

Serpents and Stairways

“Rose is a flower. Hare is an animal. Falcon is a bird. The Northern Empire is our fatherland. Death is inevitable.”

Pyotr Smirnovsky

(a real quote, discovered by Fyodor Godunov-Cherdincev in a textbook of Northern grammar)

“With science, it’s all what and how. But with fiction, it’s why.”

Uroboros

(“Loki”, season 2, episode 5)

Chapter 1

The maiden was walking through a mistful forest, accompanied by a headless figure of her mechanical knight. Leaning on his right arm—the one remaining after the dirigible crash—she was taking short and careful steps, hoping that they were moving towards the town.

“How Thomas Reid would have laughed,” she said, adjusting her cracked dark glasses with a tap, and explained, “The author of the *Headless Horseman*. I know you’d call the novel *belles-lettres*, however...”

The automaton shrugged the shoulder joint of his torn-off arm. Dinah (which was the maiden’s name) rolled her eyes. She knew her companion well enough to guess the thought behind that subtle gesture—without even seeing, only by the click-clacking rustling of the cogs.

“Don’t be a snob, Servantes! Back in the Commonwealth of Steel, it might make it into the school curriculum.” She licked her split lip and added, as if that could have lent any more weight to her words, “We were told so at the stylistics class.”

Servantes didn’t respond. Dinah made an effort to distinguish, through the murk of her vision, the shape of his broken neck and imagined what he must’ve looked like right now: charred clothing stained with soot, shards of fortified-porcelain casing sticking out like jagged teeth of a monstrous maw—wide-open—with gears and levers and

springs continuing to churn inside... Probably. How would she know?

With scraped fingers, she reached out and picked a large dark blur from the ruffled collar of her companion. Last year's leaf crackled in her hand.

Their two-seated dirigible airship had crashed into a lake a few hours ago. Now, its burnt, black, tar remnants dripped down the eyelashes of the tall shoreline rocks into the water. Dinah couldn't remember the fall itself—only the moment when the air became thin, and everything began to seem oddly hilarious. And also, a few moments before that,—a dark silhouette clouding the sun, like a massive bat.

She opened her eyes on the shore: lying on wet grass, under a dry blanket. Servantes's head and arm, a few waterlogged study books, a flask, and her tortoise-shell comb were arranged next to her—like burial gifts, meant to accompany the departed into the Valley of the Shadow of Death. That must've been everything Servantes had salvaged.

"Servantes... I know, this is a dumb question, but i'll ask anyway," Dinah had said then, when he, headless, leaned down to her in a respectful bow, "That was the dragon that attacked us, right?"

His neck joint twitched and clicked. Servantes nodded.

"Great!"

Not wishing to lose a right to object along with his head, Servantes displayed his anguish by clasping hands over his absent heart.

"I mean, we're here to learn about the dragon. Would you say we haven't learned anything?"

Since then, an eternity had passed: about forty minutes or so. The caustic smell of smoke had been left behind, drowning in morning dew. It seemed like they were not in danger of a forest fire. Or of a wild animal, either—Servantes would've protected her even with just one arm: and he needed the head for the looks, anyway, not for looking. All that was left was to walk—until they stumbled on a road.

"I have read a commemoration piece once—about the Great Fire of 1845. Was it in The New Hamilton Times?.."

Or was it Dad who had read it to her? Dinah squinted, trying to remember that morning. Yes, right! Back when it could've been considered a token of parental affection, and not a necessity, back when she could've read any text herself, not just in Braille.

Her imagination recreated the map of the article. There, nestled between the saltpeter warehouse and the explosion, aside from chronicles and consequences, in a brief paragraph, a firefighter, unaccounted for in the number of immediate victims, had died of a heart attack. When her dad reached this part of the article, he stopped, and explained that breathing in hydrogen cyanide could lead to suddenly discovering yourself in a coma even after three or four weeks.

"You know what, forget it. There wasn't anything there, in that article," Dinah said and walked faster, "Nothing relevant."

The lake their airship had crashed into was called *Hexenauge*—the "Witch's eye" in Volk. Even through dizziness, smoke, and nausea, relying on her unfaithful vision, with its permanent vignette of shadows and blur, Dinah had guessed the lake by its almond-shaped shore line and by the conifer darkness of an island in its center. It was supposed to be about halfway between two big cities: the sprawling Gebal at the foot of the mountains and the crystal Silen above the clouds. And though Dinah and Servantes were expected in the latter—embroidered into the fabric of creation with pearls and azure—they were presently descending the mountain slope—the direction that was kinder to a poor-sighted scholar and her headless automaton.

