

I THE VIGIL IN THE CHAPEL

Tiuri knelt on the stone floor of the chapel, staring at the pale flame of the candle in front of him.

What time was it? He was supposed to be reflecting seriously upon the duties he would have to perform once he was a knight, but his mind kept wandering. And sometimes he found that he wasn't thinking about anything at all. He wondered if his friends felt the same.

He glanced across at Foldo and Arman, at Wilmo and Jussipo. Foldo and Wilmo were gazing at their candles, while Arman had buried his face in his hands. Jussipo was kneeling with a straight back and staring up at the ceiling, but then he changed position and looked Tiuri right in the eyes. Tiuri turned his head away and fixed his gaze on the candle again.

What was Jussipo thinking about?

Wilmo moved, scraping his shoe on the floor. The others all looked in his direction. Wilmo hung his head and looked a little embarrassed.

It's so quiet, thought Tiuri. I've never known such quietness in my entire life. All I can hear is our breathing, and maybe, if I listen carefully, the beating of my own heart...

The five young men were not permitted to say anything to one another, not even a word, all night long. They were also forbidden to have any contact at all with the outside world. They had locked the chapel door behind them and would not open it again until the next morning, at seven o'clock, when King Dagonaut's knights would come to fetch them.

Tomorrow morning! Tiuri could already picture the celebratory procession: the knights on their magnificently caparisoned horses, with their colourful shields and fluttering banners. He imagined himself among them, riding a fine steed, clad in shining armour, with a helmet and a waving plume. But then he shook his head to rid himself of that vision. He knew he should not be thinking about the external trappings of knighthood, but instead vowing to be chivalrous and honest, brave and true.

The candlelight made his eyes hurt. He looked at the altar, where the five swords lay waiting. The shields hung above the altar, gleaming in the flickering light of the candles.

Tomorrow there will be two knights bearing the same coat of arms, thought Tiuri. *Father and myself*. His father's name was also Tiuri and he was known as Tiuri the Valiant. Was he lying awake now, thinking about his son? Tiuri hoped he would become as worthy a knight as his father.

Then another thought occurred to him. What if someone were to knock at the door? He and his companions would not be permitted to open it. Tiuri remembered something that Sir Fantumar, whose squire he had been, had once told him. During his own vigil in the chapel, there had been a loud knocking at the door. Fantumar had been there with three other young men, and none of them had opened up. And it was just as well, because they later discovered that it had been one of the king's servants, who had wanted to put them to the test.

Tiuri looked again at his friends. They were still kneeling in the same position. He knew it must be after midnight. His candle had almost burnt down; it was the shortest of the five. Perhaps it was because he was sitting by a window. The chapel was a draughty place and he could feel a chilly gust of air. *When my candle goes out*, he thought, *I won't light*

another one. The others wouldn't be able to see him in the dark, which was an appealing thought, and he wasn't worried that he might fall asleep.

Had Wilmo dozed off? No, he just shifted position, so he must be awake.

I'm not spending my vigil as I should, thought Tiuri. He clasped his hands together and rested his eyes on his sword, which he would be allowed to use only for a just cause. He repeated to himself the words that he would have to speak to King Dagonaut the following day: "I swear as a knight to serve you loyally, as I will all of your subjects and those who call upon my aid. I promise to..."

Then he heard a knock at the door. It was quiet, but there could be no doubt. The five young men held their breath, but stayed exactly where they were.

Then there was another knock.

They looked at one another, but no one said a word or moved a muscle.

The handle turned and rattled, but of course the door was locked. Then they heard the sound of footsteps slowly moving away.

All five of them sighed at the same time.

Good, thought Tiuri. *That's it over with.* It was strange, but he felt as though, all throughout his vigil, he had been waiting for such an interruption. His heart was pounding so loudly that he was sure the others must be able to hear it. *Come on, Tiuri, calm down,* he said to himself. *It was just a stranger who didn't know about our vigil, or someone who wanted to disturb us, or to put us to the test.*

But still, Tiuri waited anxiously for another sound. His candle flared brightly and then went out, with a quiet hiss, and he was surrounded by darkness.

