
Ladies of the Woods

Among all of my adventurous experiences, it is only that of the ladies of the woods I would never like to retell, or even recollect. But, well, yet now that you ask about it, perhaps I can show you some of the cleanest parts of it. Listen carefully, son, and you'll find this world you live in so beautiful and wonderful.

It dated back to the days in Velen, a province of Temeria located in the north of the northern continent, generally known as the NO MAN'S LAND. You must have once heard about it, a place full of swamps, wetlands and countless leeches. It used to be a nasty place, yet by warfare, the Nilfgaardian has managed to make it worse. Those Nilfs are so greedy that they would not pardon any inch of the Temerian territory, even for such a dirty and remote place. Let's say, besides gloomy, muddy and obscure, those Nilfgaardian add a new modifier of Velen, war-torn. However, thanks to its extreme poverty, Velen has been under the occupation of the Nilfgaardian Empire soon after the war broke out. Yet it still takes the courage of the most veteran adventurer to venture here in the no man's land.

Well, if you really haven't heard of any tales, scary or not, of Velen, like *the drowner in the shoal*, at least you may know the famous proverb, which says, "*No gods nor masters watch over Velen. The land is no man's. He who wants to survive must seek his own protectors.*" Yes, yes, your look suggests that this do ring your bell. And here what

I'm going to tell you, is exactly about one of those so-called protectors. Though the locals titled them with an honorific as "ladies of the woods", I personally prefer to call them *crones*. Whatever, with the comfort of hindsight, let's just enjoy the story.

You see, even before its being crashed by the Empire, Velen is such a place only tykes or ghouls being its visitor. And even the most adject tramp, using his only lasting rationality to think, would not choose to beg in Velen. Now after the battle, in the depopulated wastes of No Man's Land one often runs across armed men of all stripes - mercenaries, soldiers from the disbanded Temerian legions, marauders, and common bandits, only adding more bloodshed to all the misery the people in Velen had to live through. Nonetheless, despite all those grim things, there is mystery hidden behind the dense foliage in Velen. And that's what I, as an adventurer always travelling, am chasing for all my life. This world is a fabulous book, kid, and trust me, not any an adventurer wants to miss any page of it.

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I must confess, despite background knowledge above, the desolation of Velen shocked me nonetheless, which is why I would stay in Downwarron for a couple of days. Well, before arriving Downwarron, let's say, I had been wandering in Velen for one or two months, and all the food there was a disaster, really. The rice was no better than cracked pebbles; the grill always tasted rottenly unpleasant like old boots; let alone the brew...a

blending of dirty water and urine, I would say. And that's not the most outrageous thing. Have you ever thought of the price of a baked apple in Velen? Two hundred Crowns! Two hundred! My god, quite enough for both of us to revel in a whole day's grape wine in Toussaint! But things changed in Downwarron. Soft rice, fresh steak, with 100% pure water. Well, that was exaggerated, yet for a long-suffered stomach, an average meal could be a sumptuous feast. But, one thing remained suck---the goddamn Velen ale.

But when I was gobbling in the tavern, some oddness slide into my eyes. The decorating shield on the wall, on which was painted impressively the Temerian lion, but not the Nifgaardian sun. This would be ominous, I thought, didn't they know the no man's land had been ironically the Emperor's? Or some of them were still holding their heady patriotism in their sterile heart? Roused by curiosity to look around, I noticed some more bizarre things after appeasing my hunger, like the bingle hair style kept by all women in the tavern, and the absence of muddy kids playing in the marsh shoal. And what struck me most was about the ears. The right ears of the villagers were fully bandaged, some even bloodstained in black dots. And I saw the ear-shaped pendants hung beneath each of the table edge, no doubt, contributing to forge some indisposing association. Exalted by my exquisite foresight, I promptly picked up the wooden cup and moved to the neighboring table, opposite to where seated an old guy with a bandaged ear. As the first step of an adventure, I need to inquire.

