



Call to Action

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Always this same monotonous road I followed steadily, but with growing reluctance. My horse walked at a regular pace, not needing any guidance, leaving me free to let my thoughts drift off into the dusty pathways and the uneven horizon. In this dry mountainous region to the north of Candlewood, not far from the Gwidrite border, the vegetation appeared to grow laboriously near the brooks and rivers born from melting glaciers. Everything else was only a dry, desolate desert. The view might have been less bleak in summer, but in this cold, wind-beaten early fall, with the low, gray clouds looming, it felt as if I were reaching the end of the world.

Only five books remained from Aunt Haelara's library. Not realizing their true value, she had allowed me to take them. She had inherited them from her father, Glezran Mac Emmanon, who had gotten his hands on these treasures through the pillage of Gwidrite monasteries during the War of the Temple. Normally, only high-ranking initiates were allowed to read these books. I had all the time in the world to read them when I was in her service. I was just a distant cousin, a poor relative, and I had been accepted out of charity in order to act as a companion to her daughters. Since then, Luisa had been wed to a lord of the Emerald Crescent, while Abigail had left to marry one of the vassals of the Prince of Farl. The domain itself had been assigned to Osheen, the elder son. There only remained a small part, a simple legacy left to the younger son Cethern: the Domain of High-Winds. This was the fiefdom we were traveling to.

A bird of prey was gliding high in the sky. It must have felt a freedom and completeness that I was sure I would never experience. I stared at this dark, majestic shape of impressive wingspan for some time, filled with nostalgic longing.

"The Corvus vulture. A nasty one!"

Cethern had just named the bird. So it was a scavenger? Legends sometimes portrayed them as harbingers of death, and even as attracting the evil eye. In my scientific books, I had read that they were actually necessary, since by feeding on corpses and rotting carcasses, they prevented illnesses from spreading and bodies from contaminating the rivers. These carrion birds had a fearsome reputation even though they provided well-being for all by standing on the forefront of macabre horrors.

An archer drew his bow to kill "this cursed bird." He took aim while I prayed that he would miss. Cethern cheered him, while I did not have the strength to intervene in the face of their unanimous agreement. The arrow whizzed away, but missed by far the bird of prey which flew off, apparently aiming for a carcass on a distant slope. It was now just a dot on the horizon. I felt relieved while the others were making jokes.

I was suddenly taken away from my thoughts by a gentle embrace and a kiss:

"Wake up, Steren! We are almost there!"

I smiled faintly at Cethern, my husband. He tried to reassure me about the horrible bird, whose shadows of misfortune could not befoul our marriage and our life at High-Winds. As it often happened, he misread me. He thought that I feared irrational superstitions. Because I often read, he had gotten it into his head that I was a fragile and impressionable dreamer. Even our union was the result of a misunderstanding.

Less than three weeks ago, Aunt Haelara was discussing the division of property among her children. She wanted to be fair and leave no one out. She had also decided to leave a sizable nest egg to long-time servants. She had been laying everything out so that she may spend her last days peacefully thereafter. To everyone's astonishment, when she mentioned me, Cethern said that he would marry me, as if it were obvious. I had grown up in the shadow of my noble cousins, and I was only a commoner; a well-treated servant. I had not learned to say no, nor even to express my thoughts aloud. They decided what was best for me, and I must admit that I had never suffered from the sweet, comfortable life I had been offered. I had gotten used to

following recommendations. Marry Cethern? I had nothing against him; why would I? He was a merry, brave young man, always full of enthusiasm. He was very persuasive and talkative, the very opposite of me, who had always been able to truly express herself only through writing. With his happy disposition, he shrugged off any worries his status as the youngest might have brought him. He always repeated that this difficulty would be the opportunity for him to earn fame heroically and to obtain through his glory what his elder brother had due to mere birth order. I was encouraged to consent to the proposal, and as I had no serious objection, I accepted.

A gust of wind seeped through the flaps of my garments, which I gathered close to my body with a shiver.

