vouvoiement nonsense," she said, and made one of her eye-rolling expressions that normally would have made me laugh. "Fine," she said and I waited for her to utter another word.

But she didn’t talk for a while. My legs were getting tired from standing but for some reason I felt too shy of sitting beside her on the same rock. But then I remembered how we used to sit together at the edge of the pond when we were kids, and there was no shyness at all. So I asked her timidly, pointing at the rock, "Err, do you mind if I sit here?"

"Not at all," she said, her left palm patting on the greyish smooth surface just beside her. Her face seemed to say, "Um, why are you even asking? Of course I don’t mind, we’re friends". She shifted a little to the right and I sat down very closely beside her as the rock wasn’t very large.

I felt a strong sensation on the right part of my body, that seemed to be reacting with something feminine radiating from her on the right. It was the same strange feeling I felt when Jessyllka leaned a little too closely towards me. But this felt a little different. Anyway, it was making me
uneasy and yet, comfortable, at the same time. Actually no, I lied. I felt really uncomfortable.

« Okay, errmmm… you can continue talking…? », I said.

« Okay, umm », said Cadilla. « So I was saying that there are Lelondells who, uh, illogically dislike other Lelondells with any foreign accents. »

« Err, yeah, I know that already », I said.

« So you mean… » I said, knowing this was going to be difficult to say. She looked at me intently and I turned my eyes away. I pondered, Why is she telling me this, is she saying… ?

Finally I said, « You mean you don’t like the way I speak, with my terrible Lelondish-Cœunettian accent ? ». I regretted inserting the word “terrible” in there, even though that was my own opinion of it. My accent was… not pure. Not Lelondish. Not Cœunettian. A bland blend of both. And I felt a little sad about her not liking something about me.

Cadilla looked upset and astonished. « Why, no… no no no, I have nothing against Cœunette and the Cœunettians ! », she said frantically. « What I mean is… my parents and some people, they — you know, I actually like the way you speak ! ». Her voice dropped to a softer tone abruptly, « It’s just that… »

« That ? »

« Oh, this is going to be difficult to say… », she said, fiddling with her fingers.

I kept silent, curiosity growing. « It’s okay, you can tell me. I won’t get upset », I reassured her, even though I was already upset in the first place.

« Okay, here goes… my mother strongly discourages me to socialise with you, and one of her reasons is that she thinks you “don’t sound Lelondish enough” and that may “negatively influence the way I speak” and… And so, for the sake of our friendship, I’d like to help you improve on your Lelondish accent — not because I don’t like the way you currently speak — but because of her… »

« So, if I speak just like you, she may probably approve. And you actually don’t like my voice and want to help me change it. Now I get it », I finished her sentence.

Cadilla looked relieved. « Yeah… basically that. Please don’t be upset — wait what ? »,

« Well », I said, giving her a smile, and hiding my disappointment inside. « It’s nice of you to be honest with me. »

Eyes gazing across the river, she said, « Rodêne… I didn’t mean to — ». 

« No I don’t mind », I lied, « At least I know what you’re upset about. »

« Actually, that’s just one of the things I’m upset about ». 

« Oh », was all I could say.

The girl clutched one of chestnut braids that flowed down her shy face, and suddenly she whispered, « You know, I trust you a lot ». 

Now that caught me off guard, especially after just now’s awkward moment.

« Can I… can I tell you a secret ? », she asked in a sweet-sounding whisper.
« Err, yes of course… », I said, really surprised that Cadilla was willing to open her heart and share, without me encouraging her or anything.

« But you must promise never to tell this to anyone », she said in a soft voice.

I nodded. « Okay, I promise. »

« My family is in debt », she said gravely in a soft, low voice.

My first reaction was one of disbelief. The Fleurstrom family ? In debt ? « Really ? But… », I said.

« Yes, I know it doesn’t look like it from the outside. We’ve got a big house and a rich name, but the reality is, all our money is under Lord Tilton’s power. »

« And that is bad », I said in a low, serious voice.

« Yes, indeed. »

We did not say anything for a while. Cadilla stared downwards at my nice brown shoes while I admired the special reddish-brown colour of her long hair, and how interestingly it contrasted with the blue blouse she was wearing.

« How did you know about this ? », I asked, then realised that I should have said “when did you…”.

« Oh, I knew about this a long time ago, when I was a little girl », said Cadilla. « I was lying on my bed, trying to fall asleep, when I heard my parents arguing. I actually didn’t really care much about this until recently one night, when I heard something… disturbing. »

« Disturbing ? Oh. Okay. Such as…? »

She sighed. « Actually I shouldn’t have said that… »

I felt a little disappointed, but hey, pushing the sensitive girl would not be very wise. So I said, « It’s okay, maybe you can tell me some other time ».

The girl suddenly stood up, and walked closer to the river. From a distance I watched her stretching her hands upwards in the air gracefully. I stood up too, feeling stiff for having sat for such a long time, and walked over to her right. We stood side by side, eyes staring across the river, which flowed down from Mont Point, the highest point of Lelondell. I turned my head to the right and noticed how pointed and conical the mountain appeared.

« Have you ever wished to… explore the wilder parts of Lelondell, and other places we’ve never been to ? », asked Cadilla.

« Like the highest point of Lelondell, Mont Point ? », I said, knowing that it wouldn’t be achievable.

« Hmm, I was actually thinking of that forest in front of us, that magical-sounding Forest of Lilianity… or maybe that odd Loda Rock… »

« But it’s a forest », I said, imagining myself alone surrounded on all sides by trees of a huge gloomy dark forest with eerie greenish glows. « There could be lots of wild animals and it could be dangerous. »
“That’s why it simply remains an unachievable wish of mine, to explore it”, Cadilla said. She breathed an almost silent sigh.

“Well, you would need some sort of weapon if you are… if you were to go there”, I said, trying to hide the disinterest in my voice, with my fingers enclosed around the handle of the sword in my scabbard. Secretly, I was starting to feel more and more emotionally drained the longer she talked.

In a complaining tone she posed me a question: « Do you know that it is socially unacceptable, for a girl around here under the age of eighteen to carry a weapon… a weapon like your sword? »

« No… »

« Well, some people even consider it illegal. People around here except us girls to put on ridiculous outfits, apply lots of makeup, go to dance class, and dance and look “cute” in front of the king in those ridiculous outfits! »

The way Cadilla put it was somewhat humorous but I refrained from laughing and joking because it seemed to be a serious matter for her. By the way, this was the first time I heard her speak so sharply and roughly. I said in a slightly sarcastic manner, « I don’t think I even need to ask you how it is, the Beauty thing…? ».

« Beauty Program », she said.

A few tense seconds passed by, of me sensing so much negative energy from the girl who stood silently, crossing her arms. I asked, « Dancing in front of the king, what do you mean? »

« Oh, you haven’t heard? It’s going to be the king’s birthday this Saturday. »

« So…? ». I lengthened the word, waiting for her answer.

« Forget I brought it up », she said coldly. « I’m actually trying to forget about it. »

Several minutes later, after a serious of topics that failed to liven up our mood…

« So Rodène, you’ve heard about the latest rumour, haven’t you? »

I was leaning against a tree. I nodded. « Yeah, yeah, the one about the Dragon Conqueror and stuff. »

« I must say », began Cadilla, « that I’m relieved to hear about that. It breaks my heart to see all those dragons being slaughtered like that. The last raid was especially gruesome, I — I can’t take it. I believe that — »

At this, I furrowed my eyebrows. « What do you mean “it breaks your heart to see all those dragons being slaughtered like that”? They are the ones slaughtering us! »

Cadilla seemed to flinch by my sudden reaction. « I know. But you haven’t seen what I’ve seen. The villagers would catch the injured ones, one by one, into huge nets and behead them like some sort of sick game! It’s too much! »

« I don’t care! », I yelled with a huge sweeping motion of my arm, « These mindless creatures make us suffer, so we kill them! They should all be killed anyway. »

The girl took a step backward from me, her face mortified. « Bringing up this topic was a
mistake », she murmured quietly to herself, her hands, clutching the elegant fabric of her long purple skirt.

« Yes, it is a mistake. »

« I thought you at least believed in the theory that with the Dragon Queen or whatever dead, we might have less raids and less… deaths and sufferings. »

I frowned and crossed my arms. « I personally think it’s just a dumb rumour. »

She shook her head ever so slightly. « Then what about what Johann said? »

« Who? »

The girl seemed reluctant to continue further but she somehow still wanted to talk about this stupid topic. « You don’t remember? He was that foreign trader we met at the harbour last time… always with those tall exaggerated tales? »

« No I don’t remember. »

She sighed. « He said that he had been tasked by the chief of a certain tribe to find the drag— »

« I really don’t want to hear the word “dragon” again, okay?! », I found myself shouting out of control. « You know, I never even got to talk about what I wanted to talk about, about my problems »

The Fleurstrom girl froze, staring at me for a long time. She looked away. « You’re… », the blue-and-purple-dressed girl said weakly.

Huh? My heart suddenly felt funny… then crushed, as the girl bolted off and disappeared among the clumps of trees on the beach. My eyes couldn’t even catch where she went.
Under the late afternoon sun, I was walking on the one of the paved roads that separated the village and Nobleland. Feeling guilty and, to be honest, devastated, over what happened yesterday morning, I had decided to go to Cadilla’s house to talk with the more-than-upset girl.

Instead, I bumped into Jessyllka on the way, again. The girl from the noble Tilton family was also walking on the paved road, in the same lively, dance-like gait as that day.

« Hi, Rodène~! », she greeted with a sweet smile, hand waving shyly.

We stood facing each other. I forced myself to smile for the sake of politeness and greeted her in a friendly manner, « Hi, Jessyllka… ».

« Hmm, you don’t look very well. Are you okay? », she asked.

I was unable to hide my sadness from even a person whom I had always considered insensitive, it seemed. « Err, I have training tomorrow, so I’m not very happy… about it », I replied clumsily, using it as an excuse.

« Are you sure this is still about the training? », she asked, giving a disbelieving face. « By the looks of it, you seem worried about something… or someone. »

I sighed. « Okay, fine… It’s about Cadilla. Like you said, she’s really upset. »

« But what is she upset about? », she asked.

Surprised that Jessyllka seemed caring about a person who disliked her, I asked, casually leaning on one leg. « Err, but why do you even ask? I thought you didn’t like her? ».

« Oh, no, I have nothing against her », she replied sweetly and added, « It’s just that she’d be much prettier if she had a nice smile like everyone else during dance class ». 

I asked a question that I did not manage to ask Cadilla, « Say, err, how is your dance class? ». 

The blonde seemed amused as she smiled cheekily. « You really want to know what we girls are doing~? Okay, basically, it’s rather interesting. And tiring, mind you, as dancing is indeed a form of exercise… We get to try new outfits, lots of beauty products, spas, saunas, new hairstyles… [she tilted her head and bent her knee to draw attention to her hair]. Plus, as our room is on the… second floor of the Palace, we get to have a bird’s eye view of you boys down below, training so diligently. You should’ve seen Illy and Nillie, always peeping out of the window! »

She stressed the words “so diligently” so much that I wondered if she was teasing me. The thought of girls always watching the shirtless boys and I training in the Stadium made me a little
uncomfortable. « Wait wait wait, you mean you all have your dance class in the Palace ? », I asked.

« Yeah », she replied and added a teasing comment, « I hope you aren’t jealous of us girls~ ». Her tone was playful, waving up and down in a femininely cute manner. It made my heart feel funny.

I refrained from breaking into an embarrassed smile and asked, « I’m just curious. How does the interior of the Palace look like ? », knowing that one could not simply enter that building — not that I dared to.

« It’s magnificent ! », exclaimed Jessyllka, her green eyes gleaming. « It is an enormous multilevel building with such amazing architecture ! It has three floors, I think. Here’s the picture : after walking over the drawbridge and passing through the gatehouse and then the Palace doors, the girls and I find ourselves right in the middle of a grand hall, with quite a high ceiling. There are tall pillars everywhere, and two huge, beautifully curved stairs that lead up to the first floor, but we prefer to use the winding staircase… in the south-eastern tower of the castle, uh, Palace… to ensure that we do not get lost… or bump into the royals. {laugh} »

« So that’s what inside those two towers… »

« Yes, yes, exactly the same sentence I said when we first went into the Palace », she said dryly.

We gave a little chuckle, then I listened intently as she continued : « So, after climbing up the spiral staircase with its very wide steps, we exit it on the second floor and enter a long corridor which leads straight into the dance room. The room is intricately decorated, with a smooth marble floor of interesting patterns, and it’s always beautifully lit… there are many windows that run along the wall. If we peek out of one of the windows and look down, the Stadium is directly below ! »

« Wow…! », I exclaimed. « You’re really good at describing. You’ve painted a nice picture in my mind ! »

She giggled and covered her mouth with a shy hand. « Aww… Thanks for the compliment~ », she said sweetly, « but I’m no storyteller ».

We started walking side by side as we continued talking. I couldn’t help but notice how Jessyllka walked along gracefully with her very long light blue skirt. She did not have that interesting mix of gracefulness and slightly unpredictable and off-beat liveliness that was so characteristic of a happy Cadilla, however. In the distance I spied the Well of Eau.

Then I remembered something, and I asked her clumsily about it, « Err, earlier on, this day… I mean I remembered that yesterday, you were saying something, and I didn’t have the time as I was in a hurry, so… what was it again…? »

Jessyllka did not immediately answer. I looked at her face and spotted a fleeting smile that looked cute.


« Oh, nothing, just glad you brought it up. Here’s the thing : would you rather skip that training you dislike so much, tomorrow, for something more interesting ? By the way, it’s a pity you dislike it, I kind of love seeing my brother getting beaten up by your… superior fighting skills. »
Superior fighting skills? What was she doing, making me, a self-critical person, proud of myself? I frowned my eyebrows, saying, «Yes, of course» I would skip it, but how? I don’t think that strict Laurem would accept an excuse, like “I’m taking the day off”.

«Actually… he would», she said. «All you need is an excuse that sounds valid, and I have just the thing: Tell him that you have some dealings with the Tiltons, when in fact, it is accompanying me for lunch in the Palace.»

«Whoa, whoa, whoa whhaat?! But… that would be… how would that work anyway?»

I was going into unfamiliar territory here…!

Amused by my strong reaction, she covered her mouth with the back of her hand. «It’s quite simple really. If Laurem doesn’t believe you, let me do the talking», she said, giving a confident reply while I gave a doubtful and confused look.

«Let me explain», she said giving me one of her… err, flirtatious smiles, as soon as we reached the large well with its high roof, and its three buckets oddly positioned in a triangle. We stood nearby it and Jessyllka continued,

«I was already planning to go there to have an afternoon meal…»

«With your parents?», I asked, dreading the thought of meeting two of the scariest and richest nobles of Lelondell.

«No…». A corner of her lips raised slightly as if she was amused again. «I rarely go the Palace with my parents, unless it’s an event, like a dinner or a ballroom dance.»

That caught me by surprise. «Do they allow teenagers like us into the Palace just like that?»

«Why, yes…?», she said as if it was an obvious fact. «Everyone knows me, the daughter of the Tiltons. Of course we can enter the Palace.»