So I piled up a big smile on my face, asking, "how is it going, buddy?"

Casting a fast sidelong glance at my right ear, the guy revealed an unwelcoming expression with subtle disdain, “Foreigner?”

I sat down quickly, maybe too quickly for him to stop me, and nodded slightly, knowing that it would be stupid to conceal a conspicuous truth, “Vesarn of Toussaint, historian, coming to investigate the postwar situation in front places.” That was one of my common disguising identities. It would be much wiser to use these official titles than confessing that I was here merely for fun.

He took his eyes off me and took a long drink of his cup, as if to say “so what” in silence. At that moment I’ve got an opportunity to scrutinize this man. It was a withered face dominated by wrinkles, on which stirred his eyes as turbid as the liquid in his cup, with grey hair suggesting his age. But what frightened me was, across the small table I could see clearly his right ear, or where it should be. There, where the bandage clung closely to his cheek, nothing. He had no right ear! Or, it was cut off! It was once embarrassing when I was ready to brace myself for asking him. Yet fortunately a bald drinker chimed in in time to help me out.

“Hey! Foreigner! Don’t bother the old man! Here you come. We can chat.”

A timely request. I therefore put aside my doubt about the ear, and sat opposite the bald

man.

Two ears. He'd got them.

"Good madam, here! Two more please! Something good! Or we'd rather bite the mud in crookback bog!" he shouted towards the proprietress, then turned to me, "always fresh to meet someone new, isn't it?"

"Absolutely," I replied friendly. His words made a good impression, but what rested in his eyes mattered more. Something not usual, nor supposed to be here in Velen. The ardour of life. "I am ..."

"All right, I knew." He took the two heavy cups from the proprietress, and passed me one of them, "Vesarn of Toussaint, right? I've heard just now, which is why exactly I want so much to talk with you, a stranger from the romantic realm that teems with love, fairy and wine. Exactly where Gragas *the brewer* came from! I've heard much about his tales. Guess you've held some doubt here...maybe we can take what we need from each other."

I picked up my cup and sipped at it, nodding to show my approval. I'd never expected to meet a man of my kind in Velen----I sensed special trait in his words. The trait of an adventurer.

“Mr. Mirror, that’s what they call me. And...not hard to guess your doubt, Master Vesarn of Toussaint. The EAR.” Said he, with a gleam of deliberate mystery in his eyes.

“So, Master Mirror of Velen. Not hard to guess, you’re going to resolve my doubt.” I therefore followed his suspense.

“The *ladies*. All from the *ladies of the woods*.” After a few rounds of drinking, Mirror put down his cup and said as if tipsy, “They are the gods of this obscure village. As you’ve seen, things here were running much better than other places in Velen. Not much famine nor drought. Yes, yes, let’s say the gods did listen to their wishes. But they demand for sacrifices. I mean, how could there be no cost? Rumor has it that, through those cut ears, ladies can hear everything. Even our talk here. Shit, those goddamned old witches!”

“Hey! Mirror!” The old folk, who’s remained speechless just now, stood up from his seat, yelling at us, “Here in Downwarron, no one doubts the ladies. One more shit and you piss off!”

“Oh...looks like I’m gonna piss off.” Finishing his last few tastes in haste, Mirror dropped a dozen of Crowns down to the table, “Listen to me, Vesarn, go to the Whispering Hillock. Out the tavern and straight south. You will see an old oak tree.

You'll definitely find something there."

I toasted him goodbye, wondering about the whispering hillock. Strange name. What would it be like to whisper?

"And YOU. Outsider." Unexpectedly the old geezer turned to me, growling with a morose face, "Here you are not wel..."

His voice was interrupted by a kick on the door. So hard to tremble the wooden floor. There came in, almost armed to their teeth, a couple of tall guys cockily, the golden sun carved on their cuirass flaring regally in the darksome tavern---I'd never be so grateful to those Nilfgaadians. But for them, at the next moment I would have punched the old guy on his face. In that way this story would have ended up embarrassingly.

