

1.

“Queen ...?” AdAhlea Sym quietly uttered, while getting out to a large balcony from which the queens have been addressing the nation for hundreds of years. The queen was standing in front of a stone fence of a luxurious palace terrace, looking thoughtfully down at the square in front of the palace.

“Come, Sym, take a look” the queen said, without turning her head, “How did it come to this? Do you remember?”

At the foot of the palace walked the endless line of soldier troops, stepping firmly. Their gaze was focused on the path that led them to the south of the Kingdom. At first glance, a powerful and numerous army that could bring a major shift in the battlefield, after it would join the troops that were already there. But the queen was well acquainted with the actual state of those soldiers. AdAhlea, the supreme commander of Ahleyn army, knew the condition even more than her.

The ranks were filled with wounded soldiers returning to battle, with young boys whose experience consisted of catching frogs along the banks of the Clean River, and of elderly men too old to remember much about their own childhood experiences. Crowd of people who were doubtfully ready for warfare, fed up with horrors of war which they had seen, or frightened by horrors of war they have had many opportunities to listen about and now were expecting for the first time to see with their own eyes.

“I remember it slightly” Adahlea stated ironically. “many years have passed since the war began. But did it ever matter how wars begin?”

“No, no. It matters only how they end. And it looks that this war will end with our defeat.”

The Queen’s words surprised the supreme commander of the Ahlea order. It was true, the situation on the battlefield has not been favorable for Ahleyn for the past few years, because Waeryehen was on a long winning streak. However, when duration of the war starts counting generations instead of years, its participants start to feel tired of it and often forget the origins of the actual conflict. Such tiredness and forgetting had spread through the plains, rivers and mountains of two neighbouring countries at war, placed between the Great Mountains of Koron on the East and the Live Sea on the West. The will to end the fights nested firmly in the minds of all the inhabitants of these regions.

After many years, the warring parties had two weeks ago finally initiated dialogue for which the Queen of Ahleyn and her “defense minister” had high hopes.

“I don’t understand.” stated AdAhlea, “Are we not close to the final peace agreement? The Waeryehens and we are both very tired of this war.”

The queen lowered her head. An inconvenient truth is even more uncomfortable when it is communicated to another.

“It’s true, we both want the war to end. An agreement has been reached, the terms of peace have been set... but I am afraid that we cannot meet their primary condition!”



“What could be important enough for you to drag me from the Front, in the middle of making plans for a counteroffensive?” Ahleia Dloria dared to ask the Supreme Council of her warrior order.

She stood in the middle of the magnificent great hall, the design of which she knew well.. the place remained in high esteem. In this hall she had undergone many ceremonies. The first, and the one that she remembered most fondly, was the initiation in the superior warrior order of kingdom Ahleyn, reserved exclusively for females. It was followed by crossing to the next, higher ranks. Dloria progressed in the ranks much faster than the average member of the order. She was last promoted into PanAhleia, the highest rank for active warriors.

Every moment of the first ceremony, which marked entry into the Ahleia warrior school, was an inimitable and indescribable experience for the blond warrior girl. Today, seven ceremonies and seven ranks later, Dloria considered the entire ceremony with a mixture of respect and a feeling that it was an unnecessary ceremonial show in traditional ceremonial robes. The ceremony had a powerful role in the admissions of new members. They would grow stronger feeling that they were joining something truly magnificent. All subsequent ceremonies, she felt, were useless fakery.

It was equally useless to ask her to return to the capital, without giving rea-

sons and explanations. Dlorah's full attention in recent weeks was focused on the battlefield. Her new strategy raised new hopes that the course of the war might change or that defeats could be discontinued. Her tactical moves were complex, detailed and too important. The consequences of her leaving the battlefield could make all efforts futile. It was enough for a respected warrior to address the Council with arrogance and without any hesitation.

"Let us put it this way" AdAhlea calmly replied, ignoring Dlorah's tone. The nature of her youngest general was well known, "if you fulfill the task that is before you, there will be no need for a counteroffensive."

AdAhlea's words immediately changed Dlorah's angry expression to one of focused attention.

"You are one of the few who knew" AdAhlea continued "that after the occupation of Yaraelen, the capital of our enemies, among others things that we did, we also confiscated Tarlaeth, the sacred statuette of Waeryehenians."

For five long years the slender Ahlea warrior with blond hair and eyes tried to forget that word. Memories of events related to the stone figurine, that showed a man with wings and a lowered sword in his hands, were still memories of proud days, when minor war casualties were insignificant in the mass of major military victories. But all of history written after those days was gloomy and a lot different. Always subconsciously and sometimes consciously, Dlorah blamed the statuette for a reversal or cessation of war success.

