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Once upon a time there lived a young, valorous, noble King and his beautiful Queen who was also a very good match for him. The King inherited a small kingdom near the sea shore. After marriage the royal couple moved there and started to renovate the old, abandoned castle. The only thing that grieved them was that they had no children. One day the Queen was walking in the garden going deeper and deeper. She had never been there earlier. This part of the garden was somewhat wilder, without lovely trimmed trees; hence everything looked more natural and wild. She was enchanted by its beauty. There was a lake in the palace garden, protruding into the grove as a narrow strip in this part of the garden, making the surroundings particularly charming. As the Queen approached the lake she noticed a marble statue on its shore among the trees. It was the Prince's figure, of the man's height. The Queen came closer and looked at it attentively.

- What a graceful work, so delicate, really remarkable piece of art! What a noble face, - she exclaimed.,- But why it was put in such a wild, lonely place of the garden?

The right hand of the Prince was on his chest, his left hand, with his palm up, was stretched out a little bit. The palm was filled with rain waters. Small redbreast fluffy birds were sitting on the statue chirping gaily, dipping their beaks into the palm and drinking some water in turn. The Queen was looking at them smiling. When she looked down she noticed a climbing rose growing from the statue's foot. It was the end of May and white velvety petals just were coming into bloom. She reached out for the rose and tore it off. Smelling lovely scent, her heart was filled with heavenly joy. She raised her eyes; the sun was shining brightly in the blue, cloudless sky. She smiled at the sky and cried out:

- Let me have a small girl, beautiful like this rose, with blue sparkling eyes like this sky and with heart filled with burning love for others like this sun.

All of a sudden the birds sitting on the statue broke up chirping, made several circles around the Queen and flew up. The Queen felt her entreaty was heard. And, indeed a year later the King and Queen rejoiced at having a very sweet baby-girl with blue eyes. She was called Leticia. The birth of the princess made the whole nation happy. And the princess really was exceptionally warm and bright creation with loving heart.

Leticia was five years old when the Queen unexpectedly fell ill and passed away. The child spent all that night crying clutching to her father's breast, worn out she fell asleep at dawn. At the Palace there lived a maid of honour, her name was Emilia. Leticia and the children living in the Palace showed exceptional love towards Emilia as she knew and would tell them many interesting stories and fairy tales. After her mother's death the little princess became particularly attached to Emilia, constantly being next to her. Emilia used to tell her numerous fairy tales, walked with her in the garden, sang songs for her, and played with her trying to relieve the pain caused by her mother's death.

Time passed. Leticia was growing up. Though her father was indulging her too much, trying to relieve her from royal burden of Monarch Etiquette and formalities and was ready to satisfy any of her wishes or desires, the nature of the princess did not change, she remained as warm, kind and responsive as she used to be. Everyone in the Palace was rejoiced at her joyful giggles. Leticia has already grown up but she still enjoyed listening to Emilia's fairy-tales as before. If she could not manage to tell her a story during the daytime, the maid had to tell her at least one new fairy tale before the bedtime. And

once, when Leticia was ten years old, Emilia told her the following fairy tale:

Many, many years ago, in a far off country near the sea shore there lived a King and a Queen. They had the only son, Evilas by name. The prince was very handsome, valorous, strong, noble-hearted, wise, distinguished by his bravery in battles, very simple and modest in relationship with the others, self-controlled, a man of dignity. The Royal couple rejoiced at having such a good heir to the throne. Their only worry was that he was nearly twenty one and was not thinking about marriage. Whenever somebody tried to talk to him about this he tried to evade the question and changed the subject. The Prince did not want to marry without love, and he had not loved anyone yet.

One day a magnificent vessel berthed at their pier-head. The King of the neighbouring country decided to voyage around together with his daughter. The King, Queen and the Prince went out to meet them and welcomed them to their Palace. The first time the Prince saw the Princess, he liked her. Her name was Elvira. She had thick, curly golden hair, green glittering eyes, the angles of her deep red lips were constantly adorned with a smile. Evilas particularly liked her smile and he was telling her various amusing stories to be delighted by her cheerful and happy smile. Elvira was also very clever, they were exchanging witty, sharp remarks, contesting in making trial of their skills in narrating stories and making witty remarks, one would start telling a story, the other would continue it and then the first one would finish. The days passed merrily. Evilas and Elvira enjoyed spending time together and one day they found out they could not even think of being parted.

The happy couple was walking in the garden of the Palace where there was a several hundred years old lime tree.

- What a huge tree! - She exclaimed looking up the tree.

- It is several hundred years old, - answered the Prince.

- And how many hundred years it will stand here? It must have seen quite a lot!, - she said embracing the trunk of the tree.

- And today it is a witness of us being together... I can't bear to be parted with you, - said Evilas.

- Neither me.

- It means...- began the Prince and looked at Elvira.

- We fell in love? - The Princess continued.

- Will you marry me? - Evilas asked.

The Princess stretched out both hands granting him her charming smile. Evilas touched her hands with his lips, then, holding her in his arms, kissed her.

- Now this tree is a witness of our love, - Evilas said and cut out two "E" letters on the trunk of the tree, their initials woven into one another, with royal crown above them as a symbol of eternal love and fidelity.

- This will be left to generations to come as a symbol of our love, - the Prince said and took her in his arms. In return the Princess pulled out a crimson rose from her hair and gave it to him. Evilas took the rose, touched it with his lips and put it into his breast pocket.

The parents were filled with boundless joy. The wedding day was fixed, lots of invitations were sent out and they were expecting a large number of guests. The distant relative, friends, Kings and Queens of the neighbouring kingdoms, princes and princesses started to arrive. The town was decorated with garlands and colourful hanging lanterns for this gorgeous festive occasion. The feasts were held almost every day. Everyone was rejoicing greatly. Evilas was hosting all young princes, dukes and other guests, while Elvira was welcoming princesses, duchesses and daughters of the nobles.

There was Evilas' distant relative Prince Oscar among the guests. He was distinct from the others by his arrogance, impudence, pride. Though Evilas was not of good opinion of him he still hosted him with corresponding esteem and attended to all his needs.

- I do understand your awkward position, how can you bear his company! - Elvira kept whispering to her bridegroom casting her expressive look upon Oscar.

And Evilas would shrug his shoulders smiling and obediently go on with his hosting duties.

- Oh, I wish everything is over and done, just to get you back to me, - Evilas would tell his bride, and wherever he found her alone he would kiss her passionately.

The Days went on, and the wedding day was approaching rapidly.

- I am tired of being idle, can't we go for hunting? - One day Oscar said looking at Evilas.
- Oh, that's not a bad idea, - joined the others.
- Maybe the day after tomorrow, what do you think? - Oscar asked him again.
- Why not. You can hunt for a deer and wild boar in those mountains, - Evilas answered.
- Oh, very good! It means we go hunting, - exclaimed the guests and broke immediately up to get ready for hunting.

- We are not coming, - Elvira said to Oscar and looking over her guests, the Princesses, - Enjoy yourself without us.

It was still dark when the horse-mounted men left the Palace that day. All of a sudden they heard the church bells ringing. The groups of folk were hurrying up the slope of the mountain towards the church. The Prince Evilas remembered that it was the festive day of their church and he intended to go there. The Prince tightened the reins and halted.

- What is happening? - Oscar asked.

- I forgot it is the feast day of our church, I intended to go there, - Evilas answered.