"Ah...welcome! Dear masters...what can I do for you?" The proprietress hurried to greet the soldiers, dressed up with a big smile---the brightest smile I'd ever seen in Velen.

Armour of the leading one was extraordinarily exquisite, revealing his high-rank identity. Taking off his well-decorated armet, the officer manifested his scarred face and elaborated mustache. Obviously he had no intent to hide his arrogance by saying, "Heard of your drink. Better than others. Take it to me."

As the proprietress hurried to prepare their drink, the noble officer began to look around. The noisy, dirty environment seemed to make him frown, and it turned into anger when he saw the Temerian shield. But his rationality somehow managed to calm him down.

“Hey, YOU!” The chief turned to his fellow to make command, his voice loud enough for the whole tavern to hear, clearly every word, “Take down the bloody shield.”

While one of the soldiers was going to remove the shield, again it was the old man who stood out to stop, “Masters, you can’t...that’s for the ladies...”

Jesus, even a GOD should have a political stand during a war. Never heard a god so worldly-wise.

“I do not care what bitches want this shield!” The officer seemed to lose his temper finally. He stepped on to lifted the old man up by his collar, shouting, “Here now is Nilfgaardian, and the Nilfgaadian should take charge. One more shit word I’ll cut off your tongue!”

Then he drew his sword and split the shield violently into pieces. As is for decoration, the shield is just as vulnerable as the Temerian garrison, I would have written down this dramatic scene if I had really been a historian. But as those noble Nilfgaardians were

getting seated, I realized there was no way getting more information. I was zealous for adventure, but not for trouble, especially political ones. As far as I knew, unlike the northern realm, these Nilf guys had no religious faith to believe in, if anything, that was their supreme emperor. I therefore put down the cup, in which much left, thinking of Mirror the guy and what he called the whispering hillock.

As checking out at the counter, I heard the proprietress gossiping with some other middle-aged women. Even too busy schmoozing to count my coins.

“Been several days since I last saw the boy...The ladies’ feast. Is it today?” Asked one of them.

“It is tomorrow. You idiot.” The proprietress signed as if pitying, “Poor bog kids.”

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It was at dusk outside the tavern. Reddish twilight of the afterglow casted to the dense foliage of Velen, together with the looming thick mist among the woods, somehow reflected a shadow of evil in the disgusting puddle next to my foot. A typical excerpt of the quotidian view of Velen. It was the last warning of the no man’s land to its people, that the night, along with the unknown danger, was coming. Unintentionally I noticed the board above the tavern, on which said its name, “Ladies’ spoon”. The LADIES.

Everybody here knew them and talked about them. I made up my mind to visit whispering hillock the next day.

However, trouble came much earlier than I thought. According to my former experiences, five coins were fair enough for villagers to spare me a bald sleeping place. It wouldn't be comfortable, of course, but at least I'd be able to spend the night. But in Downwarron, each closed his door tightly, no matter how I expressed my friendliness or raised the price. In front of their doors hung a wizened human ear, sending out unpleasant signal and frightening me a little. At that moment I thought of the bald drinker met by day. Shit. Should have asked him for a night. But you know, to regret may be common for an ordinary folk, but not for an adventurer like me. It was getting darker, a dangerous instinct of curiosity, along with the adrenaline was aroused in my heart. I changed my plan and headed for the whispering hillock, right that night.

The dusk in Velen was all of a sudden. Those swamps faraway had swallowed the lasting sun no sooner than I began to walk south.

The night fell.

The sky was covered pitch-black. And the atmosphere changed dramatically, from the obscure to the vicious. Groans and howls of the unhuman reverberated constantly through the woods of the no man's land, waking up those only active at nights. In

distance, I espied a small hill, plumping up abruptly from the plain, exactly like a malformed bulge of the ground. On the hillock stood the oak tree, whirling loudly with its luxuriant branches in the hideous night wind. Under the tree shined a gleam of man light. There were more and more creepy sounds among the dark woods, urging me to hurry.