The High-Winds. I could only face this place with graveness. The structure was twisted, bare, and built on a headland overhanging a yawning chasm. It irresistibly evoked a broken tower; an image of destroyed ambition and wishes. This former fort had been built to protect Reizh against Gwidrite incursions, and its primary function still showed through. Rock, ice, and dust appeared to be all one could hope for here—a life of bitterness. I realized that I had made a terrible mistake when I accepted such a convenient marriage.

Despite all my fears, I was not able to change Cethern's mind. All that I could only clumsily express were just the worries of a little girl who had always lived in a lofty castle. I could not “appreciate the potential” of the cold walls, rotting wooden frame, and leaky roof. The dreary, dismal loneliness I portrayed when describing the dull village half an hour's walking distance away was “much exaggerated;” the people there just needed some time to get used to new faces, that was all.

Dismounting my horse in the unpaved courtyard, I tried to see the place as he did. A gate, and on the left, a shaky tower that looked dangerously unsteady to me. A short path leading to the main castle building. On the right, another tower, smaller and distorted. The well stood near the stables, close to the half-buried kitchen door. The ground floor was still partly habitable, but the large reception halls, the lord's rooms, all the prestigious places that offered a breathtaking view of the surroundings, were now crumbling ruins. Whole portions of the roof were missing. The second and third floors of this part of the building were still accessible through a circular side staircase. A taciturn villager who had welcomed us and acted as our guide warned us against the badly damaged wooden floor. If we were to go to the upper parts, the sensible thing to do was to follow the main beams, which still supported the floor.

Otherwise, we might fall to our deaths. Even the stout-hearted, optimistic Cethern went pale as he heard the floor cracking under his feet when he ventured too far.

That night, Cethern slept very little, pondering with a thoughtful look I had never seen him with before. He refused to hear my opinion, saying that it was up to him to solve this problem: I had nothing to worry about and everything would be all right very soon. Exhausted from our journey as I was, I did not insist, in spite of my skepticism, and I quickly fell asleep, overwhelmed with fatigue.

He woke me up before dawn. While I was still struggling to collect my thoughts, he began to talk wildly. He was frantic. He had a great idea; he knew what to do. He had to leave now. Until he came back, I had to take care of the most urgent roof repairs. I would hear from him soon. He would find money.

I saw him trot away in the early dawn. I was wrapped in a wool blanket and felt as in a dream. All of this seemed so strange, absurd, and futile... but what could I expect from someone who was convinced he could rise through strength of arms? Adventures, epic journeyings, unexpected encounters, discoveries, and the exploration of mysterious ruins in a quest for treasures were now his. As for me, I had a ruin of my own to take care of, exposed to omnipresent cold winds, and was doomed to endless monotonous days amidst a landscape of rocks, dust, and ice. I was almost unbearably alone. The villagers ignored me and spoke with an accent I could barely understand—when they deigned to talk to me at all. They came and worked on the roof to stabilize its deterioration. They put up ladders almost everywhere and removed the most dangerous parts of the floor, leaving large empty spaces. The echoes sounded even more ghastly to me.

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Weeks went by in silence and in boredom. Winter came, and with it snow fell like a white net, a bleak, hopeless vision of death. I felt trapped, almost immured... buried alive. In this prison, where only my docility had confined me, I spent many hours reading my few books. I had no other distraction but the flight of my vulture friend that often hovered over the Domain of

High-Winds. I had time to seek to solve the mysteries of the occult language, which I discovered and learned with great difficulty. The mysteries of this world freed my mind. Trying to wrap my head around this alien knowledge kept me busy and distracted me from my sulking.

After the solstice, the days grew longer, and a Varigal brought me Cethern's third letter. He remained vague about his activities, but he seemed confident; it would not take too long now.

With the end of winter, the snow melted without the onset of spring bringing the slightest hope of renewal and happiness. Instead, it felt as if fall had come again.

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The horizon was heavy with dark clouds, and the cold wind blew strong, this gloomy whistling messenger worming everywhere. In the kitchen, which had nearly become my whole world, I had put an old rolled carpet against the door bottom, and I had nailed a piece of oilcloth to replace the broken window pane. It was not the first storm I had to face in these mountains. The Domain of High-Winds was aptly named.