I decided to clarify further. «Err… we? Even me? My parents say that peasants like us are not allowed anywhere near the palace grounds… which makes sense as we don’t have good clothes, I mean, we’re unable to get dressed for that sort of thing, you know what I mean». I felt weird because I just refrained myself from complaining about the excessive class-conscious attitude of the rich nobles, to a rich girl who happened to be standing right in front of me.

Jessyllka seemed surprised. «Hmm… That’s weird, I have never heard of that before.» (Of course, she also never belonged to the common class). Understanding everything now, I had to decline this invitation. We weren’t supposed to be talking together, what about this?

«So, err, thank you for the offer, it’s… It would be interesting to see the Palace, but maybe some other time?», I said, despite my curiosity silently saying otherwise. It would be interesting to go out with you too, wait, what was I feeling right now??

The girl looked disappointed. «Aww… Rodène are you sure you don’t want to~?», she asked in a sweet voice. «By the way, you are already handsome in that outfit, with that awesome leather coat of yours so don’t worry about the dressing up part.»

I found it difficult to put my foot down and say a simple “no” because of how nice she was complimenting me. I decided to give another excuse: «Even if I do go, once someone finds out that I’m actually a poor peasant boy, penniless, from a dairy farm, they’ll kick me out.»
“Good point, even though I’m pretty sure they would not do that”, she said, amused by my pessimism. “But you’ve given me an idea… How about you pretend to be my attendant when you pass by those inquisitive soldiers, so that you’d feel less nervous?”

I couldn’t help but take a quick glance as her playful green eyes which darted to mine and quickly darted away again. For some reason, the idea felt appealing to me. I was no stranger to working under rich teenage girls, it seemed. First I used to be Cadilla’s part-time gardener, now this — but of course I still had to decline. I forced down a smile, and somehow felt like teasing her back and say, “Oh really? As if I would do that for free”.

With a sly look, she shook her head. “Why would I pay you to be a fake personal attendant who gets to savour the best of what Lelondish cuisine has to offer?”

“Wouldn’t?”

“You know that I would be paying for the meal, don’t you?”

My eyes widened. “Really?”, I asked, enjoying myself. It had been some time since Cadilla and I poke fun at each other and…

“Wait. I am supposed to be at Cadilla’s, right? I realised suddenly and quickly said to Jessyllka, “Um… I just realised that I had to be somewhere. Well, err, see you later…?” I turned away from facing the well and was about to leave when the girl walked right in front of me and said,

“So… have you made up your mind…?”

The curious and adventurous part of me wanted to say yes, the careful part of me was afraid of Cadilla overreacting, and still another part of me felt guilty for shouting at Cadilla (because she brought up a particular painful topic). And I was now, being on friendly terms with a person she disliked. In the end, what came out from all those conflicting feelings was… “I can go, but you must invite Cadilla along also.”

Okay, great. I probably shouldn’t have said that, and so obviously.

To my surprise, the wealthy girl didn’t seem too affected. “No problem. I knew you might want to bring along your friend. I know she doesn’t really like this type of thing, but still, I’ll try and ask her —”

“No, no I’ll ask her”, I lied frantically. “Err, so, bye”, I said, not waving goodbye as I began to walk away.

“See you later Rodène…”, she sang from behind.

…

I was walking slowly towards Cadilla’s home, the forest on the left, the Well of Eau behind me. I had set my thoughts to revolve around these: how to cheer Cadilla up (and apologise to her, again), and whether I should tell her about Jessyllka’s invitation, and whether my “I’ll ask Cadilla about it” was a justified lie or not a lie at all. However, I, err… was a little distracted by how beautiful both girls looked — in their own different way. But one thing was in common: they were both mysterious.

“Oh!… Hi Rodène”, said a slim long-haired brunette slightly shorter in height than the two tall girls in my head. Oh, it was Illy, oddly without her younger sister by her side. She passed by while I glanced at her face briefly.
"Hi...?" I replied.

"Bye Rodène", she said before she quickly passed by me. Her tone seemed to tell that something was going on. And she appeared to have just left Cadilla’s house, which I found weird because I had never once seen either of the two Tylens visiting her before.

With an uneasy feeling, I had arrived at the southern wing of the magnificent stone-and-wood house of the Fleurstroms, which was surrounded by the pretty colours of nature such as the clear blue sky overhead. I walked between the two rows of flowering bushes that adorned the wall of the house, deciding to go into the garden first before trying my luck at the front door. I went around the corner and turned right to find...

...Cadilla sitting in the garden set with a teacup in her hand. The girl dressed in blue and purple saw me and without a word she put down her cup and stood up, her face serious. With large strides she walked away from the elaborately designed chair and table set and went right towards me... and crossed her arms.

"Hi", I said stiffly, bracing for any emotional impact.

"Is it true?" she asked in a sharp tone.

"That...?"

"That you asked Jessyllka out?"

"Wait wait, what?"

She rolled her eyes and uncrossed her arms, saying, "Ugh, must I say it more clearly?". Her brown eyes stared straight into mine, she said, "Did you or did you not ask Jessyllka out on a date?"

"No!!!", I burst out in a bizarre mix of surprise and awkwardness. "I — how did you... get the idea?!".

"Then what is the meaning of thinking of having an over-the-top meal at the Palace... with her?", she asked in a cold-sounding tone.

"No, I never agreed — never really agreed to that."

"Oh?", she said nonchalantly, raising an eyebrow.

"Wait, how did you know anyway?", I asked, my eyes avoiding her powerful gaze.

"Doesn’t matter. But if you want to know... Illy told me."

_No wonder I felt something was off when I bumped into that girl just now._

"Said she saw you were laughing and happily talking with her, something you never do with me nowadays! In fact, you even shouted at me!".

Feeling a sharp pang of guilt, I attempted to clarify why I was here: "I was — actually I was just about to visit you to try again in cheering you up and um, apologise..."

"Sure you were", she said sarcastically.

"But — but I was! I wanted to tell you that I was having problems also... That was a
particularly painful topic, you know, and you brought it up », I said quickly and switched the topic, « Anyway, just now, along the way, Jessyllka bumped into me — »

« And you invited her for that Palace meal », she interrupted.

« Yes, she… n--no ! No no, she invited me ! And she was very persistent. »

« Oh ? ». She continued her nonchalant, unconvinced expression. « So this the truth : she’s just persistent as usual and Illy lied and you have got nothing to do with it… »

« Err, no… »

« Then what is it !? »

« I… err… »

Cadilla faced downwards and gave a sigh. « Rodène, when are you going to tell me the truth ? », the disappointed girl asked softly. « Since your little secret’s out already… »

« Okay fine, I’ll tell you everything », I said, hoping that doing so would calm her down.

« Good. »

Stammering, I continued, « As — as I told you already, I was on the way to your house when… when Jessyllka bumped into me, and… You see, I was very stressed out with my training… (training at the Stadium) and she sort of, you know, offered to help me skip tomorrow’s training session… by inviting me to the Palace ».

« And let me guess, you agreed », she said dryly.

« Yes », I said before realising I had said the wrong word, « N–no ! This is a misunderstanding ! »

« Oh yeah ? From the looks of it, someone is unable to keep his lies under a straight face. »

Horrified that my attempts to clarify that I was not lying had brought out the opposite result, I said, secretly feeling hurt inside, « You don’t… believe me ? ».

« Not until you stop with your stupid stories and tell me plainly what is going on with you two », she stated.

What did she mean by that ? Feeling pushed to a corner, I replied, « I was just being friendly — »

« With a heartless manipulator, also known as my enemy », she stated.

Her enemy. I took a moment to recover from hearing a heavy and extremely negative description of a seemingly nice person I didn’t really know. Deciding to give that person the benefit of the doubt, I said, « I know you don’t like her — for some reason — but calling her a manipulator… I think it’s a little too much », I made a timid gesture with my fingers to illustrate my point.

I took a step backwards as Cadilla step a step forwards, pointing her finger towards my chest. She raised her voice, saying, « Don’t you see ? She’s manipulating you ! ».

Feeling accused, I defended in a sharper tone, « What’s wrong with being on friendly terms
with a person who just happens to be your enemy or whatever ?

« She’s not your friend, and never will be », she said softly and coldly. I could feel her hate, mixed with a hint of something else.

A speck of doubt appeared and disappeared. Hard to believe that Cadilla was talking like this. Whatever, I was getting sick of her.

« Just because she’s your enemy doesn’t mean she must be my enemy too ! », I stated in a voice louder than I wanted to.

« So you want to shout ? Fine I’ll join you. »

No, no, no, no. I avoided her eyes. The darkness deep inside was starting to show itself again. My fingers clenched involuntarily before I forced myself to relax them.

The chestnut-braided girl looked away from my face, her eyes gazing off somewhere around her garden on my left. Then she sharply faced me again and yelled, « DO YOU WHY I CARE ? I’m trying to save you from being a victim, her victim, [soft whispering voice] like I was… ».

« And you never told me what happened. »

« I did ! »

« Not really », I stated bluntly.

She looked downwards and said softly, « I was about to tell you some other things I never got to tell you before but… »

« But… »

« I was about to trust you, you know, but then you… », she said, in a hurt tone.

That also made my heart hurt. « Fine », I said. « If Jessyllka is really so bad, then tell me why I should not consider her as a friend. And don’t just tell me what she did to you a long time ago, but also any recent incidents, if any. »

She appeared very uneasy. « I can’t. »

« Why not ? »

« It’s… complicated. »

I crossed my arms. « You see ? How am I supposed to help you if you always refrain from telling me enough ? You know, I’ve known you for so long, but it seems that you never tell me much about yourself and your struggles. I did most of the talking. You, you are always so… closed off ». I was starting to cry inside but the anger and frustration were too strong.

« Closed off ?! That’s what Jessyllka told you, didn’t she ? »

« … »

« Save it ». She turned around, her back facing me. « You’re probably right. I am closed off, the unpopular girl having trouble trusting people. Yes, say all what you want me. »

I stood in silence staring at the angry girl with her arms stiffly down by her sides.
« Go on, say that I have a temper, I am controlling, emotionally unavailable, whatever ! ». She was in a “negative surrender” mood, inviting me to attack her when she was already down. This was a feeling that I knew quite well.

« I never came here to argue with you » I said in a solemn restrained voice.

« Then get out of my garden ! »

« If that’s what you want », I said, before turning around and walking away.

—«Shift in POV»—

Cadilla was still standing still, long after Rodène left. Then she walked aimlessly, pacing around her garden. After a while, she stopped and stared for no reason at a white fence that enclosed a bed of her favourite Blue Oleanders.

“Then get out of my garden !”

“If that’s what you want.”

“Then get out of my garden !”

« If that’s what you want.»

“Then get out of my garden !”

The words still rang in her ears, and the sight of him actually doing that… they were still stinging her heart.

« ARGH !!! », she yelled out loud.

He was behaving so terrible nowadays, just hearing his name made her feel sick. Stupid Rodène.

Yes, she knew she was being too harsh with him, her only friend ; but she had finally and unfortunately fallen into one of her rare-but-severe tempers, and she had to cool down.

Cadilla looked down at her fists, which were clenched. She sighed, and tried to relax herself.

The thought of lying on bed and doing nothing for the rest of the day appealed to the girl. Deciding to go into the house using a different way, she walked along the back of the house passing by the colourful garden on her left. As she turned right around the corner of the house, a splendid view of Milky Cliffs and the sea distracted her for a moment. Her angry breathing eventually slowed down.

She stood close to the wooden fence that had been installed at the dangerous edge of the cliff, and she simply stood there for a long time, marvelling at the blue endless sea and how dangerously steep down the sharp, rocky cliffs went down.

How peaceful and chaotic at the same time.

She turned and walked through the narrow strip of grass-covered land that separated the north wing of the house and the Cliffs, passing by the large vegetable shed. Mr Kettlon waved to her in the distance. Not being in the mood to be friendly or polite, the girl ignored him and turned to the steps of the front porch and entered the house.
She would have taken the staircase on the left if it were not for her mother. Terrified of bumping into the strict lady, Cadilla hurried upwards using the other staircase and tried not to notice that broken window on the top floor, which constantly reminded her of her family’s financial situation. After walking along a few corridors, she finally entered her room and locked the door behind her, then immediately headed straight for the bed located against the wall. The exhausted girl collapsed and buried her face into a fluffy pillow, waiting for any emotions to pour themselves out.

Instead she heard a knock at her door. «**Oh come on !!!**», she groaned. The vexed girl was reluctant to let go of the pillow she was clutching in her hands. «**It better not be Mother…**», she said to herself. Grumbling, she got up and walked over. After unlocking and opening the door, she was greeted by a soft playful voice:

«**Hello, Cadilla~**»

{!!} A certain girl with green eyes was at the door, her wavy hair tied up in a classy crown braid.

«**You…**», Cadilla snarled, getting ready to lose herself in a full-blown rage.

Jessyllka smiled as if there was nothing going on at all, and in a casual and calm voice, she said: «No need to be alarmed, girl, I’ve just come here to say hello — well more than that, {laugh} actually, if you allow me. So, I trust that things are going well for you?»

Cadilla moved forwards and savagely grabbed the adolescent girl’s wrists, squeezing them. «**You are messing with me at the wrong time!**», she spat. «**Get out before I…**», she said, enjoying the flash of fear in Jessyllka’s green eyes, which quickly disappeared as a smile crept on the girl’s lips.

«Tsk, tsk, tsk», she said shaking her pretty head, «Always quick to rush into violence. You know, I never came here to waste my time on this type of thing…»

Not releasing her grip on her wrists, Cadilla sharply asked, «Then what do you want, huh? Rub salt into my wounds?»

«Oh, I wouldn’t dream of that», she said, seemingly unaffected by Cadilla’s stronger hands threatening to twist her delicate wrists. In fact, I simply wanted to be a good dance team leader, and treat you as part of the team. So I’m here to remind you that tomorrow is Saturday, which is the big evening.»

«Oh, I’m sure you’re here not just to tell me that.»

Still smiling in a manner as if she had a trick up her sleeve, Jessyllka said, «And need I remind you that you have no right to lay a finger on me, especially like this? Especially since I’ve done nothing wrong.»


«Now, kindly release your grip on me… unless… {smile} you want to know how it feels like to have every soul on Lelondell know some of your “littil” secrets.»

Cadilla let go of the dainty wrists of her ex-friend, and asked, «Are you threatening me?».

«Are you threatening me?», repeated Jessyllka. «And oh, has it been successful so far?», 
she asked mockingly.

Cadilla kept silent and looked elsewhere. This started a few weeks ago when she and the girls began dance class and beauty class. During class, Jessyllka was constantly making her look bad in front of the other girls and their dance instructor, who was none other than Jessyllka’s mother, Lady Tilton, a person who already had a negative impression of her. The whole thing resulted in everyone making fun of her, of her “tomboyish tendencies”, her “distinctive lack of style”, etc. One day, she could not take the bullying anymore and confronted the crafty Jessyllka with an empty threat — that was being laughed at now.

« *Ahhh* I see, you didn’t tell our dear Rodêne of how good of a team leader I was, didn’t you? », asked Jessyllka.

« I’m not going to answer that question », stated Cadilla bluntly, feeling defeated for not being able to tell Rodêne about how bad Jessyllka really was, because Jessyllka threatened to tell him of things… such as the hair dye incident. And the kissing incident. That was another part of her life that should never be brought up every again.

The blonde girl gave a giggle. « I hope you haven’t told him anything much… Remember! A single word to the talkative mouths of those two sisters and you know what happens neeexxt~! », she sang.