I found it was a small cabin after finally trot there onto the hillock. Through the timeworn window I saw the reassuring fire light in the dining room. Right above my head, the oak was still swinging its tresses, letting out some kind of creepiness, hastening me to knock the door. I did and pried for the reply.

It seemed my prayer was heard by the ladies. Soon I was replied. It was a boy's voice.

“Who is that?”

“Hush! Mommy Anna told us not to open the door for strangers.” This time a girl, in a low voice.

“But we haven't known yet whether he is a stranger or not!” The boy didn't want to admit his defeat.

It occurred to me, a flash of inspiration. “Don't be afraid. I am a friend of the ladies’.

Close friend. Open the door, please, smart boy. Darling, open the door. I need the stove to warm myself.”

No reply. But I heard them murmuring in the other side. I swallowed and was ready for a long fight of tongue. But before that the door was open unexpectedly.

“Mom has told us to respect the ladies. I think we should help their friend.” The boy lifted his little head to me, obviously proud of the independent decision he had just made.

“Good boy.”

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“That mommy Anna you’ve mentioned. Where does she go?” Sitting together besides the warming stove, I asked the kids as looking around the room. The cabin was no big, but a cozy one, compared to those I’ve endured before. Under the only big bed was a fur rug from unknown animals. A scarce extravagance in Velen. The fire went vigorously in the stove, spreading comforting drowsiness, but for the suspicious bones it would have been perfect. In the corner, I noticed a small handle connected to a block of wooden floor. From my experiences, I speculated there was a cellar beneath. Yet now it was sealed rigidly by some planks. A number of woven pictures were hung on the

walls. I'd looked into a few of them. It was all about three women, fairly pretty and well-shaped, with their beautiful breast exposed boldly. In the pictures they were cooking, or hunting, or teaching the villagers. Must be the ladies of the woods. A bigger picture absorbed my attention, in which the ladies were bandaging the wounds of a Temerian soldier. It convinced me of my assumption. The ladies were thoroughly made up. Maybe a stupid plot of those Temerian politician to control the land. All in all, no that gloominess as in my former Velen night, but this cabin was inexplicably weird.

“Mommy Anna went to the village to collect their taxes for the ladies, she told us, to complete the latest picture.” Answered the boy positively, while the girl remained silent all the time. But following her eyesight I saw the one unfinished, bigger than any of the present, “She said the ladies would compose a big golden sun on it!”

I attached little attention to the boy's childish words. In the murmuring of the oak tree, I suddenly realized the meaning of whispering hillock. Tiredness and drowsiness attacked me so good that I fell unconscious soon after.

But it was not a good sleep as I expected, I was sure, because it was still dark outside when I was woken up by the quarrel.

“...but he said he was their friend! A guest!” I could even hear the boy's tear.

“Ladies have no guest of his kind. And you’ve been told not to open for anyone, even the villagers. Let alone an outsider!” Then a raspy sound of an old woman. Must be Anna.

“Told you not let him in.” The girl, as always, said as if bad-humoured.

Common practice told me that I could no longer stayed here. But I thought I could pretend to be sleeping for some while before I leave spontaneously, as the lasting dignity of a decent man.

But I was wrong. Because the old shrew did not hesitate to throw me out by her broom. In order to prevent the argument from escalating into unnecessary violence, and in light of the grey crack of the horizon sky, as if ready to give birth to the morning sun, I decided to obey her will. In the last instant before old Anna brutally closed the door, I caught sight of what in her hand. A bundle of human hair. There was a moment I did feel pity for those poor villagers. Thought that they’d suffer so much for some god nonexistent.

The story should’ve ended here, and trust me, I do wish so. As in most of the ghost stories you’ve heard, only malicious human thought was hidden behind the scary monsters...but here in Velen, it was no such things.