That night, I wondered once more about what I should do. For too long, I had become used to obediently doing what I was told, asking no questions and relying on others to choose what was best for me. However, it was clear that such a life now led to a dead-end. Staying here, forlorn, dejected, and bored out of my mind was out of the question. Even though I had nothing, I could still walk to the capital city and find a profession as a scholar, scribe, copyist, or teacher. Anything but losing myself here.

Thunder roared deafeningly. I was sitting near the fire, waiting and dreaming before the dancing, crackling flames. This joyful glowing heat always brought me some measure of solace during the long nights. In the worst of winter, I had gotten used to sleeping here on the floor, wrapped in my blankets, feeling like a beggar. Tomorrow... I would pack my bags tomorrow. I was feeling uneasy about the idea of crossing the country by myself, but I was trapped. The longer I waited, the harder it would be for me to act.

It was then that there came a knock at the door. This had never happened before, and left me astounded. Another knock. Thunder roared deafeningly. Who? A villager? Why so late? A Varigal caught by surprise by the downpour? When I finally decided to check this out, my visitor began to shake the handle of the door which, like everything else here, did not close properly, and threw it open. A dark, massive shape, illuminated by the brief flashes of lightning, lumbered in. He was wearing ancient armor—I wondered how he could bear its weight—the helmet of which he took off.

Cethern? It was his face, his features, but his expression was hard and absent. As tired and pensive as he looked, I truly thought for a moment that I was mistaken and that it was a stranger. What warrior could wear such equipment here, in such a remote place that even brigands left it alone?

Now that he came nearer the firelight, I could make out patterns on his armor that looked like carvings I had formerly seen in a book. I did not remember what they were exactly, but they disturbed me deeply. Something in me told me to flee from the darkness I suspected, but in spite of it all, it was still Cethern, even though I had thought about leaving him and abandoning this ruined house shortly before... I was lost, and as usual, I had difficulties both gathering my thoughts and finding the right words. His sudden question gave me a start:

"Well, wife, is this how you welcome your husband?"

"Sorry. Would you like to have dinner?"

"Why not?"

"I will fetch you something. Do you want me to help you remove your armor?"

"No."

"How was your journey? Did you find money to restore the Domain of High-Winds?"

"I have acquired enough."

"Really?"

"You don't believe me? Wait."

I could not keep my voice steady and I was concerned with every detail. Who would refuse to remove such monstrous armor when he was soaked? He went out and came back with a metal

chest whose style and coating were apparently the same as his armor. It all seemed considerably heavy to me. He dropped the chest near the fireplace, which was then lit by a flickering reddish brightness, as if pulsing with life.

“Open it.”

I did. The hinges were time-worn and rusty; I had to force it a little... and suddenly came face to face with the sparkle of riches proportionate to Cethern’s wildest expectations: gold, coins, gemstones, and jewels of amber and emerald! With such a treasure, the Domain of High-Winds could not only be restored, but also become a wealthy and pleasant home. I was torn between bedazzlement and a nagging concern that I could not disregard. I could not look Cethern straight in the eyes. There was something in his features that made me feel very ill at ease, as if he were judging and scorning me. Keeping my head down, I examined the coins and jewels while he was eating and drinking beside me. He seemed huge: his armor made him look like a giant even though he walked almost casually with it.

“You found this treasure and your armor in the same place?”

“Indeed.”

“Where was it?”

“In the Mòr Roimh in Gwidre, near the Ordachai Peak in the ancient city of Gwaird.”

“Gwaird? The troglodytic town that is said to have cut itself off from the rest of the world during the Aergewin by closing its doors, and where everyone starved to death?”

“Many of them were killed by Feondas springing from the depths of the mines. Hunger only finished those who had shut themselves up inside the last bastion.”

“Did you go there alone?”

“No.”

“So your companions also have a treasure like this one?”

“No.”

“Did they not want a share?”

“They are dead.”