- Never mind, you will have lots of feast days, - exclaimed Oscar and galloped the horse.

Evilas seemed to hesitate. All of a sudden he recalled his grandmother's advice: "Remember, whenever there is a choice between two, first complete the one having priority before God, then do the other. If you act like this, your life will be led towards light and you will be saved from all temptations and trials".

- What are you doing? Are you waiting for the sun to rise? - Oscar exclaimed.

The Prince kind of awoke from sleep. He could not refuse as he promised to take his guests for hunting so he spun his horse around and galloped off towards the woods. As they left the town behind and took the country road leading to the long woods, a woman dressed in a black robe crossed them the road and moved towards the Prince.

- I was waiting for you, Your Royal Highness. I have a request to ask of you.

- I am listening to you, - Evilas replied.

- I am a widow. I have the only underage son. My husband borrowed some money from our villager. He gave him back the money a few days before he died, but he did not take the bill from him as the villager did not have it on him. Now he filed a claim with a court of law against me and my son, he wants to take the last lump of bread from us. The judge supports him. All villagers can attest that we say the truth. You are our last resort, we believe in your justice, spare us through your mercy, - said the woman.

- Don't worry, - said the Prince giving her a warm smile, - now I am with my friends and we are in a hurry, when I return from hunting I will take care and settle the matter by all means.

- But if you don't return... then who will help me? - The woman asked unexpectedly.

- How dare you?! - Oscar burst out furiously, - how dare you to curse the Prince?!

- May God save me from cursing the Prince, - said the woman, - but is there anyone who knows what is awaiting us? My husband left the house in a good health to bring some wood from the forest, but a tree fell down and killed him.

- All right, don't worry I will soon come back and everything will be arranged in favour of your family, now I can't have my guests waiting for me, - said the Prince quietly.

- You have made your inferiors impudent rascals! - Oscar said mockingly. - If I were you, I would have given this stupid woman a good lesson - whip her.

The Prince did not answer him. He struck the horse with the whip and whirled away. And the guests followed him. The woman remained standing on the road for a while looking at them. It was a very successful hunting trip. They have killed birds, deer, lots of wild boars. Mid-day was approaching when they saw a huge black wild boar. The animal was of enormous size and disgusting. The hunters started to chase it, but the boar ran away very fast. Finally everyone was left behind; the only one who was chasing the boar was Evilas. He galloped his horse whipping it, the horse was flying without wings. He felt as if the feet of his horse were not even touching the ground, they were diving in the air and the boar was drawing them toward itself. The hunters were left so far behind that even their voices could not be heard. The wild animal rushed into a dark dense wood followed by the rider. There was

a small bare piece of land between the trees. The Prince felt as if the land was swirling there rapidly drawing him towards its centre. One moment and the rider was there. All of a sudden the wild boar somersaulted several times and turned into a disgusting old witch. The horse startled, stood up on its hind legs with the forelegs off the ground and knocked the rider down. Evilas jumped quickly on his feet but he felt he lost the ability to make a step or move his fingers, penetrating cold spread through his body. The witch was standing in front of him sniggering and rubbing her hands in satisfaction.

- Hurrah! What a nice trophy captured! - She uttered a hoarse screaming squeal. - I have been waiting for this day for so many years, this may happen only once in a thousand year! Today is my day! The whole world moves just for me, the whole constellation has been arranged just for me! Well done! Excellent! I have managed to entrap you here, indeed!

The Prince was listening to her terrified.

- What? Is it difficult to stay frozen? Just wait, you will turn into stone and all your energy, youth will transfer to my body. That is why I needed the Prince, just like you. Now nobody can take you from my hold, you are captured with this ring. - Saying this she drew a large, black diamond ring from her bosom and put it on his finger.

- Here, this diamond holds all your misfortunes and salvation. You will never be able to slip away, unless a beautiful bride of yours decides to save you, but let us see. Oh, I really lay much hope on Elvira. How delicate she is! Fortunately all princesses are careless and good for nothing... In seven days you will become a marble statue and will stay such for one hundred year... After that you will be brought to life only for forty days and then will turn again into a statue. And over and over again, just five times, so you will have five chances of salvation, and naturally you will not be able to use any of them! It is very difficult to find true love within forty days. And in general love does not exist! Doesn't! Ha, Ha, Ha!!! And then you will be completely in my hands, you will disappear and I will get immortality.

The old witch sniggered wickedly and disappeared. The Prince felt the signs of life gradually reviving his body; he could already move his legs, his hands. He looked at his hand and saw a huge, five-faceted diamond shining brightly on his finger. He wanted to take it off but then changed his mind. "It might be worse," he thought. He heard neighing of the horse. He noticed his horse among the trees and tried to find a way out of the dense wood what turned out to be quite difficult. Disappearance of the Prince caused much anxiety, everyone was looking for him. They felt relieved when found him safe, but seeing him pale, worn and haggard they understood something bad had happened.

- What happened? - Oscar asked him. Evilas shook his head without saying a word and moved towards the town. The hunters followed him. When they approached the village where the widow lived, the Prince set his guests off to town and remained in the village together with two horsemen. He found the woman, summoned the judge and claimant and settled everything in favour of the widow. And then he gave her a small pouch filled with gold coins and headed to the town. The woman raised long prayers for the Prince with gratitude. Evilas was standing worn and pale and indifferent as if he could not quite perceive what was happening around him.

In the evening the Prince returned to the Palace. Elvira came out to welcome him with her usual smile, but when she saw his face, she sensed something bad had happened and her smile faded.

The Prince told her and the King and the Queen everything what had happened to him.

- I am sure there will definitely be a way out! - Elvira exclaimed, - there always is a way to break any kind of spell, we just have to find it!

- That old witch mentioned your name, - Evilas recalled, - as if she knew you. She said you could help me if you wished!

- Yes, I was just telling you that, naturally I want and I will help you, - Elvira said and put her arms on his shoulders tucking her head in his breast.

The King and the Queen sent out messengers to every part of their Kingdom and to the other countries as well, the whole world was shaken, all the famous scholars and sage men were summoned; all books and manuscripts concerning the witchcraft were checked to find the way to break up the curse. At last one scholar found a passage how to remove the spell in an old, huge book where there was a picture of exactly the same ring the Prince was wearing – black five-faceted diamond ring. The

scholar brought the book to the Palace and started to read it solemnly in front of everyone:

- The spell cast on a Prince can be broken only by his bride engaged with a bewitched ring. The bride should necessarily be a Princess. Otherwise if the Prince falls in love with a one who is not a Princess and puts the bewitched ring on her finger as a sign of their engagement, no spell will be removed. The bride Princess has to drop the ring into a black well, as soon as the ring touches the burgling, boiling mass the Prince's curse will be removed. But the most difficult thing is to reach that black well which is located in a far off country beyond the extremely stern desert. To reach the well the bride has to pass first through bewitched wood, then impassable marsh and then fiery valley. The whole chain of these obstacles encircles a high black cliff, on the top of which cliff the black well is located. It is quite difficult to climb that cliff as well. The way leads through an underground. And the Princess has to overcome all these obstructions alone; the moment she sets off she must be prepared to go ahead boldly. In case she is frightened and puts the ring off before the mission is completed, there will be no way to save the Prince, he will be crushed to pieces, as for the Princess she will be saved from danger and will immediately be returned back to the Palace unharmed. If Prince's bride decides to refuse the mission from the very beginning and returns the engagement ring to the Prince, Evilas will have a chance to try with the other Princess. The bewitched ring has five facets. Once in every hundred years when the Prince is brought back to life for forty days, he can make engagement with another Princess with that ring and ask her for help. The Prince is given five such chances. If all the brides refuse or betray him, there will be no way to save Prince's life.