« *You wouldn’t dare…!* », snarled the chestnut-haired girl, fiddling her fingers in frustrated anger.

« Oh, anger simply doesn’t fit you, dearie. You’re too beautiful for that. »

Cadilla grumbled inwardly, wanting to give that manipulative girl a stinging slap in her superficially pretty soft-skinned face, but she knew she couldn’t.

« Speaking of threats, ouch! The way you threatened to twist my wrists reminded me of those *oh so good* memories of how you got my ankle twisted. Ah, fun times », said the blonde, appearing to enjoy the control she had over the situation.

« So this is what it’s about? Taking revenge over an accident *years* ago that wasn’t entirely my fault? »

« Oh, no, I never blamed you nor the horse. I blamed myself for being so naive, for being with a tomboyish girl like you. »

« THAT’S IT! *Get out! Now!* » yelled Cadilla and she was about to push the smirking Jessyllka out of the room…

When the blonde said with an index finger waving in the air, « Ah–ah–ah! Not a finger on me — both literally and figuratively! »

« Whatever! Just get out now. I can’t believe my parents let you in the house. »

« As you wish~! », she sang. The blonde turned around and skipped out to the corridor before saying, « And oh, by the way, do get that window fixed. Wait, I forget, it must be terribly hard given your family’s financial situation. No worries! My family and I are always willing to extend a generous hand. »

*A generous hand. Ha.* The Tiltons were already doing that, lending money to her family — under terms and conditions which were more unfair than strict. *But wait.* « How… did… you…
know about *that*? », asked Cadilla. Her heartbeat raised. Her thoughts ranged in her mind: *Did Lord Tilton tell his daughter about it or...? Did Rodène — Please don’t tell me Rodène...*

Jessyllka shrugged, « Oh, I don’t know. Maybe I figured it out myself or Rodène told me or something. It doesn’t matter, does it? »

« *No it doesn’t* », the chestnut-braided girl said through gritted teeth.

« Well! I’m afraid I must be going », said Jessyllka as she smoothed the creases and folds of her light blue skirt.

Cadilla, her arms crossed, kept her mouth in a silent frown.

« And don’t be too harsh on poor Rodène. After all, whatever he wants to do, it’s up to him really. Plus, now that you know what he really is, who knows? You might have second thoughts », said the wavy-haired blonde as she walked daintily away along the corridor and out of sight. « See you later, old friend... », went her voice in a sing-song ridiculing tone.

---«Shift in POV»---

I stood alone in the very heart of Lelondell, before the closed metallic entrance of the Stadium, a place I now associated with fear, hate, and violence, perseverance... and repetition.

I took off my helmet and placed it down onto my shield lying on the ground. My head tilted upwards and I admired the height of one of the two ancient-looking stone towers of the Palace. From my viewpoint, the tower seemed to reach into the Saturday afternoon sky. The clouds appeared frozen in time, but they were in fact moving ever so slightly. They resembled the pace of life: extremely slow one moment, flying by the next moment.

Ever since arriving here and finding out that the Stadium was closed and that Laurem and the others were nowhere to be seen, I had been hanging around the area for some time, with nothing in mind except to lose myself in my worries, or distract myself from them.

All that drama with Cadilla had managed to distract me from my greatest worry, until now. Laurem had told the boys and I that there would be soon a “Level 1 test” in April in which we “young dragon fighters would battle and survive against tiny terrors”. Sounds easy? Not if we had to survive five of those surprisingly dangerous pesky little clowns.

We had been given a list of the tests that we would have to undergo for the next coming months. I copied it down in my notebook and in my memory, to know what I had to prepare myself for:

Level 2 test - The weapon-less encounter with a ronkie

Level 3 test - Two-headeds, Double Trouble

Level 4 test - Dodging the spiky sadder’s venomous spikes

As for the final test, I could already imagine in my mind what would happen. I would have to be in the centre of the Stadium, alone, while the mysterious gate of stone on the curved wall, opened by the help of strange-looking levers, would reveal a large fire-coated common fire drake determined to eliminate me. Virtually every eye in Lelondell would be watching my every move of how I survived, or not.

After months of an absence of laughter, I managed to laugh to myself, not because of
something funny, but because the whole situation was so bad that it seemed downright unbelievable and even a little comical.

Thustle never stood a chance against me in sword-fighting, unless in a one-to-one fistfight. My main sword-fighting tactic? Speed and surprise before my stronger but slower and clumsier opponent could get me. Whether this would translate into an effective fighting strategy against ferocious fire-breathing dragons remained to be seen... Even with safety measures such as keeping soldiers around to ensure things would not get too ugly, I never felt fear being this strong ever in my life. Not even my deeply rooted aggressive anger could help me now...

« Ah ! Figured that you would be here… »

I turned around the meet the blonde Jessyllka who had said that.

« Hi… », I said weakly, looking at her face. I avoided her eyes, afraid of letting them “see” into the mess I was feeling inside.

« Aww, why the long face~? Shouldn’t you be celebrating because training’s been cancelled today? »

With my eyes on the smooth grey ground, I said, « Yeah, I know… But… ».

« But what? »

I sighed. « Never mind. »

She walked closer towards me and said in a breathy soft voice, « You can always tell me what’s troubling you, I’m here to help ».

I stood, frozen, unsure what to do as she stood beside me and spoke softly into my left ear, « And I did help you. You seemed to be needing a break, so I convinced Laurem to cancel the training today. It’s the king’s birthday anyway. »

« You… did that for me? », I asked, unable to tone down my surprise.

« Like I said, I’m here to help… », she said giving me a sweet smile before reaching into her satchel that I had just noticed was with her. « Oh, by the way, here’s something for you ». The girl took out a piece of parchment paper, unrolled it and handed it over to my nervous fingers.

Glancing around the diagrams drawn on it, I asked, « A… map? »

« Of the Palace of Argent. Pretty awesome, don’t you think? », she said, placing her satchel onto the ground.

I spend a moment to take a closer look at it, which basically was some sort of floor plan of the interior layout of the Palace, of its three floors and its roof. Why had Jessyllka given me this? If it was a tactic to persuade me to agree to her little lunch invitation, then she could probably stop trying.

« Yeah, yeah, quite interesting… », I said in a bored, nonchalant tone, even though I secretly found the map interesting.

« So…? », asked Jessyllka, her hand femininely grasping the elbow of her other arm.

« Honestly, I don’t think I can. I’m not in the mood to do anything today », I said, meaning
every word I said.

Her green eyes faced downwards, she looked upset. « Really…? Aww, I’ve been hoping for so long to spend some time… with you~ ». Her blonde head tilted downwards.

I felt guilty for turning down so many times a person who turned out to be quite nice, and I said, « Sorry, uh… ».

« I--I respect your decision », she said, stammering for the first time. « But please, you must promise me to come to our dance performance… at the Palace tonight. »

« Your dance performance is also at the Palace and it is tonight? Why didn’t you tell me about that? », I asked.

« Why yes, I assumed you knew…? Also, most probably the other boys will be going too. »

« Uh… okay fine. I’ll be there », I finally said, giving in.

« Pinkie promise? », she asked, suddenly becoming unusually childish and offering me a curled little finger of hers, instead of the traditional Lelondish handshake agreement of wrist-shaking.

« Yeah… », I said trying to hide my reluctance as my little finger interlocked with hers for a moment. We dropped our hands.

« Err… when should I be there? », I asked.

« Just after sunset », she replied and as if she had seen my nervousness she said, « Relaaxx, Rod. Just remember to dress smart (like now), and put on the best Lelondish accent you can possibly do! »

« Okay, err… I’ll try to relax and be myself », I said, then restated my sentence stressing on certain parts of a word and adding some melody to them, « Oh-kay. I will try to relax and be myself ».

« Now… I know you’re trying hard but that… that doesn’t sound very Lelondish at all… », she said with a laugh. « Here. Let me help you. »

Before I could say anything to her casual offer to help in my pronunciation, the girl looked me in the eyes and said in a soft tone, « Well, the first thing is… you need to know that we often say a certain lazy sound that is often unrelated to the spelling of the word ». The blonde was standing right in front of me. She leaned forward a little and continued, « Pay… close attention to my lips and my tongue, and try to imitate exactly how I enunciate the sounds, okay~? »

« Err… »

« Relaax, Rod. I won’t bite you. »

I kept silent, feeling her feminine energy radiating from her pretty, confident face directly in front of me. Too close for comfort.

« Now say this with me: uh »

« “Euh…”? What’s so special about this sound? ». 
In fact, I often heard my mom say this when she was pondering about something. It was basically like “err”. “Euh, should I cook this or that?”

« No, not that. “uh” »

« Oh that unstressed vowel sound. I already know that », I said.

« Aha, but I notice you don’t really know when to use it. It’s usually in words with two or more sounds, like “water” or … “attractive”. You see, the “er” sound in “water”, that’s the one. And yes, we don’t like our words to sound all like “I-want-to-drink-some-wa-ter”, we stress on certain parts of a word, to give it some rhythm. Melody. »

« Melody ? That is the thing I can’t get. Can’t imitate, I mean. »

« No worries, Rod. All you need to do right now is follow my words, one by one, and then eventually you can smoothly string them together in a sentence. »

I felt so nervous right now that I normally would have told her to stop calling me by a nickname I really disliked.

« Now look closely and say after me. Water. »

I stared closely at her moving lips, and said, « Water ». 

« No, not water. Wa-ter. Just make that unstressed sound for the second part of the word. »

« Woh-terr »

« Almost there ! », she sang. « We don’t roll the “r” at the end, though. »

« Woh-tuh »

« Yes, you got it ! »

I said it again, pleased at finally being able to more closely match the beautiful voices of Cadilla and Jessyllka. This new pronunciation, the way the “woht” part seemed to stop slightly before exploding into a “t” gave me a different image from the “water” I had always known : an image of a cute bubble-like droplet of water falling down then bursting into little tiny droplets that were too small to be seen with the naked eye.

« Yeah, you’re getting pretty good. But not all words all like that. Some longer ones are like this : “attractive” ». She blinked her eyes slowly while she said it.

« Uh-tract-tive », I repeated, wondering why she chose this word.

« See ? Your voice is beginning to match mine », said the blonde, who appeared proud of my achievement.

I forced down an embarrassed smile and said, « You think so ? »

« Yes. By the way, it’s think not “ttink” »

« Argh, not this again », I said, remembering how Cadilla tried to teach me once. « Cad — I mean — I tried doing it, but I couldn’t and still can’t. »

« Well, that’s about to change with your new teacher here~ »
« Err but — », I began unsurely, but was cut off by an index finger of hers suddenly appearing and lightly resting on my lips, silencing me.

« Uh-uh. No interrupting my lesson. »

I kept silent and obeyed, for some reason. My body was like a statue standing attentively. My heart was pumping. The fact that she was one year older than me didn’t help either.

Jessyllka removed her finger and gave me a sly smile. « Good… It’s all about the placement of your tongue. All right, say this: tinder. »

« Tin-duh. Tinder. »

« Good. Notice how your tongue touches the upper part of your mouth as you say both the “t” and the “d” sounds? ». She opened her mouth wider and I could see her pinkish wet tongue touching the roof of her mouth just behind her upper front teeth, shiny and glistening with saliva.

I followed and did the same, as she stared.

« Gosh, your teeth are long and sharp », she said in a soft voice, and seemed fascinated. « Open your mouth wider so that I can have a better view, please? »

I did what she asked, only realising later that this was not part of the lesson at all! I closed my mouth immediately and turned my face away slightly. My tongue went all over the insides of my mouth, feeling the pointed shapes of my sharp canine teeth. Yes, it was true that I had unusually long and pointed canine teeth, something which no one had never commented upon until now. I felt so embarrassed. Too embarrassed to say anything about it.

« Ahahah! », she laughed out loud. « I shouldn’t tease you so much and make you too uncomfortable to concentrate…! »

« Yeah… », I agreed awkwardly.

« Well, anyway… where was I? »

« “T” and “d” sounds…? »

« Aha. So you have no problems pronouncing those. But try saying “thunderstorm” with me. »

« Thunderstrom? »

« Okay, maybe a simpler word. Maybe just the word “those”. »

« Dhose. »

« Okay. It’s almost like a “d” sound, except your tongue should in a different position. Instead of behind your teeth, it must rest just below the bottom edge of the upper front teeth. Like this ». I stared at her tongue sliding forward to rest between her upper and lower teeth, but not too far out that it stuck out of her opened mouth. She breathed in and slowly exhaled air across her tongue, making a gentle “thhhhh” sound. « You see? I’m letting a tiny space between my tongue and my upper front teeth, so that air could flow through. Thin, thick, thoughts… Now you try. Try saying “thick”. »

I copied her. « Thhhhhick. Thick. Thick ». I get it! I finally get it! It was as if a completely new sound had been recognised by my brain. It was like saying “ssssss” like a snake, except the tongue
was placed much more to the front of the mouth.

« I knew you could do it~! », she exclaimed, pleased. « Now try saying “leather” »

« Lehh-thhhuh », I tried saying, refraining the urge to say it as “ladder”.

« Well, not quite it but almost there. You see, for this one, you do the same thing, but you use your voice as you say it. »

« My voice ? » I asked, confused.

« Yeah, like this ». Jessyllka’s fingers enclosed mine and without warning she pulled my right hand towards her neck. My fingers brushed against her soft skin. Shocked, I instinctively pulled my hand away but she didn’t let go. Her smooth fingers straightened my curled fingers and held them pressed against the warm skin below the dainty pointed chin of her heart-shaped face, and she continued her lesson as if it was nothing. « My throat vibrates when I say the “th” sound in together but not when I say thirst. Feel it ? »

I nodded stupidly, feeling intimidated but yet liking the feeling somehow.

« Good. Words like think, thought, thorn, both, loathe don’t make my throat vibrate when I say them, I mean the “th” sounds in them… But words like them, bother, weather, and bathing… You get it ? It’s like the difference between “s” and “z”. »

« Yes, yes, I tink I get it, I think I get it », I said hurriedly, as she allowed me to take back my hand. « So… togedher… together… and ttirst, thirst. »

Her lips tugged into a smile. « Cloth », she said, her emerald eyes staring straight into mine.

« Cloth », I repeated.

« Without. »

« Widdout… err… without »

« Now say this : I’d like to spend some time with you », she said with a smile.

« I would like to spend some thyme… some time with you », I repeated then realised what I had just said. « Hey ! », I said. I was so focused on the pronunciation that…

She was leaning in closer, her pinkish blush-coloured lips just inches away, anticipating mine to come into contact with them.

« Kiss me, Rodêne~ I want to forget about her… »,

…That I didn’t realise what she had been doing all along !

« Jessyl–Jessyllka !? », I said loudly in a mix of annoyance and excitement and shock and embarrassment. I took a few steps back.

After a brief moment of appearing startled, she leaned back and tilted her head in a somewhat similar manner like a certain friend of mine. « Is something wrong, Rod~? »

I looked away, confused at what to express next. I felt bad for raising my voice so abruptly. I felt angry for being manipulated into something I was not ready for. I felt grateful for her teaching and making me feel a little better for a while. Then I felt confused again.
« I... need to go... and get ready for the... for the event. Thank you for the lesson, I... 
{awkward smile} ». I pointed my finger in a random direction, and I took a few steps backwards, saying clumsily, « Have to go...! I... yep...! »

« Well, at least you’ve had a few tips from me on this whole accent thing », said Jessyllka before giving one her... err... smiles and singing, « Well, I must be going too... See you later, Rodène~ ». I watched as the princess-like girl gracefully walked away to the Triangle which was now bathed in bright sunshine.