This is what happens when you ask too many questions: you learn truths that you would sometimes rather ignore. At that moment, I did not want to know whether Cethern had killed them to keep the whole treasure for himself. I dreaded to learn how he could know the details of Gwaird's fall. The Cethern I knew would never have found an ancient city by himself. He had to have relied on the assistance of experts. Things like that did not happen in a day. They had to have explored the region and its underground for a long time. Now, they were dead.

I was torn between fear and a cold line of thought that kept analyzing and juxtaposing the elements of the story. I was sitting by the fire at the feet of my husband, who was wearing that ancient armor and casually eating while it was still raining outside. Silently and calmly, I was trying to weigh what was in my favor and against me. Things did not look good.

“How long have we been married?”

“Since the end of last summer. We are now in early spring, even though it is long to come in these regions...”

“Almost one year. And I left my pretty wife alone here...”

“You wanted to restore this castle so that we may live here decently.”

“The nights you spent sleeping alone must have been long. Fortunately, I am back now.”

I glanced at him and saw that he was done eating. He took another draught of wine and faced me. I understood that he more or less wanted to rape me for dessert. Why did I see it as a rape? As I saw it, we had a marriage of convenience... But when I watched him in that armor that must have been worn during the end of Gwaird by one of its heroes who died in such abominable circumstances, and heard that almost metallic sound from that automaton-like man, my whole being was filled with loathing. The mere possibility of intimate contact with that harsh, stiff animate being gave me a kind of cold nausea.

The only thing that prevented me from panicking was a silly thought: how did he intend to do it without removing his armor? It almost seemed stuck to his skin, just like an insect's shell. I tried to analyze that protection without looking at him too intently, not wanting to trigger something that would mean my end. I could not see any defects. Even the joints were complemented with a sort of leather or oilcloth that folded and unfolded with each movement; it all looked absolutely impenetrable. Only a skilled swordsman would be able to find where to strike. With just my fists or a dagger, I would just be wasting my time.

“Where is your bedroom?”

The threat was getting clearer. The shock made me gulp. What could I do? Flee into the castle and hide? Run into my room and lock myself up? In both cases, he could catch up, and I imagined that he would prove all the more violent. Should I submit? Thousands of women did so out of political interest or lack of money...

“Show me.”

He should have known. His questions showed that he was not Cethern; not even a perverted Cethern, but someone whose face looked like his and who only knew a few scraps of his life. That meant that he did not know the castle. Could that be my chance? I could probably outrun him, then flee on his horse. It was worth trying! I stood up and walked to the corridor, then started running like never before to reach the circular staircase leading to the upper floor. There, the rooms in various conditions, connected with ladders leading to the attic, offered me a real opportunity. As fast as he could be in that monstrous armor, he had to be at least three times my weight. The floor could give way... I just had an idea, and it gave me some hope. I knew where to go and where to find salvation.

I was still ahead, but not by much; he was quick. I dashed up the stairs as fast as possible, lifting my dress so as to not trip on it. He did not waste his time insulting me; he was catching up, I could feel it. Terror overcame me; it seemed to me that this staircase would never end... then, at last, the first floor! I almost thought I was safe, but he lunged at me and caught my ankle, pulling sharply. Momentum drove me forward, and I fell down painfully on the corridor's rough floor. It took my breath away, and I knew I had to find a solution very quickly... The best option seemed to try to kick at him with my free leg. I turned around for more leverage, but gave a sudden scream at what I saw. I thought I saw his face contort, taking the form of a blackish grinning mask. My blow lost what little strength it had. Fear froze me. A part of myself urged me to recover lest I die, but I could not help it: I could not move. As he was pulling me toward him, I felt like a fly caught by a spider about to eat it alive.

“This is my room.”

I heard myself say these words, I did not even know why. It was a pathetic attempt to calm him down just when he seemed about to unleash all his violence against me, even though it was obvious I wanted to escape.

‘Very well. Let us proceed.’

Once again, that feeling of absurdity came over me and I no longer knew if I had to be scared of getting beaten or going mad. It was very dark. I opened the door while he kept a tight grip on my arm.

“Let me take a light.”