The guests summoned to the palace listened to all the above together with the King, Queen and the Princess Elvira. Elvira was listening very attentively. Her heart clenched painfully when other princesses were mentioned though she managed to cover her feelings. She was sitting upright, with her head raised, solemn, firm preserving peaceful expression on her face.

The book also said:

- The sorcery can be performed on someone only in case the planets and stars in the sky are arranged according to specific mystical scheme, and this happens only once in one thousand years, and in the middle of the day, when the Sun is at its daily zenith. And it should necessarily be performed in the spell-cast wood. The victim should by all means be the Prince, in case the sorcerer misses such a chance the ring loses its power and the sorcerer will not gain the immortality.

When Evilas heard all these he grew pale. "I am to be blamed for everything. In the morning I was given two chances to avoid the meeting with the old witch but I neglected, now what is to be done? I had two chances to make a good choice, but I failed to be responsive. What will become of me? Will any Princess be able to help me? Now I understand why the old witch was sniggering at the delicacy of all princesses. Or how should I demand a sacrifice from anyone?" - Evilas was thinking to himself.

The King and Queen rose to their feet. It was the sign for everyone that the assembly was over. The Prince Evilas and the Princess Elvira separated themselves in a small room. Evilas kept silent. Elvira came closer to him and stretched her hand to him.

- When are you going to give me the engagement ring, I am your bride.

The Prince looked at her in surprise.

- Are you sure?

- Of course I am. Or maybe you are not sure yourself and put your trust in future princesses? -

Elvira asked smiling.

The Prince gave her a tender smile, he intended to take the ring off his finger but then he changed his mind.

- Haven't you heard about all those challenging obstructions? How can you tackle them?

- I will. Since your salvation is in the hands of the Princess who is in love with you, I will manage to do it, - she replied with confidence.

The Prince was hesitating.

- All right, - he said finally, - only promise me, that you will take off the ring and not endanger yourself if you just feel a little bit hard to do it.

- I promise, - Elvira answered.

Evilas took off the ring from his finger and as he slipped it on the ring finger of his bride, one of its facets flashed as a rainbow.

- Not as frightening as it seemed to be, - she said and kissed him.

The day assigned by the old witch was drawing closer, the seventh day from that horrible hunting. Everyone was fearful and thrilled. The King, Queen, Elvira's father, Prince Evilas and Princes Elvira were gathered in a hall and were waiting for the daybreak. It was dawning. Evilas rose to his feet and looked at the sky through the window. Elvira clutched firmly his hand standing next to him. "Maybe nothing will happen," - the Prince was thinking, - "Maybe it was just a horrible dream, a nightmare?"

The Sun appeared on the horizon and the instant its first rays penetrated through the window Evilas turned into a marble statue. Elvira cried out, released his hand in fear and left the hall crying. The Queen embraced her son weeping bitterly.

Overall grief was announced in the whole Kingdom. The guests gradually drove away returning to their countries. Only a few guests remained, Prince Oscar among them. Princess Elvira locked herself in her room and would not come out crying bitterly all days long. A few days later she asked for the book in which that disgusting sorcery was described. Elvira read the book thoroughly, returning to it over and over again. She was plunged in her thoughts. And one day she finally came out of the room and moved towards the hall where she was expecting to see Evilas. Everybody rose to meet her. Her eyes were swollen from crying, the hair dishevelled. She entered the hall upright with her head raised, looked over the people being with the Royal family and started her speech making an effort to force a calm voice:

- I was thinking over too much. I read the book several times and came to the conclusion, - the Princess stopped her speech for a moment, looked at the Queen and continued, - I won't be able to help Evilas, it is an extremely difficult task for me. Even if I go, will I be able to accomplish my goal having not enough power and patience? I may finally ruin him, that's why I am returning the ring. Hope other Princess worthier of being his bride will be able to help him.

- Please, don't do this, - the Queen exclaimed desperately, - don't doom him, you loved him, didn't you?

- Yes, I loved and still love him, but all this is beyond my power. How can I go to a distant unknown place alone and overcome all those difficulties when I haven't even walked alone

- Evilas would not have behaved like that should he be in your place; he would have sacrificed his life to save you.

- Evilas is a man, experienced in battles, valorous, and I am a young woman. How could I endure all those troubles?

- Your love will give you the power to resist and win, - the Queen kept beseeching. - He loves you so much, please don't reject him.

- Don't ask me, please, any more, - she answered holding back her tears, took off the ring from her finger and put it on a small table. One flickering facet of the ring grew dim. Elvira shook her head, threw back the curls from her forehead and hastily left the hall without looking at the marble statue.

At this very time the old witch was standing in front of a huge mirror in her cave. The mirror resembled the diamond ring. It was divided into five parts and each part was reflecting her wrinkled ugly face. All of a sudden her reflection turned into a very nice face of a young lady in one part of the mirror.

The old witch joyfully clapped her hands:

- Yes! That is what I was longing for! The first Princess has completed her mission. - The witch approached the mirror, placed her wrinkled face and claws against the reflection of the young face and hands and she turned into a nice young lady.

- Wonderful! Excellent! - She was murmuring away to herself and turning round in front of the mirror. - I'll be young and beautiful for one hundred years. Then again become old just for forty days, but never mind, I will survive! It's just temporary, until the next Princess casts my Prince aside. And it will be like that every hundred years until the last Princess fails to accomplish her mission! Then I will stay young and beautiful forever.

The old witch was happy while everyone was crying in the palace. The Queen took the ring,

came closer to her son weeping bitterly and put it on his ring finger. The ring set deeply as if implanted into his fossilized finger.

- Oh, my dear son, I wish I could go to that cursed well and sacrifice myself for you, - The Queen was kissing tenderly his petrified hands shedding tears.

A large drop of tear rolled down from petrified Prince's eye and fell on Queen's hand.

- Oh, He can hear me! He is alive! - cried out the Queen.

- Yes, he can hear and see everything now and for the next forty days, then he will sink away into deep sleep - explained the old scholar, who found the way of breaking the spell and who was now standing with the courtiers, crying silently, - and by the end of the hundredth year he will be able to see and hear again for forty days before his revival. This is also said in that book.

The time passed. The grief over his son was so painful that the King died soon. The Queen was constantly next to the marble statue, talking to him as with alive, caressing him tenderly. By her order the musicians were playing sweet melodies to the Prince. And in a while the Queen also felt sick and feeble. She suffered much thinking what would happen after her death, how to protect her son from any damage and finally she decided to hide him in the safe place.

Far from the town there was a secret cave in the mountains where the Royal treasure was hidden and nobody knew about it except for the family members. The Queen decided to hide the statue in that cave. The Prince would have been safe there and at the same time when he was brought back to life he would have found all the necessary things and wealth to lead his life with Royal dignity. By the help of the servants of Royal family the Queen placed the statue in a carriage and at night they headed towards that secret cave through a tunnel. They carried the statue inside and put it in its central part. The Sun rays were penetrating through a narrow chink. The Queen kissed him for the last time and left him alone in the cave. After that she soon passed away. As for the Prince he would stand in the dark cave waiting for one hundred years to pass."