I'd better keep going. Where was I? Oh, after getting outside, as I've said, it was still very dark. So I went closer to the oak tree, with the glimmering light from the cabin. My god, you won't know how big it is unless you get the some close as I was. And the truth is, I'd never seen such a tremendous tree as that. Even the ones planted in the Toussaint Royal Garden could not compare with this one in Downwarron. Ironical. But when I tried to touch it, I found in surprise that it was cold. Dead cold, like an inanimate corpse. On its limbs cawing some ugly ravens, making their unamiable suggestion to ask me to leave. Finally, more sunlight was poured from the horizon crack. I was going to leave, in the whispering of the oak, thinking. But it startled me that the door opened again. There came out the boy, hopping and jumping right towards me. Seemed that Anna had forgiven him.

"Mommy has her message on you." He coughed affectedly, imitating the raspy voice of the old woman, "Go away, stranger, better as far as possible. The Gods here welcome no outsiders."

Finishing getting the message across, he grinned as if a little confused, "Honestly I don't think the ladies are so scary. They all say we should respect the ladies, but they are afraid when they say so, aren't they?... to tell you secretly, we are going to visit the ladies! Me and Isa! Mommy Anna said only good kids can see the ladies. Don't know why Isa is so sad about it...I sometimes hear her crying in the corner. Really I cannot understand."

“You said you are going to see them? The ladies?”

I was about to ask more when unfortunately, Anna was waving to the boy at the door, calling him back. So it was when we farewell. I liked the boy. His smile always reminded me of all the good of innocence, even in such a nasty place. I gaze after his little figure until devoured by the cabin. Somehow, the old woman, who had been a vicious character in my mind, looked so haggard and lugubrious at that moment.

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Dawn light struggled hard to penetrate the dense dark clouds above Velen, glimmering delicately when arrived at the tavern — at dawn or dusk, it was depressing to the same extent.

I was waiting for Mirror, looking forward to a conversation. I supposed he'd wished the same.

It proved my supposition that shortly he showed up in the doorway with his distinguishing hair style, glistening obviously in the somber room.

“Hi! Knew you're here!” Recognizing me too, Mirror came to me directly. His forehead

gleamed with sweat, suggesting some kind of strenuous exercise he had done.

“I’ve heard of it! You’ve spent a night on the hillock? Hah! Strange enough. The old woman didn’t drive you away?”

“Anna? You know about her?”

Mirror didn’t answer my question. He sighed heavily, and then closed his eyes, as if had a story to tell. Yet eventually he kept silent about it. To change the subject, I told him my conjecture about the ladies, expecting him to agree. But conversely, he said,

“Temerian political production? NO, no no no. I’d rather they are fake. But things is, they aren’t. You’ll see. Those bloody whores do exist, controlling these stupid men with their dirty tricks...But thanks to these Nilfgardians, I’ve got a plan. I...”

He was interrupted by a sudden cry. People put stopped drinking one after another and swarmed out the tavern to see what happened. One of them knocked over my cup while passing by, spilt the remaining liquid on to my pants. Cursing my bad luck, I stood up and followed Mirror into the crowd. I noticed his face, on which was a faint sneer of satisfaction.

But after he actually saw the scene, his sneer turned into astonishment, then anguish. A

gang of empire soldiers were binding a woman high to a wooden pillar. Under the pillar heaped up lots of firewood.

It was Anna. It was what we called burning death.

“No! Not her!” In the shriek of the woman and the buzz of the crowd shouted Mirror in agony, “She is innocent!”

“Shut up. Northerner. You are teaching me what to do?” A Nilfgaardian stepped forward and said ruthlessly. From his voice and his armour, I knew he was the officer yesterday in the tavern.