"I've already been down there once, by the way. I mean, Gebal," Dinah said, "Well, I passed through it, really, on my trip from Albion to the Northern Empire, before my first semester. Even spent a night. It's not a pleasant town—must've seen better days, but now, you know... like poorman's teeth. Crumbling, black, aching. And smells. And there was also something circling above it all the time," she added, "Maybe birds, or dirigibles. Maybe warplanes. You know, I can't make them out from down here."

She was about to remember something else when, through all the ear-ringing, leaf-crunching, wood-pecking, and the

vibrations of her fear, poorly camouflaged as anxiety, she heard a hum of voices and the smell of campfire.

“Saviour be praised, huh! Who do you think this may be? A search group? No, probably not. Hunters? Or foresters...”

Dinah rubbed her chin, where a streak of blood from her split lip had caked up, and was about to take another step, but the automaton had stretched his only arm, preventing her.

“Not foresters, then?”

A joint shifted—the automaton put his finger above the neck, where his lips could’ve been. Dinah nodded, although she hoped Servantes was being needlessly cautious—the morning had already been too much to deal with for a girl who had barely left her spacious Parisian apartment and its books in years.

Sitting down so that her back was fully hidden behind a moss-covered boulder, she found Servantes's head in the bag and, delving her wrist into the torn-off neck, began to feel for the speaker.

“I think I got it. I’ll pull it out. Can you switch it on?”

The speaker was the only electrical component inside the mechanical body of her clever hidalgo. When they tried to turn the poor device on, it coughed and wheezed like her mother’s phonograph, and they had quietly agreed to leave the thing alone, at least until they saw a master puppeteer. The circumstances, however, had changed.

Dinah pulled the speaker from Servantes’s throat—tightening cables prevented her from pulling any further than about half a foot. The automaton knelt down, took it with his articulated fingers and gave it a shake—either to let the water out or out of spite.

“Wow, aren’t you an engineering genius?”

“Yes,” coughed the speaker.

Dinah felt unnerved by that short response.

“Yes? Just yes? Not some sort of ‘How dare you question my humble skills, o my illustrious señora?’”

“Yes.”

“Well, you get what you get. Do you want to go?”

The headless knight stood up and walked toward the campfire—slowly, soundlessly—flexing the segmented parts of

the unbalanced body at unhuman angles, dampening each footfall. This terrifying visage could provide the group of people with a lifetime worth of campfire stories, if they were to notice him. Although if they had been born to the other side of the Veil, they would naturally see something else: rational, correct. A large wolf, perhaps, or a one-armed lumberer in a fit of madness. Something plausible.

It was one of the great mysteries of the world—why could some people see the so-called “miracles”, while others—only their consequences. Why were some capable of seeing the witch’s spellwork, mermaids, or unicorns, while others... Well, there was more nuance to unicorns, really. However, the question stood—how does the Veil, or the law of nature that we call so, “choose” the way of substituting an aetherial image for an ordinary one, and... Dinah, focus!

“Campfire,” said the speaker in her hand.

“I could’ve guessed as much. What about the people?”

“Six and one.”

“Why the distinction?”

“Tied up.”

Dinah closed her eyes, clenched her toes inside her wet boots. Even when Servantes wasn’t talking, the speaker kept hissing, interfering with her thoughts.

“That sucks, Servantes. That really sucks.”

“Señora!”

“Well, pardon my Steel! What else can I say? What if I was hoping they’d be the type to cheerfully point us towards the pajamas closet?”

The automaton’s head gave no response. Dinah pressed her back against the damp rock.

“What does it look like? Option A: the six are noble heroes, who have succeeded in capturing a vile revolutionary threatening the crown. Option B: the captive is innocent, and the others have robbed the poor fellow, and are about to eat him. Or to sacrifice his heart. Or...”

Still, no answer.

“Ok, wait, I’ll rephrase. Which...”

Dinah hadn’t finished her sentence—a tall shadow stood looking at her through the tangle of red-speckled thicket. A

fact that would have become obvious to anyone with healthy eyes at least half a minute earlier. Destructor! She hastily turned her head, trying to figure out how far Servantes was away from her—Servantes, who must've already been rushing in to save her, but...

A male voice shouted in Volk and pointed a threateningly firearmly blur at her—tough to say what exactly, but she understood the overall intent.