Emilia finished her narrative and looked at Leticia. The Princess was listening to her beloved maid of with her beautiful eyes wide open.

- Then, what happened? - The Princess asked Emilia.

- I will tell you tomorrow, my dear Princess, now is too late, - she smiled at her, tucked up her comfortably in a blanket, bowed her head and left the room.

Leticia lay awake for a long time, thinking about the Prince all the time. Little Princess was wondering: "Has anyone helped him? Does Emilia know the end of the story?"

The next day she was restless, she could not help thinking about the Prince. She was anxiously waiting for night to come.

At bedtime Emilia sat down at her bedside and continued her story:

"A hundred-year period was coming to an end. In spring, when the roses are in bloom the Prince was to be brought back to life. And this day was coming closer. Forty days before his revival the Prince could already hear and see everything. Gradually his eyes got used to the darkness and he understood where he was. He remembered visiting this place with the King when he was a little boy. "Probably my parents brought me here," the Prince thought and it sent a pang to his heart to think of them dead. "They probably passed away long time ago. And I have to be alone in this world among unknown people. Elvira? She could not also be alive either. What is happening outside? Who reigns my Kingdom?"

At last the day has come when the statue finally was brought back to life. The Prince fully recovered himself. Evilas struck flint with steel to get sparks, lit the candles and lighted the cave. The cave was full of treasury. There were also fighting weapons, armour, accoutrements, rich, sumptuous apparel, horse-trappings, trunks filled with gold and precious stones, pearls. The Prince explored the cave and found necessary clothes and weapon. When he was changing the dress he found a weathered deep red rose in his breast pocket. Sad memories forced themselves upon him. He kissed the rose and put it again in his breast pocket. Then he filled the leather bag with gold and precious stones and left the cave. It was spring, warm and sunny day, the birds were chirping gaily in the wood, everything was shining around in bright green colour. Being so many years in darkness the Prince has missed it so

much. He bent down, stroke the wet dew with love, put both hand on the ground and kept silent for a moment taken by his thoughts. Then he lay down on the grass under a tree looking up into the sky. The huge trees sticking up above other trees were gently swinging under the favouring breeze. The Prince liked to look at the trees and listen to their rustling sound from his early childhood. And it was particularly pleasing this time. His heart melted as he recalled his childhood. The Power of Life was slowly returning to him, he felt rapid flow of energy in his body. He rose up, sealed the cave mouth and climbed down the slope of the mountain. Somewhere, far away, a town was seen. So he set off. In the very first settlement he bought a horse, mounted it and rode towards the town.

It was already getting dark when he approached his home-town. It has changed much though preserved some old traits. He enjoyed walking along the streets, visiting known and beloved places. He was observing people, subconsciously searching for familiar faces. Life was in full swing in the town. The squares were crowded. The pierce was full of vessels and ships. The people were looking forward to a great feast.

- What is happening? - The Prince asked a passer-by.

- There will be a magnificent celebration and ball at the Palace in a few days. Lots of guests are invited, among them the Princes from other countries. As it was rumoured, the Princess is going to choose the bridegroom.

- Princess? - The Prince asked, - The King has no son?

- No, she is the only child, pretty green-eyed Cecilia, - said the stranger and went away.

“Oh, can it be a piece of good luck for me? The only daughter and intends to choose her bridegroom when I am alive again. Nothing happens by chance. This nice Princess is definitely my destiny. Her love can save my life and I will recover my Kingdom too.” - Thought the Prince.

Evilas found a room in the most fashionable hotel and was making preparations to meet her. First he had to think about a proper present. The King’s daughter had green eyes. This reminded him Elvira’s green eyes and caused him feel sad. He still missed Elvira though his beloved rejected him and broke the engagement. Nevertheless he did not feel she had done something wrong or unjust, just he felt regret, the only consolation was that it was not too painful, as if everything plunged into mist-covered vague memories of the past.

Evilas chose a very beautiful necklace embedded with emerald as a present - “it would fit her green eyes,” - he thought. And on the day of magnificent feast he put on his best clothes for the occasion and set off for the Palace. Lots of guests from different countries, princes, nobles gathered in the Palace hall to join the festivity and to try their fate as well. The audience started from the early morning, all were waiting for their turn. It was already afternoon when Evilas’ audience was granted. The Princess looked so worn out with all those ceremonial formalities that it was evident she wished it to be over as soon as possible. As Prince Evilas appeared, she became enlivened. He was really a distinguished-looking prince, taller than all the other guests, handsome, with impressive appearance, dignified, chestnut wavy hair, black sparkling eyes, penetrating and powerful look being gentle and kind at the same time. She noticed him immediately as he entered the hall. He was waiting for his turn with dignity. So his turn has come at last and his name was announced by hall-porter:

- Prince Evilas!

The Princess bowed her head with a smile to welcome him. The Prince also bowed his head and gave her his present - a very beautiful necklace.

- It is magnificent! - She exclaimed - It’s so lustrous!

- Yes, really it is. Though it is one of the rarest emeralds in this world, it cannot be compared with magnificence and glowed brightness of your eyes.

The Princess granted him with a pleasant smile, her green eyes sparkling brighter. It was evident she liked the Prince. Presentation of the guests continued for some more time. All the formalities were ended by a grand feast. A grand ball was planned for the night.

At ball the Princess danced constantly with Prince Evilas. It was evident for everyone that Cecilia definitely gave preference to the Prince. Cecilia’s father - severe, slightly haughty man - approved his daughter’s choice. He talked to the Prince and was convinced in his erudition and nobility. He could not hide his joy that such a distinguished man was with his daughter but he had strong desire to

get more knowledge about him, but nobody knew anything about him.

- Do you know him, or have you heard about him anything? - He was asking the courtiers and the nobles.

- No, - they answered. - We don't know him and heard nothing about him.

- Very strange, why haven't we heard anything about such a rich and dignified Prince until now?

The Prince kept dancing with Cecilia and the more he danced the more he liked her. In a certain way she reminded him of Elvira, especially her green eyes and blond curly hair, only her eyes were not as sparkling as Elvira's. They seemed to be somewhat misted and were glimmering as candles in this mist. Her smile was also distinct from that of Elvira's, it was more gentle and soft. She was very charming. Prince Evilas felt happy with her. His usual joyfulness and sharp wit returned to him, he was telling her many interesting stories and she was listening to him with wide-open eyes. It was clear for everybody that he was her choice. All the other challengers looked sad. Cecilia was expecting Evilas to ask her to marry him immediately but days passed and Evilas waited. "The Princess is charming, that is true, but how should I be sure? Didn't Elvira love me more, she was my bride and she rejected me in the last moment. I don't know how Cecilia will behave as she learns everything about me" – such thoughts tormented him. At the same time he felt some sort of remorse towards Cecilia. "I behave as if I want to use her position to achieve my goal," - he continued to think, - "Do I really love her? I loved Elvira much more. No, I should not be taken by these thoughts. I love her as I can. My heart had been petrified for so long and it is really amazing I can still love. I should ask Cecilia to marry me and tell her the whole truth. Be that as it may! That was the only way for salvation and recuperation of my Kingdom. The Kingdom belongs to me! I have to try my fate."

The celebrations went on. Parties, feasts, all other entertainments, contests interchanged one another. Cecilia kept Evilas constantly at her side. They would sit set together at feasts, dance together at balls, walk in the garden. And at one of their walks they came across a huge lime tree. This was the tree on which Evilas had cut out his and Elvira's initials. The curving was still visible though letters were already blackened and a bit wiped off in the course of time.