“Fuck you Nilfs! I’ve told you to burn the house and leave the woman! You goddamned bastard! Fuc--”

He didn’t make it. He never could. His mouth was no longer connected to his throat. His round-shaped head went a fantastic curve in the air and fell to the ground. Besides it lies unconsciously the bothersome old man. No idea whether dead or fainted. Scarlet liquid sprayed out of Mirror’s head, incarnadining a few of the muddy peddles.

Shriek went out from the crowd.

The officer took a piece of handkerchief from his fellow to clean the spittle on his face.

Exactly why Mirror was convicted dead. Expressionlessly, he then took the torch and lit the firewood, waiting for the death-row to exclaim her last wail in despair.

After doing all the preparations, he turned to the stunned crowd, shouting sonorously,

“Now you all see! Northerners! No Demon nor God exists, but only the emperor’s majesty abounds in his land.”

Mirror’s death was all of a sudden, yet for a tough man like me, it was not enough to scare the hell of me. However a disgusting feeling about my crotch urged me to looked down---luckily, I’d retained the last pride of a man; but it still confused me that the dried ale stain somehow turned into some moistened mud. Recalling what Mirror had said to me a few moments ago, I was suddenly devoured by some bad imagination. Very bad.

Having no time to appreciate the tragedy, I hurried to the whispering hillock. It was almost noon; sunlight got its way to make the road bright. But there is something different from the vague horror at night. Something more dreadful, more substantive.

In full speed, it took me no long to reach the cabin. Almost out of breath, I stepped over the wooden door which had been knocked open in a violent way. It was a mass in the

room. The first thing I saw was the woven picture of the Temerian soldier, torn out of shape. Guess it was the unexpected toughness of human hair that make the Nilfgaardians give up ripping it apart. On the worktable was the new woven work, almost finished overnight. And when I walked closer to observe it, it shocked me like nothing else---the ladies were no longer naked beauties as in other pictures, but turned out to be three excessively hideous CRONES, in three distinctive shapes. The leading one was extremely obese and covered with bloodstain; several skinny legs and arms protruded from the fabric pocket tied to her waist. The second, wearing a torn witch hat, had one of her ears replaced by disgusting little holes, her body fully decorated with human ears; she was about to cut off the Nilfgaadian's ear. The third stretched her wizened arms, which were caked with human hair, and exposed her morbidly spiculate nails, weaving something. Such a picture I would spend my whole life to forget. Besides the picture was a thick pile of paper, on which ugly words and sentences were densely packed. I scanned the surface ones, and frightened to find the record of my conversation with Mirror. On the paper was every single word that came out of my mouth.

Looking around. Kids vanished. The cellar seemed to be opened and then sealed hastily. The fire had long been extinguished, the bones within therefore conspicuously frightening.

In horror, I found a sealed envelope under the mass of dusts, and picked it up perturbed. Noticing it was affixed Mirror, I opened the envelope rudely in surprise. Within the

handwriting was still fresh and watery, saying,

“Dear sister,

Your curse will be lifted soon after. You shall not suffer anymore, I promise, everything will come to an end right today. Before that, please hide yourself in the bog. I will meet you there at noon. Let the Nilfs burn the house, and we will escape together.”

I could not imagine what would going on tonight. Not at all. Just despise my cowardice as you want. As fast as I could, I ran away from the village, flustered and panicked. I knew, last warning it was, of Downwarron to a stranger like me...As for the villagers and those arrogant Nifgaardians, I had no idea about them.

...

So now you are asking, “Is it really true? The ladies of the woods. Do they really exist?” and expecting me to say “Yes”. But you shall be disappointed, because I can only reply you by “I don’t know, yet that’s what we believe.”

Bonus story:

The Bog Monster

Few tourists visit Velen. But if you are stupid enough to come here for sightseeing, then go to the crookback bog—how shall I put it—as one of the few spots here.