"Again - I will point out that I was resolutely against it. Otherwise, I agree

with all Queen's decisions, but it was an absolute foolishness to steal from Yarael Twenty Seventh his most important toy and keep it as her little secret.!"

Indeed, Tarlaeth was far more than a stone statue, besides being far honored symbol than any other throughout the known world. Nobody worshiped something so small and simple, as Waeryehenians did their statuette. They believed it was the one that should be thanked for their very existence, and the existence of the whole world.

Other states also had their symbols of significant importance. Little southern state of Dhall, credited a plant called the flower of youth for its very existence. After all, Ahleyn was the name of a country, its religion, social order, warrior philosophy, and much more. One word indicating the whole sense and the existence principle of a community in which absolute power held the female, for the benefit of all members of the community.

But admiration of Ahleyn members to Ahleyn itself could not be measured with admiration of Waeryehenians to one artistic reshaped stone.

"Dlora, let's not go there again. However, returning Tarlaeth is one of the main conditions for the end of the war."

"Oh, I thank the almighty All for that! I am willing to personally ride to Yaraelen and to return the statue."

"I believe you. But there is one problem. Tarlaeth was stolen last night."

Dlora was completely surprised by this.

"Stolen? But who...? Not many people knew that the statue was in our

hands.”

The fate of the statue was truly held in strict secrecy. Its abduction was a personal provocation by the Queen of Ahleyn to the king of Waeryehen. The Queen did not want to publicize such move before the people, because there was a possibility that the citizens would find the act immoral. For her it was joyful enough that the king of Waeryehen was also hiding before his people that he was no longer in possession of the statue and that he was holding a replica on a pedestal.

“Exactly. And your task is to find out who is behind this and to return the statue. But you must act quickly, because the truce will not last long. Erdut is to fall. After that Waeryehenians have a clear path to Blyst.”

There was no need to remind young general about the situation on the battlefield. This was the first time in five years that she left it. But five years ago the war was deep in the enemy’s country, before Yaraelen, the capital of Waeryehen. Today, the enemy held the entire southern and eastern parts of Ahleyn.

She was too rejoiced by news of peace negotiations between the two warring sides, because she did not see a sure way to end a series of war failures, nor she was hoping that someone else had any revolutionary idea to reverse the course of war. And now, this damned statue, so sacred to the enemy, stood again on her way, and on the way to final peace.

“It will not be easy” Dlora said “I do not know where to start.”

“Maybe your new partner has some ideas” AdAhlea prepared one more

surprise. She turned her head towards a small door on the right side of the hall.

Dlora followed her gaze and saw a black-haired young girl, dressed in the standard equipment of the first level Ahleia warrior girl. Her dark complexion showed that she was from a coastal region, and her walk, so typical for an Ahleia warrioress, could not completely hide manners of a girl from a noble family. Her posture showed youthful determination and courage, but did not hide a clearly visible sense of respect for all the other women present in the hall. She tied her long hair in a pony tail. Standard tiar, one of the most recognizable symbols of Ahleia warrior girls, was much bigger than Dlora's and decorated with ornaments that symbolize the country Ahleyn, with the inevitable symbol of Ahleia order in the middle. The rest of the clothing and equipment was identical to what Dlora wore: a black leather vest, short skirt of the same color, boots, a sword on her back and a knife in a holster on her belt, decorated with ornaments.

"Dlora, this is Tenen, one of the best students of Ahlean warrior school in its history. She will assist you in this investigation."

Dlora watched the young warrior with an authoritative look. Finding no immediate faults with her assigned partner, she complained:

"I hope that Tenen doesn't mind, but the assignment requires someone with more experience."

"No" Sym responded decisively, "all experienced warriors are needed at the

front, and I do not want to argue with you. You're wasting my, and especially your own time."

AdAhlea found the conversation finished. She turned, raised her hand and soon all members of the Supreme Council stood up and left the hall.

Dlora was uncertain what to feel about her new role. Ahleia warrior girl had to be ready to many other forms of action next to fighting in a war. In times of peace they often maintained law and order. They also worked in hard labor activities due to their extreme physical abilities and skills. But in recent years the young general was completely accustomed to command multiple units and to fighting war chest to chest.

On the other hand, somewhere in the depths of her consciousness, she felt raising pleasure. Successful resolution of this task could finally put an end to bloodshed.