- Look, there is someone's monogram! I think they are the initials of someone being in love, - said Cecilia and pointed to the tree.

- Yes, it seems so. Perhaps the names of the couple started from the letter "E", - Evilas answered and sad memories evoked in his heart.

- Yes, I also think so, and they should have been of Royal descent. Look! There is a Royal crown above the monogram, - Cecilia exclaimed. - I wonder who they were and what their names were: Edgar, Edmund, or Evilas, like you.

- Yes, maybe, - Evilas agreed - and the lady's name probably was Ellen, Elizabeth or Elvira.

- Elvira? - Asked Cecilia, - it was the name of my great-grandmother, and my great-grandfather's name did not begin with E, his name was Oscar.

- Elvira and Oscar? - The Prince asked in surprise.

- Yes, my father says I look like my great-grandma a little bit. She also had green eyes and blond curly hair. Would you like to see her portrait?

Cecilia grasped his hand and led him to one of the galleries. There the pictures of the Kings and nobles were hanging on the walls. There was a magnificent picture portrait of the Royal couple in golden frame in the most conspicuous place. When he looked at it, it made him speechless with amazement. There was Prince Oscar on the portrait, his distant relative and Elvira, his former bride. He was standing proudly and looking victoriously at the Prince and she was leaning firmly against the arm of his spouse. She looked contented, her usual charming, enchanting smile playing at the corners of her lips. Evilas couldn't take his eyes off.

- What would you say, is there any resemblance? - Cecilia asked.

- Yes, a slight one, - Evilas uttered silently.

At that very moment a maid of honour of the Palace entered the gallery, bowed her head to the Princess and said:

- Your Royal Highness, a dress-maker brought you a new dress for the evening ball.

- Yes, I have been waiting for her since morning, - exclaimed Cecilia. She turned to Evilas saying: I have to leave you for a while, hope you will not feel lonely, - and left the gallery.

Evilas stood still for a long time in front of the picture gazing at it. "Oscar," - he thought, - "it means he took over my entire Kingdom after my bad luck and he married Elvira, my bride. It is difficult to imagine that Elvira became his spouse when she even could not bear his sight." The Prince felt warmth and sweetness leaving his already faded memories, cooling them down.

- Farewell! - Evilas said, took out the withered rose from his breast pocket, fixed it in the frame at Elvira's feet and went out quickly.

After that Evilas took a final decision to ask for Cecilia's hand. One evening when they were left alone, he confessed his love to her. Cecilia was listening to him with a smile and dropped gaze. He asked for her hand and added:

- If you are not sure that you really love me, don't accept it. There is one mystic obstruction between us. The only thing that can overcome it is the truth love.

- What mystery? - The Princess asked. - Do you introduce yourself as the Prince and you are not?

- No, I certainly am the Prince Evilas, - he said with confidence.

- Then what obstructions could there be? - The Princess smiled, - If you really love me and want me to marry you, I accept your proposal.

With these words Cecilia stretched out her hand. Prince kissed her hand, took the black diamond ring off his finger and put it on Cecilia's finger.

- What a strange ring, - exclaimed the Princess, I don't know why, but I feel some fear.

- The mystery is exactly in this ring, - answered Evilas and related her all his life. She was listening to him with wide opened eyes, she grew pale. Then she started crying and exclaimed in rage:

- Now I know who you are! I thought you loved me while your plot was how to recover your Kingdom and to save yourself!

- I love you and I could be happy with you, but that is possible after the curse is broken, and it could be done by you.

- How could you even think about it? How can I do it?

- Sorry, I thought you loved me, - Evilas uttered silently.

- Yes, I loved you, but now I hate you! - Cecilia cried out and left the room weeping in despair.

The Prince was left alone. He stood drooping for a long time. All of a sudden he heard the sounds of steps behind him. The King entered the room, approached him and told him in a fit of fury:

- You deserve severe punishment, entered my Palace in a deceitful manner, put my daughter in such a horrible state, but you will be excused just for my daughter's sake. Now, leave my Kingdom this moment! If you refuse my order you will die a horrible death! Here is your wretched ring! - With these words the King threw the ring into his feet and left the room.

The Prince bent down, picked up the ring, ran down the stairs hastily, mounted his horse and galloped off at full speed. He had been riding away for a long time discouraged. The weather has changed, the clouds became dark, and flash of lightning was followed by a loud crash of thunder. A heavy rain poured down from the sky. The Prince did not stop as he wanted to reach his cave as soon as possible. In a few days the forty days term was expiring and he had to turn again into a marble statue. It was still raining. It was becoming more and more difficult for him to move, the hooves of the horse were sinking in the mud and the road was not seen. He had been rambling in the woods for some days now, but no cave was visible. He understood he had lost his way in such weather in the deep forest and had gone into quite different direction. He stopped. There was no sense in continuing the way - he had only one day left. He dismounted and sat beneath a tree. It stopped raining and the wind died down. He was waiting for the dawn. Soon the sky grew more and more pale. Evilas rose to his feet and looked at the sky. The Sun was rising. Upon appearance of the first ray Evilas turned into a marble statue".

Emilia stopped her narration. Little Princess raised her head from the pillow and asked impatiently:

- And then? What happened afterwards?

- Tomorrow I will tell you the story about the third Princess. Now try to sleep, sweet dreams, Your Royal Highness, - the maid of honour bowed her head and left the room.

The next night Emilia continued her narration:

“The petrified Prince stood in a dense forest for a long time. Years passed. For all this time no man has ever set his foot on that area. Only wild animals would run along or the jays would perch down on his stony shoulders. After the first forty days the Prince turned into a statue he would neither feel nor see anything. A century was already passing. One day the common silence of the wood was broken by unusual for that place whoops of joy and loud cries, followed by neigh of horses and barking of the dogs. A large group of riders appeared from thickly wooded area. A lady dressed in man’s hunting clothes, mounting a black horse was leading them. Her thick black hair was fluttering in the wind, the light of her black eyes were sparkling like stars. She was nice-looking, graceful, full of feminine attraction and at the same time manly brave, vigorously galloping her horse. The horsemen were following the dogs. All of a sudden all the dogs rushed towards the marble statue started to make horrible barking around it. The statue was hidden among the withered lives and climbing plants. The lady-rider made a sign to her companions to find out whom the dogs were barking at. One of the companions came closer to the statue, dismounted the horse and cleaned the statue from the leaves.

- It is a statue, Your Royal Highness, - he said to her.

- A statue in such an impenetrable forest? - She asked in surprise and approached it horse-mounted. The servants have already cleaned it from all leaves and climbing plants. The lady dismounted her horse to have a closer look at it.

- What a marvellous carving, it is a real piece of art! How could it appear in such an uninhibited place? I will not leave it here. Put it on the horse and bring it to the Palace, - the lady ordered, mounted the horse and galloped forward.

The lady-rider was the Princess Eleanor, after her father’s death she was the ruler of the Kingdom. Her Kingdom was a little bit far from former Kingdom of Evilas and a narrow line of the forest was forming a boundary between two Kingdoms in this part of the country. The forest was at quite a long distance from the Palace. That is why almost nobody went hunting to that forest. One day Eleanor decided to go for hunting to new, unknown places. They hunted till evening, killed many animals and returned to the Palace with rich trophy.