—An anonymous adventurer

Here in velen, anything could happen. Anything strange. Mirror had known it well when he was a child. In his childhood, just like any other kids, Mirror would enjoy running on the bare humid earth and rolling in the muddy bogs. Kids are all the same. They shared the same curiosity for everything. Yet things went particularly in Mirror. While the badlands in Velen had diminished the curiosity of other kids, Mirror remained the same—he was born an adventurer. His curiosity increased as time flied.

This might have something to do with his origin. Mirror didn't remember his parents. He never met them. His sister, Anna, raised him by doing labor work at the port. Not much jobs in Velen paid coins. She had had no choices but to toil away. Like any other orphans, Mirror would ask about his parents, but the silence of Anna silenced him as well.

No doubt, as grown up, Mirror's spirit of adventure did him some good. The mirror business he was working on now could be a good example. No one really knew how he

managed to cut a deal with the glass merchant who had occasionally come to Downwarron. But as a consequence he had become a mirror dealer since then. It was even more amazing that he was running it well.

But in general, for one in Velen, especially in Downwarron, this is no good quality. Not at all.

It was not long before Mirror's sister got caught by the ladies and became their messenger.

There was always hustle and bustle in Ladies' spoon, a tavern that provided best food in Velen, and a mixing pot of all kinds of rumors and hearsay. Here, every day, different people from all walks of life would come and go, with only one thing in common, the desire for cheap pleasure. Drinkers got their souls back only among the cups of ale.

Mirror was no exception. He was a frequenter in Ladies' Spoon. Here he enjoyed listening to the gossip that came along with the dirty ale foam from all kinds of drinkers. Some of the word would rouse his curiosity, like the bait to the fish. This time, it was the rumor about Crookback Bog that rang his bell.

"Some more strange sounds were heard yesterday, in the Bog..." The first voice came from a woman, on whose face her freckles grew as much as the wrinkles. Sitting close

to the counter, she spoke to the proprietress, who was, at that moment, busy washing dishes full of greasy dirt, the scar of her cut right ear shocking.

“God. May the ladies bless us. How many beasts are still hidden in that bloody place?”

Echoes the proprietress, her eyes still fixed on the plates.

“I saw it! From the bog protruded lots of nasty tentacles. I clearly saw them last time I went by.” Another raspy voice chimed in.

Those elderly women would spontaneously gather at the counter, gossiping. The monster in Crookback Bog was lucky enough to become their new subject. By the time they were describing, maybe imagining the look of the monster with great enthusiasm. As for the men, they wouldn't be interested in these chit-chat—even if they were, they wouldn't manifest it. Politics and wars. That's what fixated them. Men loved to talk about these big stuffs. Some of them acted so zealously as if were eager to sacrifice themselves for their homeland. While others didn't scruple to scorn at the foolishness of these “patriots”. After all, in light of the current situation, it was merely a matter of time for the Nilfgaardian to win the war and take the whole north. Temeria was destined to fall. Yet this mattered little for their discussion. No one knew whether they really care about which king was in charge of the land of Velen. Perhaps they just seek a sense of existence in these conversations—a sense of existence that connected them with the whole world.

However, Mirror paid no attention to politics. His sense of existence rested elsewhere.

Now he picked up his cup and stepped towards the counter, smiling.

“Hey! Old fairies. What are you talking about? The bog monster? Wish my joining would not disturb you.”

“Of course not, Mirror.” Replied the freckled woman, as if pleased by Mirror’s frivolous speaking style. “On the contrary, we’d like to hear your view about the monster in the Crookback Bog. Two ears better than one, isn’t it?”

“Crookback Bog...? It is not absurd for a creepy place to breed a nasty monster. I can say that. Perhaps we should hire a *Witcher*.” Replied Mirror, as if thinking. He recalled that Anna would warn him to stay away from the Crookback Bog when he was still a naughty boy. Considering the dangerous landform around the bog, he thought, as grown up, that was totally made up to keep him safe.