... Finally, adopting an upper Lelondish-Norse accent was beginning to be more possible — but only in theory. In practice, speaking like *that* in front of Mom and Dad even for a while proved to be weird, forced, unnatural, and even pretentious… And I could now say a standalone word like “moth” but something as simple as “under the” in the middle of a sentence proved unbelievably impossible to pronounce. Maybe I should ask Jessyllka about this — maybe not. I couldn’t believe she tried to kiss me. And I couldn’t believe how I wasn’t overthinking this like I normally would do...

And what did she say, about “forgetting something”? What was she talking about?

Urgh, my mind felt as messy as that untidy room of mine at home.

... I had arrived at the royal path to the Palace. It was evening, and the sun had set around an hour ago. As usual, I was dressed in my only attire of dark brown trousers, dark blue tunic, and brown leather jacket, with my sword by my side, just in case, and with my hair combed neatly. I didn’t bring my helmet.

Walking on the road of neatly paved stones, I marvelled at how perspective made the road appear narrower and narrower until it met the Palace entrance which included a huge and tall gatehouse. I hurriedly passed by the mansion of the noble Tilton family and went ahead to the front of the huge royal castle which started to loom majestically before me. Unlike what the map’s simplified diagrams would suggest, the building had more than a bland square shape. Apart from the tall arched gatehouse which extended in an interesting manner from the main building, there were also some interesting design elements: a little indentation here and there on the grey stony walls, tall, narrow, intricately designed windows, and huge, elegant arches that adorned the upper front face of the royal castle, and of course, not forgetting the two powerful-looking towers accompanying its sides. There were two fierce-looking giant spear shooters on the ground near the foot of the towers. I passed by the stables or equestrian buildings that were located on both sides of the road just outside the castle, ignoring the horses that seemed to be perplexed by my presence.

Holding my breath and feeling nervous, I approached the soldiers who were standing guard on the drawbridge that had already been lowered by some complicated machinery above. Two vertical wall-like structures surrounded me left and right, meeting an arched ceiling above my head.

« HALT! », a soldier called out to me before I could take a step on the bridge-like metal platform. I thought I had done something wrong when he continued:

« State name and reason for entering the royal Palace! »

I meekly turned towards a soldier standing with an elaborately designed helmet that left only slits for the eyes, and said in my best imitation of the posh Lelondish accent, « I... My name is
Rodène… Statenson. I am… a friend of Jessyllka Tilton and Cadilla Fleurstrom. I wish to see the dance ». I probably overdid it a little, but I was surprised how much nicer my voice sounded. Less mixed, murky, or muddled.

« Ah yes, the boy whom Miss Jessyllka Tilton mentioned earlier. Enter. »

I gave him a stiff nod. Feeling a sense of accomplishment for passing the first hurdle of scary things I had never done before, I walked deeper in to find that the tunnel was getting more dimly lit and the walls on both sides suddenly became narrower and narrower in steep angles, stopping only at the closed double doors. I felt as if the tunnel was trying to squeeze me inside in a very persuasive manner. I casually looked up and was shocked to see the jagged teeth of a raised metal gate suspended above me in the dark! Disturbed, I hurried forward — to the double doors which contrasted so abruptly with their grand, polished oaken wooden design, and they were now being opened by two soldiers. A magnificent view revealed itself before my eyes as I walked in!

It was an enormous hall full of people. An imaginary curved row of pillars or columns arched inwards, meeting two beautiful, curved flights of stairs that led up to the first floor, a floor mysteriously blocked from view by an intricately designed wall with rows of tall and narrow windows, and rows of blind arches, or blind arcades.

I continued walking in, then looked upwards to see a gigantic dome overhead, with even more arches that resembled spider webs of curved stone. In the centre of the dome was suspended a great chandelier of a thousand candles. These candles, and many other candles of other chandeliers that were fixed at the arched upper part of the many pillars illuminated the entire place, giving the ballroom a lively bronze colour but at the same time, slightly gloomy shadows everywhere.

« Wow…! », I murmured to myself. I… felt so out of place, being the youngest among the lords and ladies, not one being anywhere near my age. Everyone else’s attire was so much fancier and elaborate than mine. I walked further inside and stood right in the middle of the open space, feeling lost, feeling unsure where to go, and where I was allowed to go. Now where were Jessyllka and Cadilla? What about the rest?

« I wish I… I wish I had brought the map that Jessyllka gave to me », I said quietly to myself, looking around uneasily at all the rich Viking nobles conversing with one another, some with goblets of traditional Viking mead or even exotic wine in their hands. Seriously, wine. How did they even manage to import all that? From Côeunette? I thought Cadilla said that trading with Côeunette was illegal? I scratched my head, puzzled. Ah never mind.

Anyway, I attempted to recall what the map said, but decided that it would not hurt to explore around — cautiously, while avoiding at all costs that floor where the throne room was. There were waiters who went around, each with a tray in his/her hands. I spied one going up the staircase on the left, which I decided to follow. I climbed up the steps of varying length and width in a light, slightly dignified manner, trailing my right hand along the cold-feeling railing of the staircase carved out of pure marble. For some reason, I felt like a foreign prince unknown to everyone.

Prince Rodène du royaume de Côeunette. Haha.

Ha…

When I reached the top floor, tables and chairs filled the view. My eyes glued to the column on the right with its design of horizontal grooves as I walked around it. Not far off, there was a very large, long table which I suddenly remembered that on the map, it was the “royal banquet table”! In the midst of people seated on the dark wooden table I spied an elderly man with shoulder-length grey hair and wavy moustache, with the Lelandish crown of pure gold on his head… a gold goblet.
in his hand… It was King Handeron!

« I — I’m not prepared for… this », I whispered to myself. Then the king’s gaze suddenly went over to where I was standing, and he stared right through (or at) me! I panickedly gave a quick bow not caring whether I had been seen or not, then turned around and walked in the other direction, passing by several round tables and never stopping until I reached a corner where the spiral staircase of the tower was on my right.

I looked out a tall and narrow window, breathing heavily, trying to calm myself.

This was only the first floor, but the view was already quite interesting. The straight paved road that led out of the Palace could easily be seen. The high arch structure of the gatehouse-entrance partially blocked the view on the left, though. My eyes searched around the landscape of tiny village houses and trees, as I wondered if my parents’ barn could be seen from here…

« Rodène, what are you doing here?! » went Cadilla’s voice from behind me.

I turned around and was immediately taken aback — mostly negatively — by how different Cadilla looked like. The was the first time I saw her was wearing makeup. Not that I had a problem with makeup — but she was simply wearing too much of it. Her naturally pink lips were now painted bright blood red, her cute brown eyelashes and soft eyebrows were now overly enhanced in colour, and what was she wearing…?

« Err… why…? Are ? You…? » was all I could say to the barefoot girl in a light purple breast band and a long dark purple skirt with huge slits that made it look more like a loincloth than a skirt.

I felt confused because despite my initial reaction, my stomach felt like there was some butterflies floating around, the more I stared at her long elegant bare legs of the girl.

« You haven’t answered my first question », the chestnut-braided damsel said in an annoyed tone, probably at the way I had been staring all around her body.

I shook my head and said hurriedly, « AH! Sorry! You see, err, Jessyllka invited me here. »

« What ?! » she exclaimed in disbelief with a hint of anger.

« Yeah… err… and honestly, I feel very nervous… Where are all the boys ? »

« What boys ? What do you mean ? », she asked. I stole a glance at her sharply defined brown eyebrows and to her braids flowing down to her nearly bare chest. Very femininely shaped. Ooo…!

There was it again. The funny sensations deep within my chest. Stop it, stop it!

« I… err… Jessyllka told me… they would come… be coming…? », I replied, my thoughts and feelings so jumbled up me sentence got scrambled up.

« They’re not here. Obviously, you’ve been played for a fool by her, and I’ve warned you », she said then looked elsewhere and grumbled to herself, « Of all…! I can’t believe her… »

Ouch. She was still very angry with me… angry with both Jessyllka and I. « But… are you saying I shouldn’t be here at all ? », I asked.

She shook her head as if she was getting tired of me and said, « Don’t you know that after the dance, there will be the ceremony of celebrating the king’s birthday? It involves cutting off a tiny terror’s head, traditionally done by the youngest male in the Palace who knew how to use a sword… which now happens to be you. »
« W--WHAT ? ». I shook my head vigorously. Confused. Horrified. I was completely unprepared for that. « So Jessyllka — »

« Is trying to put you to some sort of test. Or whatever the fucking Hel she’s planning. »

I couldn’t believe it. Jessyllka had set me up to something I was not prepared for. Why, was she trying to see if I could be tough enough to do that? And seriously, I had never heard Cadilla speak like this before, especially two Norse swear words in one go, as strong as “Hel” and… that word that only made those funny feelings in my belly go crazier…

I needed to get out of here.

« And you can stop staring at my ridiculous outfit. »

I averted my eyes away from her and looked to my right where I could see a stone railing that lined the edge of this floor. (If I went and leaned over the railing, I could see the ground floor below). « Err… it’s for the dance performance, right? », I said, staring at one of the solid-looking pillars that supported another floor above us.

« Yes. And just to let you know I am forced to wear this! »

No wonder she was so upset recently. And I thought the training at the Stadium was forced and the shirtless push-ups were demeaning to me…

« Well, now go and find your new girlfriend and see whether what I’ve said is true », said Cadilla before turning around.

« Wait », I said. « Wait what?!?!? She’s not…! She’s not my — »

« Whatever. I’ve tried to warn you », she said without looking behind and she walked away.

Just then, a loud voice announced from the ground floor, « Lords and ladies, your attention please! In a moment we will soon begin a dance performance by some of the most beautiful damsels of our island kingdom! I repeat, in a moment[…] »

I walked over to the nearest arch made of two pillars and a stone railing, and I leaned over to look down below. There was a circle of well-dressed nobles congregating around the centre of the ballroom, and the brilliant chandelier of a thousand candles suspended directly above. I became nervous and decided that it maybe would be best to skip this entire thing and go home — like an unprepared coward.

« Now how should I go down and go out? », I asked myself.

The winding staircase! Which was just right behind me…

« […]formance by some of the most beauti[…] »

I turned around and approached the entrance of one of the two towers of the royal building. There was a cracked nameplate above which stated:

Winding stairway

South-east wing

I stepped into the shady opening and began to descend the pie-shaped steps that spiralled
downwards in a sunwise direction. The interior of the tower was relatively devoid of design; everything was grey and gloomy. The central column was an undecorated, cylindrical pole of stone. There were lamps attached on the walls and a few extremely narrow window slits as I went down and down, partially hearing the announcement.

« [...] we have Jessyllka Tilton, the [...] Illy [...] Fleurstrom [...] »

The spiralling stairway finally opened on the right, and I stepped out, to find myself in a dimly lit area of a high ceiling supported by beautiful columns of carved stone. With cautious footsteps I went to hide behind a column in front and I looked around timidly. Unfortunately for me, there were people blocking the doors of the Palace, and so it seemed like I was stranded here.

« [...]Let the dance performance commence! »

Suddenly I heard fast-paced medieval music being played and I saw a group of four girls walking to the middle whom I recognised as Illy, Nillie, and of course, Cadilla and Jessyllka. Dressed in only a breast band and a long skirt with huge slits that exposed a lot of the thighs, each of them stood at each corner of an imaginary square and they immediately began to dance in unison. Jessyllka was dressed in light and dark blue and she had her long, wavy, blonde hair down. Her face seemed full of life as she slenderly and confidently made all those... quite sensual dance moves that seemed second nature to her. Illy and Nillie, dressed in red and green, appeared to be more in sync with each other than with the rest.

The girls put their arms in the air, fingertips touching, and they spun around in a circle. That was when I took a good look at Cadilla’s face, its natural beauty artificially enhanced, destroyed further by an unhappy appearance. I always found the girl graceful, but not in this manner. It was obvious that she was reluctantly following what the others were doing.

Needless to say, I was too shocked to react, other than to stare at them as the dance continued. I felt I was not ready to see this, not ready to see four girls who were normally dressed modestly... like this. Admittedly, they were beautiful, perhaps too beautiful, being living pieces of art. On the other hand, my heart told me that something might be terribly wrong. Whatever shame I had been experiencing with the harsh physical training was little compared to this. Unfair was another word that popped into my mind, followed by beautiful objects on display. I looked around and saw some of the noblemen, some leering, some grinning creepily. Beautiful objects on display for male pleasure...? What about the things Dad and Mom would often tell me?

I became confused and asked myself, Is this wrong, or is it a totally normal thing that I should just get used to, like what I’m sure Jessyllka would say? In any case, the unwilling Cadilla should not have been forced into this. Our friendship was experiencing a thunderstorm nowadays — and that was putting it lightly — but I could not help but feel sorry for her.

Having enough, with an unforgettable image of cute, scantily dressed girls burned in my mind, I turned around and walked away. Since I could not exit through the front doors I decided to find a different way. And so, I walked quickly towards the back to the royal castle, passing by pillar after pillar and ignoring the many paintings of Leldonish princes and kings hanging on the walls, until I reached a place with three different passageways. I went towards the left and saw two nameplates on the wall:

To the Stadium

South-east wing of the Palace of Argent

No, not that one. I turned around and decided to take the passageway on the right, feeling that it
was the right way. Now this was one long and narrow passageway which made me more and more nervous the further I went.

« Halt ! Where are you going ? », asked a soldier before I could pass by him.

« I… err… lost my way. I would like to exit… the Palace », I replied.

« Go until the end of this passageway and enter the passageway that will lead you into the Secret Hall. From there, it should be easy to go out. »

« Thank you », I said, imitating Cadilla’s polite voice.

« At your service. »

I walked away, still feeling nervous, until I reached a passageway with two nameplates :

To the Hink n’ Jelind Inn in the Secret Hall

North-west wing of the Palace of Argent

The arched passageway opened into a drastic change of scenery. I was now on wooden planks of the first-floor landing of the inn. (Yes, oddly enough, this was an inn being inside a hall.) Now instead of the stone of the royals, everything seemed to be made up of the wood of the commoners. I descended the dark wooden stairs and felt a little lost. My eyes scanned the tavern’s reddish-brown, candlelit interior for a door that would lead me out. Suddenly I spied Mr Whean somewhere in the room full of rough-looking Vikings laughing loudly over enormous mugs of mead. The plump and stout neighbour who always helped in my parents’ barn was completely drunk, along with Mr Stonberg ! Mead and vomit spilled all over their beards… it was a real eyesore.

Having seen shocks for this evening, I spied a door and it thankfully was the exit of the Secret Hall.

―――

With that single trip to the Palace, I felt like I had seen the world of Lelondell. Even with my limited point of view, I felt like I had completed the image of the isle of Lelondell in my mind — and it was not a beautiful one.

―――

Author’s note :

✶ You might want to refer to Chapter 3 - Fiery for a list of common dragons are how they are called in Lelondell.
The scene where Jessyllka teaches Rodène plays around with the differences of English accents to show the differences of the fictional Norse accents in the story.