Eleanor ordered to clean the statue and put it on her terrace on a elevated place. The terrace was facing the inner courtyard and the garden. She liked to sit there. Her armchair was at the feet of the statue. The Princess often spent her time there reading books, looking over the garden or just thinking. It was the hundredth spring starting from the Prince’s transformation. May, the month of the rose-blooming was near.

Forty days before re-awaking the ability to hear and see returned again to the Prince. He was surprised to see himself on the terrace of a magnificent Palace instead of a dense forest. He was examining everything closely, all the surrounding was alien for him, and the people too. The Prince understood that the owner of the Palace and the sovereign of these people was that good-looking dark-haired lady, who often rested in the armchair at his feet. He also found out that the lady was the daughter of the King and her name was Eleanor. Evilas saw the Princess every day. In a few days he knew her schedule quite well: the time of appearance on the terrace, of walking in the garden, her visiting hours for butlers, nobles, viziers to discuss state affairs. Evilas was keeping his eyes on her, listening to her judicious, intelligent talks, her dignified manners, how wisely she ruled the country and felt more and more from day to day. Eleanor greatly honoured the art of war and tournaments. She ordered small contests between the knights in the courtyard of the Palace. She enjoyed observing them from her terrace sitting in her armchair. At that moment she was exceptionally attractive. Evilas admired watching her face inflaming with strong feeling of stubborn fight, flashing her black eyes. Sometimes the Princess would personally take part in the contest. Wearing armour and armed with lance and sword she used to go to the courtyard to join the tournament. She was no less skilful in using archery and fighting weapons than men in the, the. Evilas was gradually becoming more and more enraptured. “She is amazing, unique,” - the Prince was thinking. - “Just such a lady is worthy of true, eternal love. If I had known her before, I would never think about other Princesses. But where could I have found

her? Such lady can be found once in a century.”

He waited impatiently for the day of his revival to meet her closer. At the same time he was tortured by his thoughts: “Will she fall in love with me? Will she help me? Or maybe she already has a bridegroom”.

One day the Princess received a letter and gifts from the King of a neighbouring country. She was sitting in her armchair as usual, when the butler informed her about it. That country was ruled by a wicked, malicious King Herman. The Princess was not expecting anything good from him. He asked for her hand twice, first when her father was alive and then after his death. The Princess rejected his offer both times. Eleanor opened his letter and read out as follows:

“Greetings and wishes for longevity from King Herman to the beautiful Eleanor! I highly appreciate your beauty and nobility and I offer you once more my heart and hand. I advise you,” – accept it, - “Don’t forget you are a woman, whatever your skills may be in using the weapons or knowledge of the art of war you must know it’s only a child’s play as compared to my real warriors. You will be defeated in the first clash. So, take my advice into consideration, otherwise you may cause my rage. No woman’s business is to rule the country. If you really have enough wit you will be able to solve the riddle and hope you will take the right decision. Be careful with your choice!”

Two boxes were brought to the Princess from the King Herman. When she opened one box there was an arrow with an eagle feather in. The arrow was pierced into dove’s wing and was broken. The other box also contained the wings of the eagle and the dove, bound with gold thread.

- What should it mean? - She said quietly, - I don’t expect anything good from Herman.

- Our messengers informed us the King Herman is assembling troops. Apparently he is preparing for war, - said the vizier.

- And we also have to be prepared for war. Herman will not set his mind at rest, - the Princess said.

The Princess was showing a sign of too much anxiety. Though she had strong army of knights devoted to her, Herman’s warriors exceeded much in number, and he was also very experienced in battles. The Princess could not solve his riddles, she guessed something but was not sure and she did not want to be disgraced before the King if made some mistakes.

The Prince Evilas saw the Princess was in trouble. She spent sleepless nights walking to and fro on the veranda. The Prince knew the solution of the King Herman’s riddles and was looking forward to the day of his revival to help the Princess Eleanor. And that day finally has come.

She spent sleepless and anxious night. It was dawning when she appeared on the veranda. She stared into space waiting for the Sun to rise. With the appearance of the first rays the marble statue shook a little bit. The Prince was brought back to life. He stepped from his pedestal down the terrace. Eleanor was looking at him with a horror, paralyzed with fear she couldn’t utter a sound. Evilas bowed his head down and said:

- Don’t be afraid, Your Royal Highness. I am Prince Evilas, alive like you. I was bewitched and now at dawn it was time for me to come back to life.

The Princess still speechless, was looking at him horrified.

- When I was standing here at the pedestal I involuntarily saw everything and heard your talks, - the Prince continued, - I know all about your ordeals. I can help you to solve King Herman’s riddles and if you agree I will lead your army and, I give my word of honour, we will win.

Gradually the Princess calmed down. She came closer to the Prince watching him closely.

- The Prince of which country are you?

- My Kingdom must be far away from here, I even don’t know how I appeared in your Kingdom.

- I found you in a dense forest, - the Princess answered.

- Yes, I lost my way, it was a century ago, - Evilas said.

- A century? You were standing one hundred years alone?

- Yes, all those years I was a stone figure and I did not hear anything. I recovered by my ability to see and hear only forty days ago.

- You say you can solve Herman’s riddles. I am listening to you.

- Herman is preparing for war. The arrow points to that. He is threatening that he will destroy you like eagle defeats a dove. You have to attack him unexpectedly. Herman does not expect such a manoeuvre from you and you will gain an advantage.

- Herman's army considerably exceeds mine. He is also a skilled and experienced leader. He is looking for a reason to wage war. Why should I hurry? May be there is a chance to avoid the battle.

- Herman does not need any reason; he will attack you in any case. His letter points to that. The only way for you to achieve peace between two Kingdoms is to accept his offer and become his spouse. The wings of eagle and dove bound with golden thread means that.

- I'd better die than marry him, - Eleanor said firmly.

- In such a case listen to me and let me lead the army, I assure you we will win. I had been watching the tournaments of your knights for a long time, they are skilled. So don't be afraid of Herman!

Eleanor kept silent walking to and from on the terrace. Then she approached the Prince and said:

- How can I trust you? I don't know who you are. But you have appeared next to me in such a curious way that involuntarily I have to trust you. Let it be as you say. I understand war cannot be avoided, lead the troops, I will give order and they will act in obedience with your orders.

The Princess ordered the whole Kingdom to get prepared for war, to gather recruits. Skilled and experienced knights were sharpening their swords, selecting the military horses, filling bags with arrows. The Prince started preparations for war and set the army in order for battle. He armed himself with his armour as well. The Princess also intended to take part in the battle, dressed in armour and with a helmet on her head she was mounting a thorough-bred black horse and leading the army together with Evilas. The battle strategy was designed by Evilas. The enemy's camp, set out in the open field, was attacked unexpectedly at night.

The King Herman did not expect such an attack from Eleanor. He was sleeping peacefully in his tent when a head of the dove-winged arrow flew in with a whistle skipping off the pole above his head and carrying broken into two eagle's feather. It was Eleanor's response to his threat. Herman hastily jumped on his feet. The terrifying sound of whistling and the flame sizzles from fiery arrows shot by Eleanor's archers filled the air. The troops were messed. They even fought each other due to darkness and confusion. Herman rushed out of his tent, mounted his horse ordering his warriors to fight. The battle was raging all around them. Both parties were fighting stubbornly. Evilas, mounted on a white horse, like smashed all around him with all his strength like a torment, swinging his sword swiftly chopping enemy's heads off. His sight brought terror to them. Nobody dared approaching him. When he was fighting on the left flank the enemy was shuddering from horror, when he turned to the right flank the sounds of terrifying cries, roar and howling was heard. Though the enemy's troops exceeded those of Eleanor's ten times the priority was on Eleanor's side because of wise leadership and steadfast disposition. The worriers also were fighting hard under the stimulus of their Princess fighting together with them advancing forwards with her sharp sword.