Dinah tried talking: first in Albion, then in Free, then—losing hope—in Northern. The man didn't respond. She raised her hands, putting them over her broken glasses—a gesture meant to explain that her vision was so-so. Even if he understood that, it hadn't made him change his mind about threatening her. Option B was getting more probable by the minute.

"Stand up," the hissing speaker in her hand instructed, and Dinah got up before she was forced to. The head fell out of her hands and rolled away like a ball of yarn. The man paid no attention to it.

"Stay calm. All they see is a weird scared girl, lost in the woods," she thought, dragging her feet through the untrodden leaves, tripping on bulging veins of tree roots, *"And he hadn't reacted to Servantes's voice. But what should I do?"*

They passed Servantes, who stood to their left—far, far in the smudgy periphery of her near-blindness—in a way the forest fairies hide, the ones you can only see out of the corner of your eye.

Dinah tensed up, immediately looking away—But her captor kept on walking as if nothing had happened. Either he was unfathomably oblivious or simply incapable. In either case, they had something going for them.

He once again talked to her in an unparseable language—softer, this time, as if consoling her. They stopped by the campfire, and someone's hands reached for her bag, other wrapped a rope around her wrists; third pair of hands took off her earrings, tugged on the necklace with a star-shaped pendant, tried to take off her finger the engagement ring with a stone of bone azure, but gave up when she clenched her fist so hard, her nails pierced the skin of her palm. Having finished, they shoved her to the side—almost

without any force, like giving up a paper boat to the stream. That was enough for her to fall on the grass.

Dinah sat up, hugging her knees, and listened. The men were in the middle of an active discussion. Some words felt familiar but didn't form sentences: "*glass*", "*fabric*", "*principle*", "*fire*". The ringing in her ears wouldn't stop—just like that endlessly terrible morning.

"Good morning." A recognizable combination of sounds cut through the canvas of incomprehensibility. "Was it your airship that caught fire at sunrise? The one attacked by a dragon?"

Dinah turned her head towards the words. A man-blur, sitting to her right, pointed with his chin at the dispersing lines of rope shapes around his wrists. The 'one' Servantes had mentioned.

"That's how I got here, yes. But did you, by chance, get a good view of it?"

"No, only from afar. Do you think your automaton could take out all six?"

The man could definitely see through the Veil. More good news—at least the conversation would be livelier.

"They have firearms, and he's broken. I don't think so."

"Pity," the man sounded somewhat flippant for the situation they were in.

Dinah rubbed her forehead against her knee. A couple of airplanes flew over them—she understood by their sound as it slipped past her feet.

"My name is Dinah Gremin." She introduced herself more out of a sense of helplessness than etiquette.

"Nice to meet you, Miss Gremin." His tone was as if at a grandma's picnic in Central Park. "Have you been to Silen before?"

"No."

"I've heard their Opera hosts heavenly ballets."

"Are they going to kill us?"

"I don't know. I think they haven't decided yet."

The stranger sounded calm—like a fairy-tale protagonist. The kind who doesn't act surprised even when his bride pulls off her frog skin.

One of the men poured water into a pot and placed it over the fire.

“Don’t let this upset you. They aren’t evil,” the stranger continued, and noticing the flare of irritation on Dinah’s face, added, “You would have noticed that yourself if you could see them.”

“I’m not blind,” she said, though she really couldn’t make out their features.

“I’ll keep that in mind. It’s just that... how do I put this? The one who led you here, with the obnoxious professorly moustache, looks more like a literature critic or a tutor than a robber. That other one wears tweed. Their nails are very carefully trimmed—”

“One can be a malicious man and mind the beauty of his nails,” she said, but the stranger didn’t understand the reference and simply shrugged.

“And the way they act. I don’t know how to explain this, but all of this is... quite unprofessional, I guess? I’ve memorized their faces, for instance.”

Dinah heard Servantes getting closer to her—faint, rolling sounds that didn’t resemble footsteps. The automaton was slowly walking around the camp, hiding in the thick of the hazels. Regaining confidence, she realized that her hands were getting damn numb and focused again on the stranger.

“Speaking of clothes. You’re wearing blue and silver, I think. The colours of a Northern Empire hussar’s coat, right?”

“It’s just a short jacket, Miss Gremin.”

How embarrassing.

“Anyway, how did an observant man like yourself end up being caught by such simpletons and rubes?”

“I wouldn’t call them simpletons. Did I upset you?”