Lelondells like Cadilla and Jessyllka have non-rhotic (non « r » sounds) « British » accents.

Okay, when I first wrote out this chapter (which was a long time ago), I was completely unaware of a dating service called Tinder. I simply picked a random word that Jessyllka would pick in her sly seduction game. The allusion was completely unintentional, I promise you. Needless to say, I had a good laugh reading back my old writings.

Map of the Palace of Argent

A **blind arch** is an arch found on the wall of a building which has been **infilled** with solid construction so it cannot serve as a passageway, **door**, or **window**. Some were built to serve no other purpose other than being intentional stylistic elements.

A **blind arcade** is an arcade that is composed of a **series of arches** that has no actual openings and that is applied to the surface of a wall as a decorative element.

I know **panically** is not a very common word, so much so that it seems incorrect, but I prefer to use it occasionally instead of **in panic**, or **panic-stricken**.

**sunwise** = clockwise

**antisunwise** = anticlockwise

Most of Rodène’s mispronunciations, especially of words with the « th » sounds, are not indicated in the text for aesthetic reasons.

By now you should already be aware of how unreliable and biased Rodène’s point-of-view really is.
Apologize on Harp by Anya Saens on YouTube is an excellent harp cover on the song Apologise by One Republic.

Here I was again, back in the four corners of my room, late at night or maybe early in the morning before dawn. I was sitting at my desk, drumming my fingers, lazily leaning my face onto the back of my hand on the wooden surface, as I wondered what had happened to Cadilla and I, and why every word we said only made our friendship worse. We tear ourselves apart even though we actually want to help each other... We feel like arguing each time we meet even though we don’t want to... I felt guilty about everything, especially after understanding why the girl was so stressed out.

I casually picked up my quill. Maybe I should write her an honest, heartfelt letter, to express all my complicated and conflicting feelings which would be too clumsy in speech. After spending a long time writing and rewriting a few drafts, this was the final version:

— Rodêne Statenson

Dear Cadilla,

Life has been hard on both of us lately, and it’s making us stressed and emotionally vulnerable. I thought I understood what you have been going through, but it turns out that I do not. I truly regret leaving you in an emotional state that day. It is not because I did not care about your feelings, but because I wanted to but was unable to, and perhaps because I do not know you enough. I was too emotionally unstable too, worrying about the dragon fighting tests which might be... fatal. Speaking of dragons, I still do not understand your view on them, but you know very well that they have been negatively affecting me from an early age.

Maybe everything you say about Jessyllka is true, as you knew her more than I do, and judging by how much you seem to want to protect me from her. Maybe she is an untrustworthy person. I appreciate your concern, but I wish to clarify that I still see no reason to stop being friendly with her on a surface level, at least for now. I really do not want to make an enemy out of her just because I need to be wary of her. In any case, please remember that you are still my best friend.

Whatever hurtful thing I said because of my lack of understanding I do not really mean it. I know, words do not erase the pain, but I am still going to say sorry. I think the problem is that we do not understand each other enough. So, please, can we put down the swords and shields, understand each other better, and help each other instead?

— Rodêne Statenson
I read and re-read the letter on the desk again and again before the two candles gave out their last light and sleep eventually overcame me.

—○—

The next day…

I stood beside the Fleurstroms’ garden set. In my nervous hands was my letter of apology, cut neatly into a rectangle and rolled up into a scroll. I looked up, and stared for a long time at the opened window of Cadilla’s room. The wall was painted with gentle shadows by the morning sun behind the house.

Deciding that handing the letter over to her directly would be too terrifying and awkward, I proceeded to turn the rectangular piece of parchment paper into a flying dart or cone. (Yes, I discovered, during one of my happy childhood days of playing alone, that I could fold layers upon layers on the short edge of a piece of parchment paper so that it resembled an arrow or a dart, and when I threw it, it would sail gracefully through the air. I loved it.)

With the finished arrow-like paper craft in my hand, I aimed at her window and threw it. Luckily, it flew beautifully, making an imaginary arch in the air as it went out of sight and into her room.

I turned around and began waiting, leaning against the wall and filling my eyes with the wonderful colours of her garden. The minutes passed by, and I grew more and more anxious.

What if it bounced off and landed somewhere else?

Arhhhh…! I screamed inwardly, fingers clawing into my short hair.

I began walking around aimlessly in circles, hands clutched together behind my back.

What if she never sees it? Maybe I should’ve given it to her directly… Is she even reading it now?

Then I spied something lying on the dark brown earth. I walked closer and bent down. « What’s this? », I said, with a sudden thought that it could be the letter that I somehow had dropped by accident. No what am I thinking? It doesn’t make sense.

But it was indeed paper. My frantic fingers unfolded the little ball of crumpled material and I stood in silence at what I saw.

No, it can’t be.

It can’t be.

It’s my letter.

Unfolded.

Now in a crumpled state.

Cadilla must had unfolded my flying dart letter, read it, crumpled it and thrown it out of the window when I was not looking.

—○—
For some reason, I never cried or went into a rage or anything. I simply did not react. Why? Maybe because I was in denial, that this could even happen. The only person that I trusted in my life had decided that I was unforgivable. The girl that saved my life had now virtually crumpled it like a pathetic piece of paper that no longer served its function and was now deemed worthless.

For nights and days, all that was in my mind were thoughts that progressively became more and more negative to the point where I yelled to myself:

« STOP THINKING ! STOP THINKING ! »

But I would think anyway, especially when I was behind closed doors. Alone with myself, with my destructive thoughts…

Am I really so bad, that I am deemed unlikeable and unforgivable by almost everyone? Have I really hurt the sensitive Cadilla so much? Does Jessyllka has a part in this in which she “complicated me”, or she is actually a nice person, who is perhaps easier to handle than that complicated Fleurstrom girl, who turns out to be as complicated as me?

All of these questions I could not answer, except possibly the last one. I had some suspicions that Jessyllka had something to do with all of this. And I had a simple plan. Instead of confronting Jessyllka directly about it, I would catch Illy near her house one day and interrogate her — thoroughly.

…

« Stay out of this, Nillie. I wish to speak to her alone », I said in a soft but stern voice to the younger girl of the two and turned to face the brunette in front of me again, the wall of her house behind her. The girl with her two braids in each side backed away silently and quickly left.

« I never knew you were capable of such boldness, Rodeen… », began Illy.

I held up my palm and glared into her eyes, effectively shutting her up. « Do not call me Rodeen. »

« So, no nicknames? Not even Roddy? Or Rod? »

« Don’t try to change the subject », I said, before sniffing away her heavy perfume which contrasted against the stench of raw fish that enveloped the area. « I am asking you a question: Do you have any dealings with Jessyllka? »

« Dealings? », she said. I thought I saw a flicker of surprise in her eyes, but it disappeared when she said nonchalantly, shrugging her shoulders, « Oh, I only told Cadilla what I saw ».

« Inaccurate, and only part of the story », I stated and crossed my arms.

« Hey, I can’t help but tell what I see! »

« Gossiper », I said with disdain, enjoying the sight of the smug Illy getting more and more uncomfortable.

« So, can I go now? », she asked impatiently.

« No, I have another question for you. »

She opened her mouth as if to say, “Another one, I can’t believe it!”. 
« I want to know what happened between Jessyllka and Cadilla that made them dislike each other so much. »

« Do I look like I know what happened? », she asked, but I knew she was pretending.

I sighed. « You’re one of the biggest gossipers in town, surely you know certain things that I don’t », I said in a monotone.

Her lips gave a faint smile which got hidden immediately. « I… uh… why should I help you? », asked Illy.

I gave her one of my wicked, sly smiles that I had been practicing in front of the mirror, and said: « You should, because this is the second time you have made me upset, and you don’t want to know what will happen if you do it again… the third time. »

« Y—you’re threatening me, aren’t you? », she asked, her eyes widening pitifully as if she was being accused of something she was innocent of.

« Depends on whether you consider spreading sensitive info about other people a threat to their lives », I stated, feeling a strange sense of satisfaction “firing” at people that I do not like.

Struggling to maintain her smug composure she said, « I get it why you’re not happy with me, because of Cadilla, but have I ever made you upset you the “first time”? »

« Hmph, you have no idea », I scoffed before firing a line of angry words that progressively grew louder and louder: « You told everyone that I had foreign blood which Thustle then knew about which he bullied me about… to the point where my leg got injured in the FIERCEST WINTER!! »

The brunette gave a frightened gasp and took a step back. She kept silent for a while avoiding my stern gaze before saying timidly, « B–but that was years ago… »

« Which has created long-term problems for me. »

« You mean your leg? »

« NO! », I yelled before switching abruptly to a softer voice, « So… tell me, did Jessyllka ask you to spy on me and Cadilla? »

My plan worked. Seemingly wrecked with guilt, the girl confessed, « Fine, you got me. Jessyllka promised me lots of things if I helped in… her plans. So, all I did was to report to her what you and Cadilla have been up, that’s all. I--I didn’t really know what I was doing… so I err… »

Finally someone was stammering so much other than me. « Sure you knew what you were doing », I cut her off. « Now, tell me why does Jessyllka dislike Cadilla so much? »

« Isn’t it obvious? She’s sort of, let’s say, jealous. »

I already knew that, but I acknowledged, nonetheless.

« And sad. »

This got me by surprise. « Sad? Why sad? Does she have anything to be sad about? »
Illy looked extremely uncomfortable. « I don’t know », she said in a small voice, her hand nervously stroking her dark brown hair.

« Anyway, do you know anything more about them being friends last time, then suddenly becoming enemies ? »

« I… Why don’t you ask the Fleurstrom girl herself ? »

I breathed out a quick impatient sigh. « I tried and it didn’t work. »

The teenage girl looked down, saying softly to herself, « Oh boy, Jessyllka’s going to kill me. So don’t tell her that I’m telling you. »

« Okay fine. She won’t know. »

« You won’t tell on me ? », she asked, putting up an unnatural pleading face.

« I won’t ». Secretly in my mind, I was saving this as something to have against the gossiping girls, just in case. Great, why was I suddenly interested in manipulating people ?

She gave a long sigh. « Okay, so basically, they were good friends, the best of friends, in fact. However, one day, Cadilla, being that adventurous girl she has always been, convinced Jessyllka to ride on a horse. Jessyllka broke her ankle and has never forgave her since, even after Cadilla pleaded for years… And then it I mean, I… err… can’t really remember the details. It was a long time ago ; heck, I was playing with dolls during that time ! Okay, maybe not, but you get the point. »

I kept silent while she asked in an impatient tone :

« So, got your answer ? »

« There’s still something missing », I said. « What about the recent incident ? The one with the dance and other things ? »

She sighed and said, « How many questions are you going to pull out of me ? »

I thought in silence for a while before saying, « I think this is the last question. »

She seemed relieved and proceeded to answer, « Look, I don’t pretend to know Jessyllka’s mind, but all I know is that she was trying all sorts of ways to force Cadilla into one of her, err… occasional tempers… and the dance was one great opportunity. And for your info, I didn’t have any part in this. I didn’t even spy on you, okay ? I mean, looking down from the top floor to you hot boys training in the Stadium doesn’t count, right ? »

With her last sentence, I realised there were some similarities to Jessyllka’s way of speaking to me, and now, I found it stupid and even a little repulsive. « Okay fine, you’ve answered all my questions. »

« So can I go now ? »

« Um… Wait », I said.

« Ugh, what now ? », said the brunette.

« Do you think the rumour about the so-called Dragon Conqueror — ? »
« What about it ? »

I crossed my arms tightly. « I hate it when people cut off what I’m saying midsentence. »

« Geez, lighten up a bit, Roddy », said Illy, then seeing my frown, she sheepishly corrected herself, « Rodène ». « So is it true or not ? », I asked.

« Uh, yeah », she replied somewhat too nonchalantly. « In fact, the royals are planning to send out ships in search of the dragon’s nest. »

« Really ? », I said, suddenly realising that I might have been too sceptical.

« And there are some who even say this particular Viking tribe had found a way to train dragons. »

I blinked my eyes. « Train dragons ? Impossible ! How can one train a dragon ? Who would want to, anyway ? »

Illy shrugged her shoulders. « By the way », she said, « What’s with that weird behaviour that day when you were listening to my conversation with the two ladies and that tall knight ? »

I chose to not even acknowledged her question. « Bye. »

« Oh. Bye. Uh, don’t tell Jessyllka that I’ve told you so many things », she said before I turned my back on the girl and started to walk away.

« Okay », I agreed stiffly as I walked, facing to the direction of home. But suddenly I turned back to look at her and happened to catch her sticking out her tongue at me. She quickly looked away and pretended to admire the Palace towers in the distance across the Triangle.

« Yes go ahead and stick your tongue out like a loser », I said, letting out one last harsh sentence before I strode off.

« Rodène, why must you be so mean ? »

I turned back to her, wanted to retaliate with a sharp remark with an accusatory finger, but I stopped myself. I looked downward towards the ground. « Everybody’s been mean to me », I whispered softly and quickly turned around and removed myself from the scene.

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The satisfactory feeling of getting back at people who had wronged me did not last as long as I thought… and I was back to lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling, on another sleepless night in a dark room illuminated with only a single candlestick on my desk. Knowing what happened was not enough to solve the problem with Cadilla, if it could ever be solved at all.

« Maybe I should tell Mom a few things », I muttered to myself before saying, « No. She’s hiding something from me — and Dad also — and why should I share things with people who hide things from me ? »

And so, I remained in my unhappiness, like a real loser. My mind wandered over to a certain thing that Dad had refrained from telling me all these years. A spike of anger rose in my chest. « Not fair. Not fair », I said. A memory flashed into my mind, when I tried to create homemade hair
ties as a present for Cadilla:

—‹‹Flashback››—

I bent down under the table to find a little chest. My mother somehow managed to keep things, cramped as there were, organised. And then I found another larger chest beside that little one. Hmm… my father had said one time that the large chest belonged to him “a long long time ago”. But he somehow did not like me touching it, for some reason. Resisting my thoughts of curiosity, I opened the smaller chest and found all sorts of — neatly arranged — sewing stuff. I sort of snatched the sewing box, and went back quickly and silently into my room.

—‹‹End of Flashback››—

« Now I’m feeling like doing it… cracking open that chest », I said and looked into the mirror. A smile formed itself on my face. « Or something crazier. ». I felt unhappy enough that I would even go out of my play-it-safe character to pursue something as crazy as going behind my strict father’s back by prying into his most personal stuff. Whatever. I have a right to know, I justified myself.

My bedroom door creaked opened as I pushed it cautiously, and I slipped into the darkness of the living room, which at this hour, felt surreal. I felt surreal, like the only one alive in this world currently in slumber. Someone on a mini-adventure…

It was probably past midnight and Mom and Dad were sleeping in their bedroom. With quick and silent footsteps, I felt my way around to the dining table then grumbled in my mind because I was dumb enough to forget to bring my candlestick. Obviously I couldn’t see anything.

Within moments, I was back from my room with the lit candlestick, the candlewick nicely trimmed so that the flame burned beautifully while making creepy shadows everywhere. I bent down, and felt relieved to see that the large chest underneath the table was still there. A finger of mine brushed the curved lid of the chest, felt its dusty surface, then withdrew. Oh. I had forgotten to make sure that my parents were indeed sleeping. So I got up and walked between the narrow space between the table and the wall, taking care not to make any noise or clumsily topple something over or accidentally burn something with the candle flame, and I pressed my left ear against the wooden door. There was nothing but the gentle snoring of my dad’s.