The morning was dawning. Fierce battle was on. It was already midday, the battle still did not slacken though the enemy's army was greatly diminishing, they were in full retreat, Herman was galloping among them cursing, shouting, threatening, giving no permission to withdraw, but the troops did not obey his orders any more. Then Herman himself was forced to retreat. He was leaving the battle-field encircled by his guard. As Evilas saw the he went galloping towards Herman striking warriors off on his way. As he was approaching Herman turned his horse and they confronted each other face to face, there was a fierce combat between the King and the Prince, their swords sending out flashes of light. Herman's warriors were helping him, but finally Evilas gained the battle striking the sword against his head. Herman fell down from his horse dead. His troops dropped the weapons down and surrendered. Eleanor's army gained brilliant victory. She took off the helmet from her head. Secure happiness gave richer lustre to her eyes.

The knights exulted over a great success were returning to their home-town with rich trophy. The population met them rejoicing greatly congratulating the Princess and the Prince for their triumphant victory. By order of the Princess the overall celebration of the victory was announced with a

great feast followed by ball. Everyone was happy. There were magnificent shows, dances in the streets. Eleanor was looking at Evilas with rapture and gratitude, bestowing particular honours upon him. She was considerate and thoughtful towards him. Evilas was also very happy and enraptured by her feminine attractiveness and bravery. The celebration continued for a week. Eleanor would rarely dance at balls, and if she did - only with Evilas.

- You dance beautifully, I thought you did not like feasts and dances, - Evilas said to her once when they went out on the terrace.

- Yes, I don't like it too much. I prefer military tournaments and contests, - Eleanor answered. This is solely my father's merit. He did not have a son and he raised me to be strong, self-disciplined, taught me how to use weapons and ride a horse. To say the truth I always preferred these to showing off in cloche-dress with ruffles and pass the time away in dull entertainments. Should he not raise me in such a way I would not be able to rule the Kingdom.

- You are right. Now you can peacefully rule your Kingdom, - Evilas said to her.

Days passed. It was apparent, that Eleanor liked Evilas, but what would be her reaction to his truth? Was her love strong enough to face danger for him? Evilas was afraid to ask for her hand. But time was expiring. Finally the Prince decided to confess, to tell the truth to her. One evening, while walking in the garden of the Palace, Evilas told her that he was in love with her.

- You are an amazing young lady, - he said. - I had no idea there existed someone like you. I could be the happiest man if you would accept my offer to become my spouse. But before you give me the answer I have to tell you one mystery of my life. This secret is an obstacle between us and only true love can overcome it.

- You deserve true love. I agree to be your spouse and to give my Kingdom to you. What is the mystery that bothers you so much?

- The mystery is in this ring, - Evilas answered, - I have to engage my beloved with this ring and after that my life will be in my bride's hands.

She stretched out her hand, saying:

- Here is my hand.

Evilas put the black diamond ring on her finger and its third facet went glimmering. Eleanor looked at it amazed.

- The ring is bewitched, - the Prince said. - My life depends on it.

He started to relate the story. Eleanor was listening to him attentively. Her face stiffened gradually, her eyes darkened. When he finished his narration he looked at her.

- It means I am one of those five brides and now it's my turn with whom you have to try your fate. Am I right?

- No, don't say so. For me you are the only one. I have never met anyone like you and will never have, I am the happiest man and I owe that joy to you.

- Certainly, you needed a fighting-Princess. How could my forerunners fight the witch?! - Eleanor turned her back and leaved the Palace hastily in high dudgeon.

- Eleanor! - The Prince called her, but she did not turn her head.

The Prince was left alone in the garden. He sat down on wooden bench. The only hope was that Eleanor did not return him the ring. He had been sitting there for a long time when he heard some footsteps. The Prince rose to his feet and his face brightened. Eleanor was behind him.

- Do not rejoice, - Eleanor said in a quiet voice, - I did not come to tell you I accept your proposal. I was too excited and blamed you. It was not your fault, you did not come to me, I brought you here, so I am to be blamed for your choice. I cannot say anything but express my gratitude for everything you have done for my Kingdom. Irrespective of that I cannot accept your proposal. I know the chivalry tactics of fighting enemy and not the witchcraft; I have no idea about it. At the same time I thought I loved you, but I understood that my Kingdom is more important for me. I will not betray my country. I cannot leave my Kingdom for some magic world. There is no other heir in my country except for me.. So, I return to you your ring. - With these words Eleanor took the ring off her hand and looked at the facet that grew dim and continued, - It would be better for you to leave the Palace as soon as possible. If you have to turn into stone again, it is not reasonable for you to stay here. Certainly I will take care of

your statue but will I live for a century? Nobody knows who will take possession of you then. Someone might decide to crush you down. That is why it is better for you to return to your cave where you will feel safe for the next century. You can take anything you need from my Palace. The earlier you leave the better for you. Peace be with you! - Eleanor stretched out her hand. The Prince touched her hand with his lips and took the diamond ring. The Princess turned back leaving Evilas alone.

The next day the Prince left the Palace early in the morning and set off towards his cave. This time he reached his mysterious abode without any difficulties. In a few days forty days term came to an end and Evilas again turned into a marble statue.”

Emilia looked at Leticia. The little Princess’ eyes were filled with tears.

- Why didn’t Eleanor help him? She could, certainly she could help Evilas, - Leticia put her face into the pillow sobbing out bitterly.

- Oh, my God, how stupid I am, why I have told you this story! - The maid of honour was in great distress, - It’s only a fairy tale, why should you worry about it?

- No, it is not a fairy tale, - the Princess continued sobbing.

- I am sorry, Your Highness, after that I will not say a word about the Prince, - said the maid of honour.

- No, Emilia, please, tell me everything till the end. I give my promise not to cry, only don’t hide anything from me. Tell me everything about it, - Leticia exclaimed.

Emilia bowed her head and left the room.

Leticia was impatiently waiting for the dusk to come. She could not do anything the whole day, she was constantly thinking about the Prince and could not wait for Emilia to continue her narrative. Finally the time has come for her to go to bed and Leticia with her eyes opened wide was listening to the story as follows:

“Prince Evilas was standing in his cave, - continued Emilia, - and though his ability to hear and see was still preserved for the first forty days after he was turned into stone he could not see much because of the darkness. As for his thoughts they were constantly returning to Eleanor. Whenever he recalled her black, glossy, shining black as raven lashes rimmed around her eyes, his heart would fill with sorrow. He felt that gradually he was losing his hope and courage.

“If brave and fearless Eleanor rejected me, then who would help me?” - Evilas was thinking. He remembered her words: “I thought I loved you, but I understood that my Kingdom is more important for me.” “Again I have made a mistake,” - he thought, - “I laid hopes on her bravery, the most important thing is love. The Princess I choose should have the talent for love and sympathy. That is whom I have to find, but that is extremely difficult. And the old witch laid her hopes on it. Where and how should I find true love within forty days?” His forty days have passed in such thoughts, filled with loneliness and sorrow. The Prince again was plunged into his deep, a hundred-year sleep.