“A *Witcher*? Those coldblooded freaks?” Unexpectedly, the woman was somehow kind of panicked hearing the word, “No, no. It is much more a trouble to hire these monster-killers than the one in the bog. I’ve heard of them. They themselves are monsters no less.”

“We can’t afford their service, neither. They are born swindlers.” Added the proprietress.

That was not true. Mirror thought. But he didn’t let it out. The overreaction of the women and the mystery of the monster gave a precise hit to his curiosity. A plan was plotted in his mind—what exactly hid in the bog? He was going to see himself.

“Well, if you say so, my girls! Let’s just forget those shit monsters. Cheers! ... dammit, I’ve got a trade to deal with. Farewell and thank you! Enjoy your drinks!”

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Crookback Bog was located in the center area of Velen. Around it grew luxuriantly the dense woods and shrubs. It was said that one must crook his back, peering carefully at the ground he was on in case falling into some deadly sticky marsh.

“Shit.” Imagining his humiliating figure in the forest, Mirror let out a curse, one of his arms pushing away the lush herbaceous plants, another one swinging constantly to repel the mosquitos. But his heart was rising high unconsciously, as if he was summoned by the unknown, as it were.

Poking violently away the last few clusters of bushes, Mirror found the scene in front of him suddenly open and clear. Through the last sparse foliage Mirror could espied the

bog in a close distance he'd never been. Recklessly he brushed down the ticks stick to his calf, and stepped out faster to the bog.

However, as Mirror was truly standing in the mysterious Crookback Bog, he found himself deeply disappointed. No creepy monster brandishing its nasty tentacles. No ugly hags living in her hut made by human bone. There, in the bog, was only scavengers, which were quite common in Velen, and crows and vultures hovering as if slobbering.

Abruptly he saw a woman dressed in homespun walking towards him, as if out from the deep of the bog, her greasy long hair suggesting that she wasn't from Downwarron. Mirror therefore waved at her friendly, saying, "Hi! Madam! Have you...."

Unexpectedly the woman was first surprised as noticing Mirror. Then she dodged her eyes, passing him quickly by with her lips closely compressed. Silently Mirror watched her run away, confused. He decided to march on to the deep.

When Mirror was still puzzled by the woman, some crying sounds slide into his ear, as if came from a baby. **Maybe there was a monster or at least something?** Absorbed by the sound, associated with the woman, right towards where the sound led him to, Mirror began to run, startling some of the ravens from enjoying their remains. They were cawing at him as if condemning his rush.

Yet Mirror didn't answer the ravens. He stopped in front of a puddle, quite bigger than others.

In the puddle lay an infant, definitely hadn't experienced his first birthday, bawling. Next to the infant strewn a few pieces of human bones and little skulls, small and fragile, on which he could see horrifying bite prints. Must be the masterpiece of the big rats hidden in the bush not far away, who were now cheeping with their little red eyes wide open and fixed on Mirror, and their feast in the puddle.

He cursed the goddamned woman, and the rats, then picked up a piece of stone and threw it at the bush. Rats were startled and scattered away.

He squatted down besides the puddle, reaching out his arms in order to hold the baby up.

But he didn't. His hands stopped in the air. The money he earned from his mirror business was quite enough for him to bring up one child or more. Also he didn't care about what the villagers would say finding him, a man in his twenties, looking after a baby. Yet he didn't.

In the howling cry even more shrilling, he put down his hands, stood up, and turned around. The curse came from his mouth finally stopped.

Again, the rats gathered, grinding their long-grinded teeth.

Mirror left. He'd never turn around.

It was getting darker. The setting sun casted his lasting light onto the puddles aside the backway, dying them blood red. With unfeeling calm Mirror went through the annoying bushes. Out of the forest, a deserter-looking guy walked right towards the bog, pulling forcibly a teenage girl, who was weeping, but didn't resist. From the lewd grin of the man Mirror would know everything. But he just passed by coldly.

There were no monsters in the Crookback bog. Mirror should have known it.

There was only guilt. [6367]