

Ashe felt the barbarian's blade graze her face. It had not been voluntary, but it was not what worried her the most: the girl hoped her mother had not seen anything. Indeed, she was forbidden to be here. Despite her ten years, Ashe felt concerned about the fate of Freljord. And this diplomatic visit, which looked much more like an intrusion and a political mistake, was likely to have repercussions on the relations between her people and those barbarians, that is, on Freljord's future. Young Ashe did not know what was going on but she would have liked to accompany her mother and the three heralds of the Winter's Claw into the throne room to take part in the negotiations.

The royal hall's gigantic doors closed before her. Ashe tended to omit her age, but the soldiers, under her mother's orders, actually never forgot. And the latter had demanded that her daughter be kept out when she saw the barbarian delegation arrive.

- "Young Ashe", one of the guards whispered to her when a deep silence followed the echo of the doors, "your mother wouldn't like you to stay here. Take a walk."

Ashe turned around and scanned the palace's dark, empty corridors. A new conflict could be foretold.

A distant laugh, unknown and young, pierced the silence and caught Ashe's attention. The child moved away from the guards and tried to find its origin. She discovered, behind a column, a girl of her age, perhaps a little older, sitting on the ground and playing with a small white creature. Ashe approached slowly.

- "Hello", she whispered. "My name's Ashe".

The stranger's smile vanished and, without answering, she hugged the young snow boar. Ashe quickly felt the girl's discomfort. The girl was truly skinny, with bite marks on her bare arms and her face had a blue mark, covering her left superciliary arch, like the three barbarians who had come to meet her mother and her counselors. Ashe felt a deep discomfort as she scanned the surroundings. The guards who roamed the corridors accused the little barbarian of her presence. Ashe went on:

- "He is cute. What's his name?"

- "Bristle", the stranger replied, after a brief hesitation.

- "And yours?"

She remained silent as Bristle struggled, hoping to access a few breadcrumbs he had spotted on the floor.

- "Follow me, I'll show you something."

As expected, the stranger remained motionless. So Ashe turned her back and began to walk away:

- "No soldier will find us."

Ashe tried not to look back because she wanted to look determined, but moved slowly so as not to lose her if she decided to follow her.

For a while, Ashe kept walking and the only steps echoing hers were those of some soldiers. But soon

enough, she heard hurried and lighter steps joining hers.

Ashe stepped into an empty kitchen.

- "There's a passage here I am the only one to know."

Ashe opened a cupboard, pushed steel pots and dislodged the bottom to reveal a narrow opening where only children could rush in. She plunged into the passage, again inviting her nameless host to imitate her.

The girls came into a narrow abandoned room with a single ray of light that pierced the stones and cobwebs.

- "What's this?" the stranger asked.

Bristle, who had regained his independence, frantically circled around, waving his snout, looking for a smell that seemed to intrigue him.

- It must be an old staircase that collapsed ages ago.

Ashe pointed to the ceiling where huge stones had piled up. She patted her guest's shoulder before nodding at a small cavity. She whispered:

- "I called him Khiro."

In the cavity, a drowsy poro. The young stranger's eyes glistened with excitement.

Ashe opened a small wooden chest set and took a fresh cookie out of it. The smell of it shook Bristle who rushed to Ashe's knees. The smell also woke Khiro up. Ashe laughed and broke the biscuit in half to offer it to the two critters.

Ashe looked at her guest to share a smile with her, but she found a puzzled look on her face. The biscuit had drawn her attention. Ashe's joy gave way to a sad compassion. Delicately, she unfolded the fabric at the trunk's bottom and closed it around the ten biscuits that were there. She handed it to the stranger.

- "Here, for you and Bristle, for the return journey."

Her interlocutor could not help but hide her surprise. She seemed speechless, but her hands accepted the gift, trembling.

Suddenly, angry cries echoed through the corridors. The two girls looked at each other.

- "My father !" the stranger said.

They rushed out, leaving Khiro alone. In the corridors, the cries continued and drew closer, becoming more comprehensible.

- "WHERE IS MY DAUGHTER? DID YOU DARE ABDUCT HER YOU..."

- "Father, I'm here!"

The barbarians' leader turned around and, seeing his daughter, stopped screaming, sighing in relief as Ashe's mother, surrounded by five guards, remained handgun, straining toward the barbarians who had recovered their blades and axes. But the relief quickly faded from his face.

- "You dare walk with this girl? What's in there?"

He grabbed the bag and opened it unceremoniously.

- "Biscuits ? So we are beggars now? Sejuani, did you accept these?"

The girl whose name Ashe knew from now on was looking for her words as a slap made her fall on her knees.

- "Your weakness is not worthy of your people. We're leaving !"

He turned and motioned his men to follow him. Before he passed the palace doors under the dazed and scornful look of local soldiers, Sejuani got up and took Bristle in her arms. Before rushing to her father, she gave Ashe one last look. Behind tears, Ashe discovered a piercing look in which a sudden anger had ignited. The girl disappeared. At Ashe's feet lay a biscuit broken in two.