I went back to the dining table and held up the candlestick close to the chest below, then noticed that it was locked. Of course it was locked ! How could I have been so stupid ? For a long time I stayed there crouching, pondering over ideas that progressively got worse. Carry the chest to the smithy and break the lock open without making too much noise ? Pick the lock, following instructions from a “how to pick a lock” book I would have to borrow from the Library ? Bring the whole chest to the village locksmith and lie that I had lost the key ? Insert glue into the keyhole so that the next time Dad unlocked it he would leave the key, thinking that it was simply jammed ?

There was a single sturdy-looking padlock which passed through a staple (metal loop) that was starting to rust. Then I noticed that the only thing passing over the staple and keeping everything fastened together was a rusty hasp. The hinge part of the hasp looked especially rusty, and I wondered if it would be easy to detach the weak-looking hinged piece of metal from the wooden surface of the chest with a metal tool, without unlocking the padlock at all…

COMPLETE DARKNESS struck everything out of a sudden and my heart started beating with as much fright as if I had been caught by Dad ! All that was left was the stench of soot and burnt animal fat that seemed to become much stronger.
"I should’ve lighted more than one candle", I said angrily to myself before realising that I should have been more silent. *Now I have to start another fire!* I grumbled silently in my mind. Not willing to use my pocket-sized tinderbox in my room and make the whole place so smoky again, I reluctantly decided that going out all the way to the smithy and grabbing an oil lamp with only the moonlight to shine my path would not be too creepy. Never mind, I would be having my scabbard and sword by my side.

After some time, I came back with a tall metal lantern instead of an oil lamp, and it brilliantly illuminated everything. I also took the opportunity to bring back a box of tools and a knife. And it had been more than creepy all right, but surprisingly… peaceful. I made a mental note to go out again later and take a quick walk around the barn with that lantern before starting that boring but necessary activity called sleep.

I put down the lantern onto Dad’s armchair, and went to the chest, again. I decided to carry it into my room for my… investigation. Lifting it up was not as difficult as I thought because it was surprisingly really light, considering its height was around one foot tall with the width making a foot and a half. I placed it down in the middle of my room and took the lantern. Anticipation and impatience mounting, I went back and closed the door and locked it with the newly installed bolt. Then I walked and knelt in front of the chest, and immediately began prying the metal hasp from the chest’s wooden surface with a knife, while trying to be as quiet as possible.

After a few tries of using the knife and a piece of wood as a lever, the hasp came off! « Ha! », I said to myself and placed down the knife. Okay, maybe I should be quieter now.

With both hands I carefully lifted the lid, and then I held the lantern above the opened chest to shine into the darkness within. The first thing I saw was… two horns… attached to an upturned metal bowl — hey?

« A helmet… with horns?? », I whispered. I was puzzled for a moment. « Who would put large, clumsy horns on helmets? This… is weird ». The upturned horns looked like the popular Lelondish description of the evil goddess Hel, the daughter of Loki…

 Seriously weird.

I assumed it was Dad’s helmet from whatever exotic land he was from. I spied two horns in the chest and took them out, and suddenly had an interesting thought. I brought up a memory of when I was making a helmet of my own design:

—<<Flashback>>—

« There you are. I figured that you’d be in the forge. »

Seeing Dad walking closer towards me, I quickly took off the helmet and began stammering, « I… err… do you need anything, or… »

« Not really. I was just wondering what you were up to », said the man. Then after an uncomfortably long pause he asked, « Why are you making a helmet when I already gave you one? »

My eyes turned over to the simple-looking helmet lying on the old, dark wooden table, with a design that basically resembled an upturned bowl with two strange, metal circular patterns on either side of it. Dad gave it to me years ago when he first started to train me in sword fighting, and I decided that it was time that I said it out directly that I disliked it. « Err… I found it… its design quite boring simply, so I’m making another one », I said quickly.
« Okayyy… », I whispered as I put down the lantern on the floor. I went over to the foot of the bed, picked up my old helmet from the floor, and put it on the floor just beside the chest. Could the two horns from the chest fit the metal circular patterns on my old helmet?

Indeed, they matched perfectly. So, the horns had been sawed off from my old helmet. No wonder Dad had been so upset of me not appreciating the helmet.

« This exotic foreign land must be really far away », I whispered while looking at the helmets. I held the lantern over the opened chest again and realised that I should put everything back in the original position so that Dad wouldn’t get suspicious. I grabbed a piece of parchment paper from my desk, and made a quick sketch of the objects. As for the rusty broken metal hasp, well…

« I’ll think about that later », I whispered as I reached into the chest to bring up a stack of…

Maps!

« Jackpot », I whispered with a smile. I brought them and the lantern over to my desk and sat down, unfolding one of the maps.

The old map turned out to be quite large, covering much of the table. In the middle of the map was an island probably a lot smaller than Lelondell, with a name thankfully written in familiar Viking runes : Berk. With several artistic drawings of different types of dragons encircling it, the small island seemed to be right in the middle of a fairly large sea that had no name written. The northwest part of Berk seemed to be an uncharted area full of fog with even more illustrations of dragons, while almost directly west of the island was another island with an unusual name : Outcast Island. Below on the map was written : The Barbaric Archipelago. And basically that was it. A map of an island in the middle of nowhere. I checked the other maps and they all showed more or less the same thing. How mysterious.

I got up from my chair and went to the chest again to see if there was anything else. Oh, only two objects left : a stone and a piece of paper with a large corner torn off. After making another sketch of their positions, I brought them near to the lantern on my desk to take a closer look at them. The stone was grey in colour and was of a rounded, oval, flat shape. On one side was a carving of a leaf and a shell, and my finger felt its beautifully carved grooves. I flipped it over and I saw a name carved into the stone : Chelly.

« Chelly ? Shelly ? Uh, maybe it rhymes with “cherry” » I whispered. « This is new, and err, completely unexpected… Looks like a girl’s name ». If it is a girl, was she Dad’s err… first love ? Feeling thrilled and guilty at the same time for digging into all these secrets, I placed the stone down on the table and began the read in my mind the paper, which was a note :

—‹‹››—

It is painful, but I hope I have made the right choice. Farewell Berk. Farewell Chelly. Know that you will not only remain in my memories, but in my heart too. Always.

—‹‹››—

I stared at the note for a long time and said in a concluding sort of tone, « So, he’s from an island called Berk, and Chelly is from there also… and according to the drawings, the island’s full of dragons, just like Lelondell. Great. »

Funny that the maps of Lelondell and the Cœunettian isles were not in the chest. Maybe there
were in Dad’s room? « Ah, never mind about that. »

Now I had to put everything back, including the hasp, back into the original state. Looking at the sketch that I had made, I carefully placed the things back into the chest, then closed the lid. I knew what I had to do: bring the chest all the way to the smithy and solder the broken hasp back. To make it easier to carry I would need a cart which was also in the smithy…

A lot of time later…

Bending under the dining table, I placed down the chest with its hasp repaired, and breathed a sigh of relief. What an investigation! With some painstakingly careful measures to avoid suspicion…

Oh, I forgot the trim the wicks of the two candles in the lantern I was holding, to make sure that they burn properly. So, I did that using Mom’s huge candle snuffer that I took from the wall, and then after placing it back I stood, unable to quickly decide whether to go to sleep or take that walk outside which I had promised myself. Still undecided, I went into my room to pour myself some water from a dull grey jug with a cork in its narrow opening.

As I was drinking from the little black ceramic cup with its simple cylindrical shape, I realised that I could not possibly go to sleep after knowing all that. « I mean, sooner or later in a few years’ time, I will have to visit my possible birthplace for myself… », I said.

I went into the kitchen to grab a slice of crunchy rye crispbread, which I wrapped up tightly with paper and slipped into my little secret pocket on the hidden side of my coat. With the lantern, a tiny pair of scissors, and my sword, I walked silently to the front door and quietly unbolted it before going out of the house.

—<>—

You would think I would be happier after an interesting nocturnal adventure, but for some reason, I was back in my lantern-lit room, this time worrying about the first dragon killing test that would be coming in a few weeks’ time in April. After the end of this crazy month…

« This is getting ridiculous… Yes, it is! », I said in frustration, lying sideways on the bed, staring at the only light source of the room. I sprang up from bed and paced around the room before casually picking up my sword.

As much as I tried to convince myself otherwise, I was scared. And sad. So much so that as I looked at the double-edged sword in my hand, I wondered if it would be less painful to stab myself with it than failing the final test with the common fire drake…

Stop, stop.

Just stop.

I continued staring at the sword with its sharp and straight metal body reflecting the faint light of the lantern, as dark thoughts clouded my mind…

« STOP CONFUSING ME !!! ». I flung the sword into the air and it stabbed the wooden wall. I could not believe my own thoughts! I staggered backwards and swept my eyes around the room, feeling repulsed at everything in the world, including myself. And especially repulsed at that cursed sword, which remained stuck at the wall above my bed.

« I’m going crazy. I need to get out of here », I said, alarmed. « Yes, at night. Now ». I reached
for my dark brown long-sleeved leather coat draped over the top rail of the chair and I put it on. Then I took my little satchel made of light brown cow hide that complemented the dark appearance of my coat, and stuffed into the satchel a few pieces of rye crispbread tightly wrapped in paper, an apple, a few hazelnuts also wrapped in paper, a small pocketknife with a sheath, a small scissors, a charcoal pencil, two folded pieces of blank paper, a handkerchief, and small and flat, narrow-necked, ceramic bottle of water with a tiny cork stopper at the end.

« A nocturnal picnic, hahahah ! », I laughed to myself, and found my abrupt switch of mood bizarre. « What else ? Ah, tinderbox, for the lantern. »

I grabbed the tiny metal container and opened it to check if there was enough flint, fire steel, and tinder. Before taking my metal lantern and going out of my room, I quickly drank a glass of water, choking myself like an idiot while doing so.

And off I went out of the house, with the sling of the satchel over my shoulder. Stepping outside in the cold darkness immediately gave me a rush of excitement. A rush of adrenaline. I looked upwards and the moon was at its fullest, partially hidden by dark blue-greyish clouds. How powerfully melancholic…

_I love-hate it._

I walked ahead, not deciding yet where to go. Last night’s walk around the barn and the smithy was nice, but I wanted more. Now, maybe I should enjoy the peaceful night way over at Fallen Rocks and if sleep never arrived, then I would wait until sunrise came, and I would watch the sunrise. Yes ! This would be another solitary, _nocturnal_ adventure !

And so I set off, trudging through the long grasses of the plains gorgeously lit by the surreal, bluish-white glow of the moonlight in contrast with the warm yellow glow of my bright lantern carried by my left hand. I could also see silhouettes of several horses, cows, and sheep, probably asleep.

After a while I said, « This is crazy. What if there’s a snake hidden in the dark grass ? ». But I still carried on, determined to not be deterred by my fear of some as stupid as a dragonesque, reptilian, and most probably poisonous creature.

I walked towards a tree which I called “The Lone Tree of the Grassy Plains” and leaned against its trunk to rest for a while, before finally arriving at Fallen Rocks. A powerful, cold breeze greeted me as I walked around rocks of all shapes and sizes. I walked dangerously close to the edge of the cliff and looked down to barely see the faint dark outline of the beach around two hundred feet below. The faint sound of the sea hitting the shore reached my ears.

After setting down the lantern on the ground, I sat down on the nicest, flattest rock I could find, and my satchel just beside me. Time stood still. All was quiet, except my thoughts, and I refrained from dwelling my thoughts on anything negative. After a long time, I opened my satchel and took out the apple and a piece of rye crispbread, which I savoured bit by bit and eventually finished as I enjoyed the atmosphere.

The image of myself miserably lying on the bed in my room and staring at the ceiling came to my mind, and I turned around to face the opposite direction, wondering whether I could see the house from here. « No, it’s too dark », I said to myself. It seemed like the entire island was in darkness, except for the Palace way off in the distance with lamps and lanterns all over.

I stared at the Grassy Plains for a while and was about to turn around and face the cliff again when I caught with my eye a black shadow in the distance floating above the dark plains.
« Wait ». There were more than one black shadow now.

Suddenly a bright yellow glowing dot appeared far off in the distance, then more dots, and more. Fire ?! Then more fire appeared on the ground far away, which illuminated the surroundings and… illuminated huge flapping wings in the air.

Dragons ! Not again. And near my parents’ barn. By reflex, my hand reached for my scabbard and sword, which I had left at the house !

« No…! » I said loudly in disbelief, hearing a roar directly above. I became angrier and angrier at myself and my stupidity I just had to let out of me in the form of an explosive, swear word.

A black shadow flew high above and out of a sudden it coated itself with fire. I turned to look at the very tall Dairy Tower, which was nearby. Fires appeared more and more everywhere around me partially illuminated the darkness. I caught a glimpse of a common fire drake firing at the top of the tower, followed by a huge flaming boulder hurled from the tower towards the dragon.

By now, the soldiers of the Tower had been alerted and they were all shouting commands to each other. I quickly took my lantern and wore my satchel and turned around to face the direction of the Palace, which glowed majestically far, far away in the distance. Suddenly a huge part of the Grassy Plains went ablaze, followed by the shouts of the villagers growing louder and louder. Now there were two questions that I asked myself : Should I go straight ahead and go back home and get my sword and prove to myself that I can fight ? Or should I simply listen to my fear and go the safer route and hide somewhere in the Market on the left ?

« Argh, I can’t decide ! », I said, feeling my fear grow in my chest.

In the end, I chose the latter and hurried off to the Market, while trying hard to ignore the scary noises of death all above me. I found myself in the middle of the dark and empty marketplace, with numerous narrow pathways to get myself lost.

_Have I chosen the wrong choice ?_

_Something feels very wrong._

_Should I turn back ?_

Along with the fear, an uneasy feeling rose in my chest, as I shone my way around (luckily I had a lantern). I passed by stall after stall, and all of them were now empty and deserted. The butcher stall was especially horrifying, which gave my unfortunately imaginative mind some gruesome images. I had no choice but to turn the other way, only to pick up with my ears the heavy stomping sound of the two long legs of a roaming spiky sadder just a few feet near me.

{}! I quickly ducked behind a wall and crouched down low behind a barrel and a large empty wheelbarrow. I felt dangerously exposed. Then I suddenly remembered that I brought along a knife in my satchel, which I took out and unsheathed. With the knife in my right hand, I held my breath as the sound of the heavy stomping went nearer and then further away. I cautiously raised myself a little and moved silently away from the sound, before turning into a corner and put back towards the wall. Feeling a little safer now, I took a few deep breaths.

« Just our luck. A dragon attack. Now the villagers are up and about ! »

« There’s nothing in the marketplace, just some dead old trash ! »

I looked left and right and blindly looked around in the darkness to try to see where the rough-
sounding male voices were coming from. They seemed to be very nearby. I turned to the right and bumped right into a tall black shadow. The bright yellow glow of a lantern shone directly into my eyes and blinded me for a few seconds.

« Well, me, I’ve got something! », said someone in front of me.

Before I could regain my balance and see properly, strong masculine arms grabbed me roughly and covered my mouth. My left hand lost its grip of the lantern and my knife was forcefully pried free from my helpless right hand.