Even if factually the stranger had little to do with her anger, fatigue, or fear of dying here, his unnatural condescending composure irritated her to no end.

“No!”

“Understood. So were you heading to Silen for leisure?”

What difference would that make right now?

“Scientific inquiry,” she lied. Well, almost lied. It’s not like she was meant to talk about matters of the crown with

complete strangers? And if it all went well with the dragon, she might as well write a research paper about it.

“Hm.”

“Hm?”

“No, it’s nothing, really. So, you’re a scientist. A mathematician? I thought of becoming a mathematician when I was younger.”

The water in the pot was rolling into a boil.

“No. Why are you so calm?”

“Just being good company. After all, it’s not like we have much to do while we wait for your automaton’s arm to finish untying my wrists.”

Dinah slowly looked down through her dark glasses at the stranger’s knees and saw something stirring in the grass. Although she couldn’t discern it, her situational awareness concluded that it was, indeed, Servantes’s arm.

“However, I can’t help but note that you yourself aren’t all that flustered either. Well then.”

And before she had a chance to process that, the stranger sprang to his feet. The rope that had bound him remained on the ground in serpentine, spiraling coils.

What followed at the camp scattered from her understanding like a pack of frightened foxes. Fragmented speech, a fracturing sound of a gunshot—unexpectedly loud and dry. Someone fell. Servantes no longer stood in the hazels. Another scream—louder than the last. Another shot. A small explosion close to her, spraying dirt clumps on her fingers.

Dinah let out a short, belated cry and pulled her feet even closer. Her glasses slipped off her nose and she pressed her knees against her eyelids so hard, the darkness underneath them sparkled—as if she were hiding from a parents’ fight under a blanket.

Ring of metal hitting metal. Splash, turning into a scream. Hiss of charcoal. The sounds growing quiet and things—still. Seconds of silence. Was that it?

“Miss Gremin?” The voice didn’t quite belong here. “Are you alright, Miss Gremin?”

“Is anybody hurt?”

Did she really have to ask that?

“Yes. This one over here tried to shoot your automaton, but the bullet ricocheted and wounded his friend in the shoulder—the one in the tweed suit. But it’s not a deep wound.”

“I see,” she said.

“Would you like a minute, or are you ready to go?”

The question was a tough one. She decided not to answer it.

“Are they... still here?”

“Yes. But now that we have a gun, they have nothing against us taking our leave.”

Dinah felt Servantes’s cold hand adjusting the glasses on her nose, tucking loose curls of hair behind her ear. She unclenched her body.

Since when did they have a gun? Guess they took it from the one who shot his friend. But Servantes wouldn’t be able to... in his current condition... which meant that he...

Whatever.

The men clumped together, quiet and hunched. One sat on the ground, and, judging by the sniffing, was trying not to cry. Dinah, at first, thought he must’ve been very young, but squinting, she could just make out his hair—gray like mountaintops. What emotions choked him? Pain? Humiliation?

She stood up, unconcerned by the striking absence in her thoughts, forgetting all about her precious little things sedimenting in foreign pockets, and stayed there, standing. Servantes slung the bag that contained his own head over his armless shoulder, offered the other arm to his señora, and led her down the same trail they had been on. The stranger, wearing a blue un-uniform, had apparently decided to keep them company.

The simple act of walking felt strange now. Even stranger than after the crash. The mixed forest brewed mixed emotions: bewildered oaks broadcast their boughs as if unsure where to grow next; pine trunks grew scabs to make it harder for intruders to reach their sap. The world was bursting green. The gaps in it formed faces—an interplay of shadow, light, and her poor vision.

Something inside Servantes rattled—some cog had come loose, or perhaps a pebble had gotten inside his body. She walked, dissolved in its sound.

Only once the deep malachite of the forest became the vibrant emerald green of alpine meadows did Dinah realize what had happened with enough clarity to talk about it.

"If not bandits, who were they?"

"I don't know. Might have been bandits," the stranger's voice still sounded relaxed. "Or marauders. They could've seen your airship falling and decided to check whether anything valuable survived the crash—not expecting to encounter an actual survivor. And so they panicked. I think one of them saw through the Veil, but I have no idea whether that changes anything or what they needed from you."

Chiming and the soft ringing of bells filled the air. Across the meadow that they were passing, land-bound clouds of sheep floated. A few houses appeared in the distance—bright geometric shapes against the cyan mass of mountains. Dinah would only notice them when they got closer.

"You can take a cableway to Silen from Gebal."

She nodded.