He had no idea how much more time had passed when he heard a quiet noise above his head. It sounded like someone scratching at the window!

And then he heard a voice, as soft as a breath. "In the name of God, open the door!"

2 A STRANGER'S REQUEST

Tiuri straightened his back and looked at the window. He could see nothing, not even a shadow, so he might almost have imagined it. If only that were true! He couldn't do as the voice had asked, no matter how urgent it had sounded. Tiuri hid his face in his hands and tried to banish every thought from his mind.

But again he heard the voice, very clearly, even though it was no more than a whisper. "In the name of God, open the door!"

It sounded even more urgent than before.

Tiuri looked at his friends. They didn't appear to have heard anything. But he had definitely heard the voice! "In the name of God, open the door!"

What should he do? He wasn't allowed to open the door... but what if it was someone who was in need of help, a fugitive in search of sanctuary?

He listened. All was silent again. But the voice was still echoing in his ears; he would never be able to forget it. Oh, why did this have to happen now of all times? Why did he have to be the one who heard the plea? He was not allowed to respond, but he knew that he would be unable to rest until he had done so.

Then Tiuri made a decision. Quietly, he stood up, stiff from kneeling on the cold floor for so long. Feeling his way

along the wall, he tiptoed towards the door. He glanced at his friends and thought at first that they had not noticed anything, but then he saw Arman looking in his direction. He knew his friend would never betray him.

It seemed to take forever to reach the door of the chapel. Tiuri looked back one more time, at his friends, at the altar and the shields above it, at the light of the four candles, and at the dark shadows throughout the chapel, between the columns and around the vaulted ceiling. Then he headed to the door and put his hand on the key.

If I open this door, he thought, I'll have broken the rules. And then the king will not knight me tomorrow.

Tiuri turned the key, opened the door a crack and peered out into the night.

A man stood outside the door, dressed in a monk's habit, with the hood pulled down over his eyes. Tiuri could not see his face, as it was too dark. He opened the door a little wider and waited in silence for the man to speak.

"Thank you!" whispered the stranger.

Tiuri did not reply.

The stranger waited for a moment and then said, still in a whisper, "I need your help. It's a matter of life and death! Will you help me? Please." When Tiuri did not reply, he said, "My God, why won't you say something?"

"How can you expect me to help you?" whispered Tiuri. "Why have you come here? Don't you know that I am to be knighted tomorrow and that I may speak to no one?"

"I know that," answered the stranger. "That is why I came to this place."

"Well, you should have gone somewhere else," Tiuri said. "Now I've broken the rules and so I can't be knighted tomorrow."

“You will be knighted and you will have earned your knighthood,” said the stranger. “A knight must help when his assistance is requested, must he not? Come outside, and I shall explain what I need you to do. Hurry, hurry, for there’s little time!”

What do I have to lose now? thought Tiuri. *I’ve already spoken and I’ve opened the door, so why not leave the chapel too?*

The stranger took him by the hand and led him around the outside of the chapel. His hand felt bony and wrinkled. It was the hand of an old man. *His voice sounded old as well,* thought Tiuri. *Who could he be?*

The stranger stopped beside a small, dark alcove. “Let’s hide here,” he whispered, “and we must speak quietly, so that no one can hear us.” Then he released Tiuri’s hand and asked, “What is your name?”

“Tiuri,” he answered.

“Ah, Tiuri. I know I shall be able to count on you.”

“What do you want of me?” asked Tiuri.

The stranger leant close and whispered in his ear, “I have a letter here, with a message of vital importance. One might even say that the fate of an entire kingdom depends on it. It is a letter for King Unauwen.”