« Or someone rather », the man said as I gave a muffled scream into his hand.

My heart was pounding. In just an instant I had lost control over the situation. With the darkness and strong arms enveloping me, I gave up struggling, surrendered, and let my body go limp, allowing my kidnapper to drag me to wherever he was taking me. Great. I can’t believe I’m being kidnapped! This isn’t real. This isn’t real. This isn’t possible.

After a while my ears picked up another surprised male voice. « Are you sure about this, boss? Didn’t we agree not to do[…]? »

« Economy’s trash. Hard times. Now quit asking questions and take the boy away to the ship! »

« Shouldn’t we tie him up? », went another voice, extremely low-pitched.

« Well, he’s not putting up much of a fight, […] the ship’s near. »

Trying to struggle away now and run away from this group of thugs would be a very dangerous option that could just work, if I had stronger arms that could break myself free of this iron grip. Completely defeated, I did not resist being dragged closer and closer to a quite large… dark silhouette just barely lit by the moonlight… or the ship they were talking about. A very tall man holding a lantern was walking along the pier.

Strong hands pushed me on board and I fell helplessly onto the deck. With hands and knees on the smooth, wooden floorboards of the deck, I supported myself and faced the floor.

This is a disaster and I am unable to do anything about it… So weak…

« Now you, get below deck! » a rough voice shouted into my ear.

I kept silent and meekly walked past the squared-shaped mast, with the man behind me. I felt so uncomfortable and frightened.

No, no, no, I can’t be taken away like this!

I panicked inwardly.

Mom! Dad!

Cadilla!

What should I do?!

My eyes turned towards the dock. I suddenly made a run for it, and felt the wind blowing against my dry eyes as I leaped forward and —
Bumped right into two tall dark shadows looming about me. I tried retreating but they had taken hold of my wrists.

*NO, NO, NO!* I cried inwardly.

« You’re not going anywhere boy! »

The men flung me and I tumbled onto the wooden deck again. My hands pushed my fallen body against the cold floor, and I got up to see a circle of tall dark figures standing before me, their faces just barely lit by the lanterns they were carrying.

« No use escaping now. Get below the deck », said one of the men.

I fearfully stood up. A pointed finger directed me to where I should be going.

« Do you understand? Compris? »

I nodded slowly.

The men and I went towards a metal hatch that was being opened by another one of the men. A heavy feeling of sadness and for some reason, guilt, welled up in my throat like an overflowing bucket, when I went down into the opening and descended a flight of stairs…

Into the darkness of the ship.

_I probably deserve this, this punishment…_

The lantern that the man behind me was holding shone a little around the completely dark room of the lower deck. My head turned around and I caught glimpses of barrels, stacked crates, some chests, and —

Suddenly and without warning the satchel that I had somehow managed to carry all the way was snatched by the man. « Get moving to that cage right there! », he said and roughly pushed me so that I stumbled forward.

I walked forward and then stared, with horror, at a four-sided metal box and metal bars with a door.

« Enter it », he said in a calm voice.

I simply stood. « But… », I said weakly, staring silently at the floor dimly lit by the light of lantern…

« Enter it or I will force you to. »

_That_ would be worse. So I complied. I bent down and crawled into the small-for-a-person cage, feeling like a passive and submissive animal.

_This is utter…_

The metal door banged with a loud *clang* behind me.

_Humiliation._

I turned around in the cage which _just_ fitted my body size, and saw the man’s hand locking the door with a large key.
« Good. And I’ll put your little satchel over here, just out of your reach », he taunted unnecessarily, seemingly enjoying whatever look I had on my face now. He placed my precious satchel with all my food and supplies onto a barrel about three feet from where I was caged in. With that, he walked away and up the steps. The light of his lantern went further away and eventually disappeared, leaving me alone…

With nothing but pure darkness and cold.

I sat on the metal floor of the cage, wrapping my arms around knees. For a while my mind went blank, then the thoughts started flooding in:

The barrier between me and my parents…

Berk… the mysterious land which I came from…?

Nearly fallen into dark temptations…

Kidnapped and will probably be sold off as a slave… in a far-off land… never to see my homeland ever again…

Tears finally welled up in my eyes, as I stared down at my wrapped arms.

Cadilla… my best and only friend…

Unforgivable…

« I’m just a pitiful soul no one really likes… », I sputtered with tears rolling down my cheeks. I collapsed my face into my arms and let out a muffled wail, sad and scream-like.

I’m not stupid. I know. I… haven’t been a good person…

I struggled painfully, restraining my wails which just wanted to explode towards this cruel, harsh world devoid of love.

In a flash of extreme anger and hatred, I punched the metal bars of the cage with my bare right hand, yelling, « STUPID ! Stupid ! Stupid… ». I burst into tears again, my knuckles feeling broken and painful.

« Stop… please… », I whimpered. « No more self-hurting… I beg you ». « Ow…! », I said, wincing almost to the point of crying, as the pain in my hand grew in intensity.

You’re going too far in hurting yourself.

Feeling an instant strong sense of remorse, my left hand gentled caressed my injured hand. I felt guilty for doing that, and terrified. My mouth opened to say something to myself, but no words were formed.

Darkness and loneliness surrounded me…
BACK TO THE PRESENT

(Rodène is 15 years old.)

Author’s note:

*Dungeon 1* is a scary dark-sounding OST from *Fate*, a fantasy action role-playing dungeon crawler game. It describes a dark and scary scene, with monsters and unknown threats lurking around the corner. [YouTube link here.](#)
Lost

Predominantly FIRST PERSON POINT-OF-VIEW & PRESENT TENSE :

20. Lost

It’s me, right ? I destroyed all the good things I had all because I was so blind and ungrateful. Now I had nothing left. At fifteen years old now and already feeling like a broken old man… I am now left with nothing but darkness and loneliness and regret…

Okay stop.

Stop.

Just stop.

Please.

I still have myself and I’m not dead yet. I’m not even injured. Well, except for my right hand.

My eyes open, and I wonder where I am. I am lying down. All I can see above is a dark grey metal-looking… ceiling…?

Of course I’m still in this cage, in the lower deck of a small ship, floating on the sea. I look around the cabin. There are shutters on the wall and they let in a bit of light. Everything feels calm, and the storm is over.

« My satchel… », I say out of a sudden and give a long sigh, as I struggle to get up. I sit cross-legged and look at the light brown little sling bag which is still securely on the barrel, which has been cruelly taken away from me. And I need to get it back — I don’t want a breakfast-less morning.

Pressing my face as close as possible to the metal bars, I extend out my right arm as far as possible… as far as possible… as far as possible…

« Urgh ! », I exclaim in frustration, having failed to touch the satchel which is around three feet away, and a little less than three feet high. I try again, but my long fingers almost touch it… It’s just a few inches too far away.

He wasn’t kidding when he said it would be “out of reach”.

—<<Flashback>>—

Suddenly and without warning the satchel that I had somehow managed to carry all the way was snatched by the man. « Get moving to that cage right there ! », he said and roughly pushed me so that I stumbled forward.
I walked forward and then stared, with horror, at a four-sided metal box and metal bars with a door.

« Enter it », he said in a calm voice.

I simply stood. « But … », I said weakly, staring silently at the floor dimly lit by the light of lantern …

« Enter it or I will force you to. »

That would be worse. So I complied. I bent down and crawled into the small-for-a-person cage, feeling like a passive and submissive animal.

This is utter…

The metal door banged with a loud clang behind me.

Humiliation.

—‹‹End of Flashback››—

« Argh, stop ! », I cry out, my mind suddenly recalling about the unnecessary unkindness shown by my Lelondish kidnappers. « I don’t want to remember ! »

I just want to concentrate on the present. Right now, I’m hungry and thirsty and I need to get my satchel back. Problem is, I’m in this cage, and the satchel is just a little too far away. Maybe I can stretch…

I press my face towards the cold iron bars which smell of stinky iron, and I stretch out my hand as far as I could. The object peacefully remains on top on the barrel, blissfully unaware of my desperate attempts to reach it. It’s like it’s taunting me.

My hand and I both retreat back into the cage. Giving a low growl of frustration I clench my right fist — and realise that it is still aching due to that recent episode of self-hurting.

« I really do regret that, you know », I say to myself, my left hand now enveloping my poor right hand.

I proceed to try again. And again, and again. Not long afterwards I give up, having no result except for aches in my right arm and hand. I swallow my drying saliva in my mouth, and moan in desperation quite loudly, almost comically. « I should have just stuffed my pockets with those food supplies, instead of everything in my satchel ! »

Oh wait. I don’t even have my dark brown leather coat which I designed to have many hidden pockets. I wish I had it now. I would feel less cold, maybe even more at home.

My dark brown leather coat… That was Mum’s birthday present to me. She taught me how to sew my very own leather coat. All I could remember was being hot-tempered and spiteful most of the time. I feel so terrible by how I acted. I ease my conscience by remembering that I did at least say “thank you” to her when the coat was completed.

I remember what Mom once said to me, “Sometimes you need to forget about the old things to enjoy new ones…”

« I’m trying, Mom » I say in a weak voice.
Just daydream later, okay?

Okay, okay.

I begin to think of other possible ways to retrieve my satchel. Just when I am about to consider the option to yell loudly and beg my kidnappers for food and water, an idea comes to my mind. My arms may not be long enough, but my legs are. The question is, how?

Turning to lie on my stomach, I inch myself backwards so that my legs are out of the cage. Not the most comfortable, but let’s see… I then raise my legs up into the air… no, my shoe can touch the barrel, but not the satchel, which is still too high up. After turning around and lying on my back, I try it again. « *Come on*… ». Still the same thing. It’s getting painful, anyway.

« {sigh} Any other way…? Maybe I can use something that I have right now, like… ».

There is some rye crispbread in the secret pocket of my coat… If only I can… Okay stop. I can’t keep dreaming the things I cannot access right now.

« My shoes ? », I ask myself. (Yes, I talk to myself quite often and it’s normal for me.) I undo my shoelaces and take off my left shoe, and start staring at it. It feels quite heavy in the hand. Maybe…

I exclaim in frustration again, before I think of my *long* leather belt. « My belt ! ». So I take it off. With my left hand grasping the very end, I try launching it out of the cage to see if it… Yes it can touch the satchel !

« Now what ? », I say stupidly, holding the long flexible leather strap of the belt in my hands, then staring intently at the buckle affixed to the end. My brain is getting cluttered and confused for thinking so much first thing in the morning.

« Looks like I’m stuck ». Then, an unconventional idea comes to my mind. Giving myself a nice grin, I take the shoelaces of the shoe in my hand and I tie them to the metal buckle of the belt. Now, I have some sort of a “fishing rod” !

My left hand grasps the end of the belt. My right hand holds the shoe and I throw the weighty object outwards, which lands heavily onto the satchel. Now, if I can just throw it *over* the satchel…

I try again and the shoe lands just behind the satchel. I give the belt a tug to pull the satchel off the barrel, but the barrel wobbles as well !

[Thud] The shoe drops to the floor.

It’s all because of the barrel’s chime (the circular ridge of the head of the barrel that surrounds the satchel) which is keeping the satchel in place. Looks like the satchel is not going to easily fall off. « *Come on* ! This is getting… ridiculous ! », I say.

I pull the belt back into the cage and throw it out again, and it lands just behind the satchel like before. « Maybe I pull everything down ? », I say, tugging the belt. But because the barrel tilts forward unstably when I pull, the shoe slides *across* the satchel and drops to the floor, leaving me with nothing but another [thud].

I roll my eyes. « Ri… {sigh} ridiculous… This method would work if my satchel… was on a table instead on a barrel with that stupid chime ».

My stomach growled.
« Okay, okay I’m working on it », I say determinedly to myself, « Maybe I just need to keep trying ». So that is what I’m going to do.

On the next try the shoe gets itself really stuck behind the satchel, and I pull the belt.

« Aha ! »

This time, the whole barrel tilts slowly downwards and towards me and I grow worried. What if it crashes to the floor and make a really loud noise and the kidnappers come ? I frantically use my left hand to support the barrel as it begins to fall in front of me then quickly withdraw my hand just before it crashes onto the wooden floorboards.

« Wow. Okay. »

My right hand gently caresses my left hand. Luckily I took out my hand just in time and the barrel didn’t trap my hand underneath it. I’m not going to have two injured hands !

As if afraid the satchel might magically grow wings and fly away from me, I frantically grab it, which is now just in front of my cage. I breathe a sigh of relief. I place it down in the cage and look at the mess in front of me. « Great, now my belt is stuck underneath the barrel. »

With both hands reached out, I try to lift the barrel just enough for me to get back my belt. I tug the belt away and withdraw my left hand away just before the barrel touches the floor heavily again. « Again ?! », I exclaim, my right hand holding my almost-crushed left hand. Maybe I should’ve rolled the barrel away instead of lifting it up…

After untying my shoelaces from my belt and putting everything back on, I open my satchel and my hand fumbles inside.

Ah, at last…

Oh, is this what relief feels like ?

« I think I do have some… » — I take out a flat, ceramic bottle of water with a tiny cork stopper — « Yes ! ». And I even have a few pieces of dry, but at least tasty, rye crispbread and a few hazelnuts wrapped in paper.

« Now I can continue my nocturnal picnic, uh, it’s already daytime. Probably afternoon. Really can’t tell because it’s super dark in here », I chatter away excitedly like a madman, and begin to quench my thirst and hunger with relief.

…

I sighed, looking at my limited rations. « I better safe this for later ». I spend some time arranging things in my satchel, before taking out a charcoal pencil and two folded pieces of blank paper.

« Why not I write a poem ? »

Sitting cross-legged and leaning forward to the paper in the floor in front seems to be the most comfortable position. First, I start with scribbling down random words all over the paper, words that fit a certain theme that I want. Then, I start the first two lines :

On the vast, blue, and dark sea
Under the glowing moonlight

« This is fun », I say with a smile, looking up the paper brought up with my fingers. « Pity that
I need more light… and a nice chair and table. »

My only sanctuary :

A small ship

I set down my pencil on the paper and ponder for a while. « Now… how am I going to make
this rhyme ? Ah, rhyming, the hardest part. »

Just then, there are sounds of footsteps on the upper deck above me. Then more footsteps.
Inaudible muffled talking. Louder and louder.

« […]What ?! WHAT ?! »

« I thought we are going DOWN SOUTH !? »

« […]was some freaking storm ! »

« Why didn’t you tell us, Kolp that — ? »

« Boss, why are we still way off course ? »

« Ridiculous ! I can’t believe[…] ! »

It seems they are starting to argue. I hear some scuffling followed by someone yelling :

« Give me that map ! »

« As usual, Pert’s not doing his job properly… »

« SILENCE, YOU ALL ! I know what I am doing. Look, we just need to find the Strait of
Secrecy […] from there, we can sail for the Rentt Isles. »

« […]southwest, right ? »

The heated atmosphere dies down abruptly. There is a moment of silence for a while.

« Have you checked around the ship ? »

« Other than the paintwork, it’s fine — »

[Heavy footsteps walking across on the upper deck above me.]