The new role of mentor was less joyful. She had lost confidence in the new warrior girls, seeing them too often killed just upon arrival at the battlefield. Dlora found their training insufficiently thorough and their behavior at the battlefield insufficiently professional. They were unconcentrated, far too free from fear and anxiety... However, this investigation had much less risk than war did, but she did not really feel like going into any action without full confidence in whoever it might be to watch her back at any given moment.

She already spent some time thinking about how her career might look like after she would finish her path of an active warrior. She knew that her age

would no longer make her a candidate for a member of the Queen's personal guard, after the war ends. She was not interested in peacetime police activity, and she did not, or ever could not imagine herself sitting in some kind of council. The status of a Military College teacher she found most attractive, but this sudden appearance in a similar role did not offer her much pleasure.

"Well, then" Dlora finally turned to Tenen, when they entered a little, indistinguished room behind the throne hall, where the Queen treasured the item stolen from the hostile nation, until it was stolen from her, "tell me, young trainee, what are your conclusions? And what, in your opinion, should be our first move?"

Young warrioress held her answer for a few seconds, not turning her thoughtful, gloomy stare from the pedestal base, where the statue recently stood.

"This certainly could not be done without the participation of people inside the Palace"

"Exactly. But now we have an awkward situation. Officially, there is a very narrow circle of people who knew about the existence of the object that was in this room."

Though it stood in front of nose of everyone on the court, and also most of those who came there just for a visit, a few of them really knew what was behind the tiny, barely visible door behind the Queen's back, while she sat on her throne. Dlora felt from the beginning that it was funny how all subjects

who would come to adore the queen, actually also bowed in front of the most sacred object of their enemies.

“From what I heard, besides the Queen, only the members of our Supreme Council and you, as the person who led the statue transfer operation, knew about it.”

Dlora really did not like to be reminded of it.

“As I said, this is the official list. And we can not know whether any of the insiders shared the knowledge with anyone who is close to him.”

“That’s right. But it puts you at the suspect list.”

Elder warrioress did not resent such derogatory remarks of the younger one. The main characteristic of an Ahlea warrior was primarily an absolute loyalty to the queen, warrior order and the ideals of Ahleyn. Such behavior was one of the greatest and most beautiful values of the country. The nation could always place the safest bet on these qualities of the most famous Ahleyn warrior members, and no one ever thought to doubt them. That also included the enemies of Ahleyn. Such faith and security was the basis for Dlora to gain the trust for the investigation, although she could have been considered one of the main suspects, especially since she had tendency to sometimes question the authority and to show doubt in decisions that others make.

Still, a scenario in which, for the first time in living memory of all living people, a traitor appeared inside the Ahleas, could not have been excluded.

“Yes, that is actually why they joined you in this investigation with me. For

you to spend the part of the investigation which would establish my potential guilt.”

“But, we can exclude this possibility for now, because it is easy to find witnesses on the battlefield who can say that you could not be here during the crime” Tenen closed this part of the discussion and continued, “So, our problem is the following: how to conduct an investigation among women who are all our superiors? Besides that, how do we examine the one with the highest possible authority, the very queen?”

“We don’t, not for now” Dlori decided. She was pleased how her new partner came to similar conclusions, and noted the same problems, “even though, at least the members of the Council most certainly would not mind that we don’t hesitate to lead the investigation into all possible directions.”

“But we could search their quarters. Or check with the other warriors if they received some unusual tasks of the elders?”

“Good idea, but I am more concerned about the possibility that a third party was responsible for the disappearance of the statuette. Maybe someone accidentally discovered a valuable item was located here, and decided to make a profit...”

“Uh, in this case, the statue could be already available on the black market. And that way it could easily get lost in someone’s private collection... Or worse, it could expose the inconvenient truth that Tarlaeth was in our hands for so long. This could further complicate the war”.

Both warriorresses fell silent, and into their thoughts. Mentioning all possible developments, one more unpleasant than the other, grew anxiety for both girls and increased the dilemma in which direction should they start the investigation. Tenen finally made a proposal.

“We should go to the suburbs. There are parts in which the largest city scum gathers. Let’s try to squeeze out something from all known informants among them, find out if there is a story about a big deal, a purchase of any valuable artifacts...”

“So, are you suggesting that we postpone the investigation in the palace?”

“That’s right, for the time being. If it’s still somewhere behind these walls, they will have hard time to bring it out. We just ask the guards to raise watch and perform maximum checks on all who come out of the castle.”

Dlora didn’t waste much time to conclude that Tenen’s proposal made sense. The girl apparently had, in addition to the enchanting looks that could certainly attract any man that she wanted, enough wisdom to achieve great warrior’s career.