"Would you like to discuss what has happened?"

"No. You?"

"Not really, no."

They flowed down the road with remarkable ease. The massive cableway pylons loomed over the treetops—large enough for even Dinah to notice. The pylons scaled up the mountain, thinning and vanishing into the altitude.

"How did you end up in the woods?"

"The same way I always end up in places, I guess."

Whatever that meant.

"I see. Thanks," Dinah said.

She didn't really feel gratitude. She didn't really feel anything. Occasionally, a thought would clang inside her head with a sound of the pebble inside the automaton's body, or the metal bell on a sheep's neck. "*This morning at dawn, I fell from the sky and got captured by forest bandits,*" rang in her head, "*but a clever copper knight and a young man with a honey-sweet voice rescued me.*" The words were beautiful but meant next to nothing, related to her life no more than the opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

"I should be thanking you. Without your automaton's help, we wouldn't have pulled this off. What's his name?"

"Servantes. And yours? I mean... I'm sorry! I should've thanked you immediately and asked for your name, it's just..."

"Georg. My name is Georg. Nice to meet you, Miss Gremin."

"Really?"

The young man nodded without asking which part was really?

There were more people around now—wandering shadows in the shapes of shepherds, brushstrokes defining silhouettes of farmers inspecting their fields. A cart rolled past them, driven by a brown donkey with bald spots that Dinah would never know about.

"Whoa!" the driver—a woman, apparently—commanded.

"Must've stared at us," Dinah thought and, recognizing the futility of it, straightened her tie. Still damp with lake water.

Georg glanced back at the diminishing cart.

"I think your friend could use a hat."

"Fedoras must work splendidly with broken necks," Dinah said and forced the corners of her mouth into a smile.

Georg chuckled, vaguely. They were walking by a short fence, behind which stood a log cabin. Someone was smoking on the porch—Dinah sensed the tobacco long before she discerned the man crouching in its shade.

"Hey!" Georg shouted in Albion. "Do you play cards?"

The question was so sudden she thought it was addressed to her. However, the man looked at them and walked up to the fence. A dense cloud of smoke made his head appear misshapen at first.

"Not till noon, I don't."

"A hundred crowns if it goes your way."

"And if it doesn't?"

"You'll take us to the cableway station."

The old man scratched his unshaved chin—the sound was enough for Dinah to know how uncertain he was.

"*But he shouldn't have any money,*" she thought suddenly, remembering that the bandits had taken away her jewelry, and clenched her fingers tighter, holding onto the lifebuoyingly round azure ring.

"No, pass. The day is just starting."

Georg seemed entirely unaffected by his response.

"How about this: bet I can guess three cards in a row? Your deck, your pick, and your shuffle—I won't even touch the cards."

"You're mad? Who bets like that without having a trick?"

"Well, naturally. Let's even do it this way—I'll call the cards right here and now. You'll see I'm right. Four, seven, and ace."

"Oh well," Dinah thought, "*I guess, he's some sort of a medium.*"

For a moment, she felt somewhat disappointed—were her companion a real illusionist, one that relied only on the skill in his hands, it would've been exciting. Aether, however... Aether was straightforward. Some could, others couldn't.

The old man stepped out of the cabin with a deck of cards and laid them one by one in front of him, right on the porch, far away from them. Probably couldn't see through the Veil and was curious. One, two, three—the cards rustled onto the splintering planks. Judging by the amused, guttural sound, Georg was right.

"How did you do that?" The old man's voice buzzed with admiration.

"Spent a winter in the Northern Empire," the young man answered, as if that explained anything at all. "Are you going to respect the deal?"

The old man sat for a bit longer, clicked his tongue, and then, to Dinah's surprise, stood up, checked the window shutters, and left to harness the horse.

"But he knew you had tricked him! I mean.. he thought you had tricked him in some other way, with sleight of hand or... I don't know. Why would he help us?"

She stopped talking, trying to figure out what exactly bothered her.

"Dozens of options, Miss Gremin. Perhaps, he considered this a fair price for being entertained. Or he's a cardsharp himself who appreciates others' art—I don't know either. What if he just needed a reason to go to the city for the parades?"

"Parades?"

“Yes. Quite an event for Gebal. More visitors from Silen than locals—pickpockets of all trades must’ve been waiting for it like it was the New Year’s meal.”

The old man fumbled with the wagon for an ungentlemanly long time. When he finally returned, Dinah gave him the tortoise-shell comb—for a weathered hat.