« You call this “fine” ? Don’t you know that white paint’s gettin’ ridiculously expensive
nowadays — »

« Says the guy who insists on going [mocking tone] traditional… to paint the whole ship
white. »

« But it’s the royal… official — »

« Official colour of Lelond’. Yes, big deal — »

« Hey you two ! Shut up your trap and go and check the sails. Boss’s orders[…] »
« No, I was going to check on the prisoner. »

« And see if he’s badly starving or thirsty… »

At this, I become a little nervous. « Wait », I say, and start folding my paper into two. « I better put this away ». As I put the folded paper and the pencil into my satchel I hear the rusty-sounding swing of a metal hatch opening up there and footsteps coming down the stairs.

A middle-aged man wearing heavy-looking chainmail approaches my cage and stands in front of me. I think he’s not the same one who grabbed my satchel and threw me into here.

The stout but not very tall man looks down at me for a while before saying, « Shall I get you some dry biscuits and water ? »

I blink my eyes involuntarily. He has such a scary appearance, but he has just asked me a surprisingly polite question ? In response, I nodded rapidly in silence. The man leaves and after a while he returns with the food and water, which he places down just outside of the cage. As he turns to leave, I think about the shutters in the wall of this lower deck and how I would love to have more light for my poem writing. Should I ask him to open more shutters or maybe light up a lamp ? He’s walking away towards the stairs ! Should I ? For some reason, I don’t dare. I open my mouth, but my thoughts are unable to express themselves as words. It’s as if I have a block of timid reluctance deep within my chest.

I force away the block and say, trying hard to raise my voice to an audible level, « Um, Can you, err, can you open more shutters ? ». The man stops climbing the stairs, turns around, and walks back.

« Yes ? », he asks in his deep voice.

I look up and avoiding his eyes I force myself to repeat, « Can you open more window shutters… please ? ». In my head, my voice sounds like a timid girl, for some reason.

« Window shutters ? »

« Err, yes, err… it’s a little dark in here!… », I clarify quickly, breaking into a short shy laugh at the end.

Without another word, the man walks to the wooden walls and adjusts the shutters so that they open wider. Before he walks up the staircase he turns his head, not directly facing me.

« Just so you know, I’m only doing all this under orders. It’s nothing personal », he says.

He disappears up the stairs.

I immediately feel a strange sense of relief and comfort, because I get to be alone with myself again, and my pondering mind.

I have just learned a few things from listening to the men on the upper deck. They may not all be Lelondells, but I am definitely on a Lelondish ship right now because one of the men said that the whole ship is painted white. I think I remember Cadilla saying it before, that the royal colour of Lelondell, is white, and that eggshell white paint is rather expensive.

—‹‹Flashback››—

As we started going up the steps, I could see the adult Fleurstroms on the right at the dining
table, peacefully having their meal with an air of dignity.

Well, going up the staircase was doable. I only had to use my right hand to grip the smooth railing, while being supported by Cadilla on my left of course. At last we finished the last of the deep - dark wooden steps and there was a hallway.

« It’s white », I said in amazement. « All white. »

« So you’ve noticed » she commented simply. « But white paint made from eggshells is hard to come by in Lelondell, oddly enough. »

Now, seeing so much white was something unusual for me especially when there was so much of that dark wooden furniture in a typical Norse home. « Your house is so different. It’s like a mini palace », I remarked.

—‹‹End of Flashback››—

It hurts… just to think of her.

Please, stop.

But what is the Strait of Secrecy ? And the Rentt Isles, which I think they say is “down south” ? That sounds like… Cœunette. They said we are sailing off course now due to the storm. How badly off course ?

If we do arrive anywhere, I am really going to have to find a way to escape before they come for me. I look downwards at the floor of the cage. If only this was made of wood (it’s metal)... I wonder... I could use the tinderbox that I’ve brought in my satchel to burn my way out. I would have to jump through a hole in the bottom of the ship and swim in the blackness of the sea and towards dry land, though. It is a really terrifying thought. Have I mentioned that I’m bad at swimming and I’m afraid to be on the sea, much less under it ?

« Ah, enough about that. No use thinking about how to escape from this cage. Right now, I want to write my poem », I say in a sing-song voice.

I spent virtually the whole day writing my poem...

I have taken so much time not just because of the lack of a decent chair and table, but because I wanted to make it “singable” to a certain tune that I remember hearing in Lelondell. I had to take into account the number of syllables and the amount of time each syllable needs to be sung, in order to match the words harmoniously with that tricky tune. Yes, this will be my very first song ! The rather melancholic but graceful tune, being not mine of course, was played by a man who was at the Spiky Sadder Harbour of Lelondell. Nobody knew him ; he was just a mysterious lone traveller with a simple Viking flute. I could still remember placing a coin into his helmet which was on the ground beside his wooden stool.

It is now late in the evening, and the room is starting to grow dimmer and darker. I’ve finished writing my song, which I’ve entitled “My Light”. It’s rather complicated because it has three pitches (pitches, right ?) and the words smoothly overlap with each other. I’ve also decided to depart from the traditional way of rhyming the lyrics. The beautiful tune in my mind, I begin to softly sing :

-
MY LIGHT

- 

On the vast and dark sea
Under the glowing moonlight

My only sanctuary:

A small ship painted white

Lost in my thoughts, in the middle of the void
Alone, in a prison of myself

This is where I find my real self

Weak and broken, crushed, destroyed

This is where I begin to sing

In the dark, I find a light…

Barely surviving
But its flame is still burning

[Chorus (highest pitch)]

See the light…
Feel its warmth and its glow…

O… pen me now
And reach into my core
Which I’ve hidden until now

Please…

Heal it
Repair it
Touch it

There’s no one except for people
Who are just like me…
Desperate to fix their broken core, in any…
Way possible
Getting lost in the sea
Of loneliness and darkness

[Chorus (highest pitch)]
Heal my light
I can’t do it all alone…

The room gradually grows dark and the sound of the howling wind grows louder and louder.  

A storm is coming.

This feels like the end.

Looking towards the window shutters on the wooden walls which no longer let in much light, I begin singing my song again — this time in a louder voice, tears streaming down my face.

Waves splash against the outer sides of the small ship which I am in now, a wooden vessel which now feels fragile against the aggression of the sea and the storm. The floorboards creak and I can feel the whole ship rolling side to side — and the door to my cage rattles again.

Annoyed of being forced to pause my singing, I say out loud to hear myself against the rumble of thunder high above: « This time I need a more permanent solution ! ».

I grab a wrinkled and crumpled piece of paper that used to wrap my dry foodstuffs and I twist the thin and fragile-feeling material as tightly as possible with my fingers so that it now looks like a very short thick rope. I wrap the paper rope around the doorframe and a bar of the cage, and twist its ends together. The door rattles less. I take another paper and do the same, twist-tying the upper part of the door frame. Now it doesn’t even rattle.

Pleased to know that my problem-solving skills are not as lacking as I thought, I smile to myself and continue singing. Let it storm, no one other than myself and the storm can hear me !

« My only sanctuary : a small ship painted white »

I try to ignore everything outside. I try to ignore the possibility that the ship might go down into the sea taking me along. I try to ignore the voices of the men above in a state of panic.

« WHEN is this […] storm going to subside ?! »

« […]Thor must be angry…! »
« Enough with your religious theories [...] come and help us with the sails! »

« [...] sails! They're tearing apart! »

Upon hearing that I exclaim, « What?! ». I sit up straight, my back no longer leaning against the bars, and I start to listen attentively, getting more and more worried.

« Boss, [...] off course are we? »

« [...] still carrying us towards the east! Something’s wrong, I [...] »

« The ship’s going down?! »

« Don’t be ridiculous! We still have [...] »

« Do we or do we not have a spare? Don’t tell me we don’t! »

« It’s hard to see in this fog! »

« How far east ARE we? »

« [...] don’t know! I don’t remember being in these waters before! »

« All these jagged rocks…! »

My imagination is now painting pictures in my mind… An island enveloped by fog, and surrounded by lots of…

« WATCH OUT! JAGGED ROCK DEAD AHEAD! »

« Hard to port! Hard to port! »

...jagged rocks which continuously threaten to penetrate a hole in the ship’s hull and because I’m in the lower deck, I’ll be the first person to see a leakage, and I’ll be the first to… Drown.

A nervous hand of mine grasps a cold metal bar. I’m in a chaotic situation where I am helpless and I am unable to even observe what is going on.

I can only hear... and imagine.

« This place [...] the creeps. »

« Let’s head south and get out of here! »

« Before we ram into something spiky. »

I look around. There is a hole high in the wooden wall that constantly lets in sprays of seawater. It’s only a matter of time until a leakage much lower springs up somewhere.

WHY must I be so pessimistic? No, this has to change. I’m not doomed yet.

I change my sitting position, wrapping my arms around my knees, and I hug myself... because I am scared... and alone.
Nobody’s there for me.

Only myself.

« Only myself », I find myself whispering. This time, Cadilla’s hand is not there to help me up. This time, she is not there to pull out my body buried in the snow…

Snow and storm, it’s the same. But this time, I am going to try something new, because I don’t have a choice.

My ears eventually shut out the chaotic noise outside. I dig deep into my mind… behind closed eyelids. Now is the time to distract myself from my horrible reality with the canvas of my mind. And I visualise :

\[ \text{Cadilla’s garden, in all its beauty and colour… The graceful girl is holding a watering can, and a smile is on her pretty face as she sprinkles water droplets glittering under the sun... over flowers of a thousand colours. Suddenly, her head swiftly turns to face away from me, revealing her long chestnut hair, spiralling and blowing in the wind — a gorgeous sight. But the garden starts to blur, more and more. The colours get washed out, turning to grey, leaving only a fuzzy smudge of reddish-brown and purple. Finally, only a sheet of paper as black as the void remains. A starscape devoid of stars. It expands and swallows up the other colours, and eventually, its four dark corners exceed the limits of the canvas of my mind. I get pulled into the expanding darkness, which transforms into a tunnel...} \]

\[ \text{There’s nothing left for you, why push forward ?} \]

\[ \text{No ! As I continue travelling through the swirling blackness I say to myself,} \]

\[ \text{« What is the opposite of black? »} \]

\[ \text{White.} \]

\[ \text{The old colours are gone. They belong to the past. I don’t want to drown in the past.} \]

\[ \text{Why not just end it here ? You can’t do anything anyway…} \]

\[ \text{Anymore…} \]

\[ \text{« Yes I can ! I can still… »} \]

\[ \text{Believe in myself. Hope for the best. Be there for myself. Think positive.} \]

\[ \text{You sound like an idiot thinking about these things. You are never good at that… all your life.} \]

\[ \text{That’s because I have never tried ! All my life, I have been burying myself with negative thoughts. I got myself into this mess, and I can get myself out. Now it’s the time to see what happens when I…} \]

\[ \text{Switch the blackness to white.} \]

\[ \text{A tiny white dot appears in the black sheet of darkness. The dot grows. I let it grow… Oh, it’s now a circle full of white light. So there is light at the end of the tunnel. I can’t see… it’s too bright. But I already know what it is.} \]
It’s a new canvas.

... ...
...

The same old sight of a dim wooden cabin around metal bars meets my eyes. And everything is strangely quiet.

« That was some visualisation », I say in a calm voice with a hint of amusement. « Now, I am forced to help you… ». I break into a shy laugh at the end while my left hand gently massages my injured right hand which is starting to ache less.

Time passes by...

I lie down and try to get comfortable. My head rests onto the unevenly soft leather surface of my satchel, now pillow. My right knee is raised up but resting against the metal bars, while my other leg is stretched out of the cage.

Time passes by even more, as I paint in my mind again. Feeling disconnected. I am no longer confined by reality. Ship, disappear. Cage, disappear. What’s left is myself. The sea caresses my back. My vision is directed upwards. Above, a starry sky. A black canvas filled with beautiful spots. The best painting ever.

Every single positive thought will help me to push through this storm. I will use all my strength. I will dig deep into my mind. But if everything fails… If the sea swallows me up… cage pulling me down, six metal sides confining me as I drown...

Then I will accept my fate and fly to the stars, and see up close the best painting in the world, or the Painters themselves. A mix of fear and tranquillity fills me. But before that, I will fight, supporting myself all the way. A tear drops out of my eye. I want to. I must.

I open my eyes. There’s one more thing I need to do.

Write an apology letter to myself.

—‹‹››—

Dear Me,

I realised that it was not Lelondell that was the problem. It was not even Thustle. Not the dragons. Not the Blue Fire Drake. Not Jessyllka. Not Cadilla.

It was me that was the problem.

I was so mean and cruel to myself and others. I did not add positivity to my world and look what happened to me. I was so blind. I am sorry. I wished I had known this before I ended up here. Now there’s no turning back. And moving forward is so hard ; I can’t see the light at the end of this tunnel. Or maybe I can, but it’s oh so far away...

It’s hard to see in this storm.

No one, not even the dragons, hurt me more than I hurt myself. I have no one to blame. I had the power to change things but I did not believe in myself. I had so many opportunities to change
things. I had the power to make people like me but I chose to hide myself behind an intimidating shield, to hide my inner vulnerability and weakness.

Please forgive me. I beg you. I want you. I need you. I love you. I forgive you. I will strive to understand you. I will no longer kick you when you are already on the ground.

You are not actually useless. You are amazing and beautiful. You just need my support, and I need yours.

I want to believe in you. I want to believe in us. Can you give this broken evil person another chance?

If we do manage to get out of this… let us live again.

With tears,

— Me

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I give myself a wistful smile, and lean back, holding the handwritten note close to my chest. To my heart.

My tears fall.

« I forgive you. »

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Author’s note:

* Drawings:
Rodêne Statenson (15 y. o.)
Image 1
Image 2
The Blue Fire Drake

« My Light » are lyrics that I have created for the instrumental piece Apologize Piano by Dirk Bergmann, which can be found here on YouTube:

Apologize Piano Instrumental

https://youtu.be/Aou-yJ7f2yY

I felt that I have finally reached the top of the mountain. It has been a terribly long hike of self-exploration, but I have learnt so many things.

I am going to take a break from writing. I know, the story isn’t technically finished yet, but I consider this to be an ending. Book 2 can wait. My resources are dried up for the moment. The beautiful images in my mind may never have the chance to get expressed out in this way, but in other ways.

I updated the tags on Archive Of Our Own because some of them apply to Book 2, not Book 1.

I have to be honest. I didn’t know my story would turn out like that. I designed this entire story to be one big past flashback full of colourful descriptive metaphors and satire, but it needs Book 2 (or at least Part 2) in order to have a happy ending/beginning. So I kept rushing through Book 1, to “chase” after Book 2.

It’s like life. Sometimes it just goes into a different direction, or you run out of time. The thing you keep chasing after might just go out of your grasp every time you thought you are going to touch it.

I’ll still keep this story in my mind. In the future, when I feel ready to write again, I may come back, but I’m not going to push myself.

If you’re wondering what’s so special about Book 2, it’s basically a more traditional-style fanfiction of the movie and the Riders of Berk TV series. Here is a one-line spoiler:

A broken, repentant Rodêne enters the world of How To Train Your Dragon for the first time, and he constantly struggles with himself as he attempts to find himself again, by reconciling with his past, by focusing on the bright side of the present, by befriending his enemy, and by forming new friendships with the friendly simple people of Berk who take him on amazing adventures.
New Bridges.

In the meantime, try to see the beauty of *The Contradiction* in your life. There is always some things you can change for the better. Don’t worry, you have an advantage. Unlike Rodène, you live in the present tense. (And I hope you are not as negative as him.)

Au revoir.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!