King Unauwen! Tiuri had heard that name many times before. He reigned over the land to the west of the mountains, and was renowned as a noble and just ruler.

“This letter must be taken across the Great Mountains to the king in the City of Unauwen,” said the stranger. “As quickly as possible.”

“You don’t expect me...” Tiuri began.

“No,” said the stranger, interrupting him. “The man who shall deliver the letter is the Black Knight with the White Shield. At this moment, he is in the forest, at the Yikarvara

Inn. What I need you to do is to take this letter to him. I cannot do so myself, as I am old and there are enemies all around, who are pursuing me and who know my face.”

“Why do you not ask someone else?” said Tiuri. “The city is full of knights right now, and there must be plenty of men you can trust.”

“I cannot ask any of those knights,” responded the stranger. “They would attract too much attention. Did I not tell you that there are enemies everywhere? Spies are lying in wait throughout the city, just looking for an opportunity to steal this letter. A famous knight is no good to me. I need someone who is unknown and who will go unnoticed. But at the same time I must be able to trust him with this letter. In other words, I am looking for someone who is a knight and yet not a knight! You are the one I need. You have been found worthy of being knighted tomorrow, but you are still young and have no reputation for your valiant deeds. And yet I know I can trust you.”

Tiuri could find no argument to counter his words. He tried again to make out the stranger’s features, but it was still too dark. “So this letter is of great importance?” he said.

“Of more importance than you could ever imagine!” whispered the stranger. “Come, you must hesitate no longer,” he continued, his voice trembling. “We’re wasting too much time! Near this place, behind the chapel, there is a horse in a meadow. If you take it, you can be at the inn within three hours – sooner if you ride quickly. It is about quarter past one now. You can be back by seven, when King Dagonaut’s men will come to fetch you. Please, do as I ask!”

Tiuri knew he could not refuse. The rules that a future knight had to follow were important, but this appeal for his assistance seemed to matter even more.

“I will do it,” he said. “Give me the letter and tell me how to find the inn.”

“My thanks!” sighed the stranger. He quickly continued, in a whisper, “The place where he is to be found is called the Yikarvara Inn. Do you know King Dagonaut’s hunting lodge? Behind it, there is a track that heads north-west. Ride along it until you reach a clearing in the forest. Two paths run on from there. Take the left-hand path and it will lead you to the inn. As for the letter, you must promise me on your honour as a knight that you will guard it as you would your own life and give it to no one other than the Black Knight with the White Shield.”

“I am not yet a knight,” said Tiuri, “but if I were, I would promise it on my honour as a knight.”

“Good. If someone tries to steal the letter, you must destroy it, but only if it is absolutely necessary. Understood?”

“Understood,” said Tiuri.

“And mark this well: when you find the Black Knight with the White Shield, you must ask him: Why is your shield white? And he will respond: Because white contains every colour. Then he will ask you: Where do you come from? You must answer: I come from afar. Only after that exchange should you hand over the letter.”

“Like a password,” said Tiuri.

“Exactly. A password. Do you understand exactly what you need to do?”

“Yes,” said Tiuri. “Please give me the letter.”

“One last thing,” said the stranger. “Be careful. You must make sure that you are not followed. Here is the letter; guard it well.”

Tiuri took the letter. It was small and flat and he could feel, in the darkness, that there were seals on it. He slipped it under his shirt, close to his chest.

“You won’t lose it if you keep it there, will you?” asked the stranger.

“No,” Tiuri replied. “That’s the safest place.”

The stranger grasped his hands and shook them firmly. “Then go,” he said. “And God bless you!” He let go of Tiuri’s hands, turned around and slipped back into the darkness.

Tiuri waited for a moment and then walked, quickly and quietly, in the opposite direction. He looked over at the dimly lit windows of the chapel, where his friends were still keeping their vigil before the altar. “Come on,” he whispered to himself, “You have to hurry.”

And he went in search of the meadow where the stranger had told him he would find a horse waiting.