He nodded without letting go. I went straight ahead, past my wardrobe and my bed on the right, toward a dressing table where a candelabra stood. The glimmer of the candles let me see Cethern’s face in the mirror in front of me. I could not help but strongly hope I was mistaken, that it was some cruel joke and that he would be himself again. I hoped so as much as I did not believe it, and I was giving in to despair. This enemy who had suddenly appeared at my door this stormy night could abuse me to his heart’s content. This almost organic armor made him insanely strong, and I was on my own. Tears welled-up in my eyes. I was still reluctant to accept my fate.

Cethern’s face in the mirror... He embraced me with his metal hands while pushing me against the dresser, scratching me much more than caressing me and tearing off pieces of my dress. Watching his reflection squeezing me and clawing me, sometimes till blood came, made him chuckle with evil glee. How could I tolerate such a thing, even from a false Cethern? Our marriage was indeed based on a misunderstanding, but he was still like a brother to me. Would I let a monster use his face as a mask, defile him, and inflict all this on me?

Certainly not! Not as long as I lived. Clenching my teeth, I did not shout. The monster was panting so heavily that the mirror had started fogging up.

“Don’t resist.”

Apparently, I must have tensed or disturbed him, I did not really know. He started biting my neck and shoulder with rising excitement, but as I had suspected, his armor hampered his goal. Such a foolish blunder infuriated him: he had to at least remove the cup shielding the sensitive parts of his body. The problem was doing it with only one hand embedded in a metal glove. He was all brute strength and animal urge, and did not think much. I suddenly became aware of what I considered obtuseness. It was like a revelation. This being who had terrified

me was primitive, deprived of subtlety, and I had been witless not to notice it earlier and take advantage of it one way or another.

He took me by my braids to lay me down on the dressing table with one hand and raised my skirt. I was off the floor now, and my nose was almost pressed against the mirror half-covered with mist. I felt that pressing himself against me had driven him to the edge; he was scratching my thighs, and crushing me painfully between him and the wood. But he was still struggling with his cup, and the claws of his metal gloves were now proving a disadvantage.

The stranger brutally pulled my head back, using my braids as reins. Baffled, I stared wide-eyed at the mirror, where an invisible hand was writing in reverse. Was it real, or a figment of my imagination that was desperately seeking to escape the sordid end awaiting me?

“Fight. Kill him.”

A ghost? I had spent the winter here, there was nothing haunting the Domain of High-Winds! How? Who?

“Call my name!”

Call whose name?

Suddenly, I understood: this body was no longer Cethern’s—he had lost it to an evil spirit—but there remained something of him that had become a ghost, anchored to his own bones, prisoner of a flesh he could no longer live in. How could it be? The armor? This all-too-living thing, thirsting for the extreme intensity of existence, obsessed with experiencing pleasure? An Object of Power? I had read books on the subject, but I did not think I would one day have the opportunity to be so close to one!

“Cethern! Cethern! Cethern Mac Emmanon!”

I shouted as loudly as I could, my voice shrill, high enough to bring me pain. I caught a glimpse of something moving confusedly in the mirror, and I could make out a vaguely bright figure in the reflection. However, I did not dwell on this vision: already my hand was on the candelabra, and I struck at the abomination. The candles were blown out. I heard fighting, falling objects, but I did not wait to understand what was going on and ran outside the room.

Still in shock, I felt neither the blood seeping from my wounds nor the nightly chill. I could hardly stand up. I was so distraught that I felt as if I were on a boat rocking up and down in

the middle of a storm. I had walked through the corridor countless times, but the single straight line, about fifteen yards long, sporadically illuminated by the flashes of lightning, seemed an endless tunnel. Behind me, I heard the screams of damned souls fighting—wild beasts tearing one another apart. No sooner had I reached the end of the corridor than I heard the heavy steps of my enemy.

“Your plan was a good idea.”

It seemed to me that I heard Cethern but I was too confused to be sure. No time to dither; I had to remember the layout of the mansion. It was dark, almost pitch-black. Tarps on the roof kept rain from falling inside despite the large sections of flooring that had been removed. I had to run to the upper floor, and from there, reach the attic through the ladders. At each step in the dark, I felt driven forward, but I was too focused to pay any attention. I knew that the other was coming: he was following me, cursing... He had understood that the floor was full of empty spaces, and had decided to climb the circular staircase to catch me upstairs. I hurried up, climbed the ladders... Second floor... Third floor, quick! He was already there! I missed a rung, caught hold of the ladder, felt it slipping... Finally, I reached the beams I was going for, the ones used to work on the roof. I sat on the wood, keeping a precarious balance. I could hardly see, I had to fully concentrate to not fall... He was coming; he was already there, just below me. He was furious and yelled that he would break me, gut me, and rape me through my wounds until I died.

Why didn't the floor give way? I had put so much hope in this supposedly rotten wood, and it was now bearing a man in heavy armor. I felt both desperate and angry at the cruel fate that favored that monster. I heard him reach the ladder I had just climbed. Since it had fallen down, he picked it up and put it back. He began to climb up, and in spite of all his weight, the wood creaked, but held.

I shook my head. What could I do? I had never stopped retreating! What would Cethern have done? He had always been a fighter to me, someone who never gave up in the face of danger, even if it meant acting rashly. I felt vaguely that if he managed to inspire this quality in me, just for this night, it would be a lesson for my whole existence. If I could learn this from him, our short marriage would finally have some meaning. I had had nine months, the length of a pregnancy, the time to become myself, to find myself.

I stood up on trembling legs and moved forward with small steps while he was climbing. He was almost here. I came near to the top of the ladder and sat on the beam, trying to position myself to push the ladder with both hands, my legs leaning on the wood. Chances were that I would topple down as well if I managed to make the ladder fall, but I had no time to consider it. For me, it was a great feat.

Suddenly, the ladder moved away from the beam. I could make out the movement of the monster trying to cling to me to take me with him, but I was quicker this time and pushed harder. At first, it happened very slowly, with a succession of creaks... Then it went on faster: a crash, and a scream. The floor finally gave way under the impact and he fell down. The fall of about fifty feet ended with a sickening crashing sound down below.

I caught the beam just in time. I was sliding, and was now holding on with just my fingers. Would I know the same fate as my enemy right after defeating him? I gripped tight and took a deep breath. What could I do? Let myself go as flexibly as possible onto the intact floor ten feet below, and hope? In a final effort, I decided to swing toward the wall before releasing my grip, considering that the floor would probably be sturdier on the edge. I relaxed my aching, splintered hands, and fell hard onto the floor. The impact was brutal but less painful than expected. I stood up and slumped against the wall. I was shaken, covered with bruises and scratches, but I was safe.

I sat on the stone steps of the circular staircase, getting my breath back and wiping away the tears that filled my eyes. I knew I was in shock; it was but nerves. I was relieved.

“You have always been smarter than me.”

Cethern? His ghost?

“I don’t want to stay, I don’t want to become what he became.”

Horror struck me. I understood that I had killed my husband, and the fact his soul had not been in his body seemed like a flimsy excuse to me...

“The armor. You could have never helped me without destroying it, and it is indestructible. Entirely made of Tugarch’. No one must ever find it.”

If he told the truth, the armor alone could be worth as much as his treasure. Yet, I agreed with him: this thing had to be stopped. I needed to understand to feel better, to ensure this nightmare never would never occur again, and to put an end to the horrors of this night.

Somehow, I had found my call to action.

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The next day, at dawn, I went to check on the intruder's cadaver. Cethern's body was broken and the armor seemed less alive. It was an ordeal to free his corpse from this protection that had become a prison. My intention was to leave, gathering the metal into bags and dumping it all into the most desolate chasm on my way. Resolute, I struggled to pull Cethern's body out into the castle's courtyard.

The vultures were there.

About a dozen of them. I had never seen that before. I had the strange feeling that it was a gesture of sympathy. I stepped back inside. They came upon the corpse like a tawny swarm of feathers. Staring at them with a kind of morbid fascination, it seemed right to me. It was necessary to accept a passing and the purification of the dead...

A few hours later, only bones were left. I respectfully gathered my husband's remains to bring them back to his family, along with my cut braids.