And the life went on. People were born, grew old and died. Joy was interchanged with sorrow. The years passed and next century came to an end. The Prince has awaked from his deep sleep. He was again in his cave. He remembered everything; the only thing was that his reminiscences seemed to remain in the remote past, somewhat faded. Finally forty monotonous days have passed and the Prince came back to life. As before he looked over his wealth, took some necessary things and left the cave. This time he decided to take the other direction, he wanted to leave the place by ship that is why he set off towards the nearest seaport. On his way he was caught by dusk and decided to pass the night in an abandoned castle. Ready to fall asleep he heard the sound of steps and voices. He lent an ear to their talk. Three travellers entered the old castle. They built a fire in the stone hall, sat round it and started to talk:

- I am from Far East, - started the first traveller, - My country is ruled by a magnificent king. As for me I was the closest person to the court, and the richest merchant. Our king has the only daughter, very beautiful. She is so intelligent and wise that people from different countries arrive just to listen to her. The King is looking for a Prince worthy of being her bridegroom but until now no worthy one was found. By the King’s order the most beautiful crown is being made for the Princess. I was entrusted to find the rarest jewels for the crown. I set off with all my vessels to fulfil my duties and even found

them, but on my way home heavy storm caused shipwreck of all vessels and loss of life of all my team, the only one who survived was me. Being in extreme poverty I have no means even to return home. So, I keep wandering from one place to another.

- I am also from a far-off country, - said the second stranger, - Our King has three prettiest daughters, one is better the other. Their voices are so enchanting that even wild animals become tamed when they sing. Our King is searching bridegrooms for his daughters. As I heard the preparations are made for a magnificent feast to be held in a few days for which the Princes and nobles are being invited from different countries so that each Princess could select the bridegroom for herself. I intend to go there as at such festivities even the poorest is welcomed and given rich alms.

- I believe the Princesses of your countries are indeed beautiful but compared with the Princess of my country no one will come up to her, - started his talk the third stranger, - No one can be found equal to her in mercifulness and loving nature. She distributes alms herself, takes care of homeless people, gives shelter to them. Her birthday is coming up soon and that is the day when she gives rich donations to charity and it is enough for me to survive for quite a long time. So I am anxious to get there as soon as possible not to miss the feast.

The travellers talked much about some other things and finally fell asleep in front of the fire and. The Prince heard everything. "It is interesting my fate might lie in their talk about their Princesses," - the Prince was thinking, - "and as for me I am looking for the one who possesses the virtue of love. Without that what is the use of having wisdom or enchanting voice. It might be possible that merciful, loving Princess becomes my rescuer?!"

At night Evilas got up quietly, put the gold coins into the bags of the travellers, as to the beggarly merchant, he put three big diamonds in addition to some coins. The sleeping travellers did not feel anything. It was dawning when they woke up and each of them took a different direction. The Prince followed the wanderer who talked about merciful Princess. He was also going towards the seaport. Evilas boarded the same ship and sailed to Princess's kingdom. While sailing he made acquaintance with the poor passenger and learnt the name of the Princess. Her name was Miranda and she would be eighteenth soon. The sea was quiet and they peacefully reached the coastal line of the desired Kingdom. The Prince went immediately to the Palace and introduced himself to the King. The Royal couple greeted the Prince with deep reverence and presented their daughter to him. Miranda liked him at first sight and Evilas liked her too. The Princess was very pretty, gentle, with chestnut brown, dazzling silky hair and large brown coloured eyes with sparkling amber hue. Soft, loving smile was playing on her small pink mouth.

Miranda took a burden of hosting the Prince with great pleasure. She showed to the Prince the Castle, its garden, the Shelter for disabled, homeless people and told him about her some other activities related to charity.

- I have a very busy day schedule, - she declared, - Tomorrow I have to visit the shelter for homeless, the day after, the facilities for disabled. Would you like to come with me?

- With pleasure, - answered the Prince.

The next day they visited the shelter for elderly people. Wealth and luxury could be seen everywhere. The musicians would play sweet melodies from morning till evening by the order of the Princess. Both the elderly people and care-takers kept lavishing their excessive praises on her:

- What a marvellous person!

- Oh, she is so noble!

- So responsive and merciful nature!

- What should we do without her?!

The exclamations were heard from all sides. To show their deep gratitude they would kiss her hands. Miranda bowed her head graciously to her nationals and accepted their praises with a smile.

The next day they visited a hospital. The same luxury met them there too. The pretty young nurses in dazzling white aprons were taking care after those suffering from different diseases. Miranda approached each of them, enquired about their health, cheered them up and here again she was met reverentially by lavishing praises and gratitude.

There was a boy, seven years of age among disabled persons. The Prince tenderly stroke his

head, caressed him and set down on his bed.

- Feel any pain? - He asked the boy.

- No pain, the only thing is that I cannot move my legs. Three months ago the frozen lake broke and I fell into it, my father rescued me. After that I cannot walk.

- What is your name? - asked the Prince.

- Nil, - answered the boy.

- Listen to me, Nil, is not it better for you to be at home? Don't you find it staying here boring?

- Nil has no mother, - intervened a care-taker into their conversation. - His father and elder brothers are sailors and they stay for months in the high sea. He cannot move alone.

- All right Nil, I'll try to find something for you, - said Evilas.

After returning to the Palace Evilas was constantly thinking about that little boy. He was calculating something in his mind, making some notes on a piece of paper. The next morning with the permission of the Princess he went down to the yard and started assembling something. He worked hard till night. He used two wheels of a carriage, fixed a comfortable chair on them, nailed wooden planks to each other and fastened the pedal gear worked by hand to drive the wheelchair. Finally it appeared to be a very convenient vehicle for Nil to move around. At the appearance of the first light Evilas set off taking his assembled vehicle to the hospital. As he presented it to Nil, the boy's heart was filled with joy. The Prince took the boy in his hands, seated him on the chair and put his legs on wooden board specially designed for this purpose.

- Oh, take care! It's tickling! - The boy was laughing with shouts of joy.

- Feel any sensation in your feet when touched? - asked the Prince

- Yes I do, on the right foot, less on the left, but it's still tickling!

The Prince was thinking. Then he asked the nurse standing next to him:

- Can you give the boy a massage with alcohol and vinegar? It should be done with firm strokes to increase circulation, warm the foot and release tension, it might help him.

- I don't think so. The same thing happened to an old warrior a few years ago and he cannot walk even today, - said the head-master of the Hospital.

- He is an old man, and the boy is full of life. May be it will help him.

- All right, Prince I will obey your orders, - said the woman and gave instructions to the nurse to take care of Nil.

- Now, my friend, use the pedals and your wheelchair will move, - the Prince turned to Nil.

Using levers the boy made pedals and wheels run and the mobile chair moved ahead. He felt overwhelming joy.

- Look here, soon you will get used to drive it and then you will be able to go home and even play games with your friends, - the Prince said.

The birthday of the Princess was approaching. The town was richly decorated for such an occasion and the guests were gradually filling the Palace. Though quite a large number of guests assembled Evilas had always been the centre of her attention. She showed particular interest in him. It was evident she liked him. Miranda's schedule was very tight. Twice a week she would visit the shelter for disabled and the homeless people, one more day was allocated for charity. All the other days were devoted to reading and music. The Princess was a good speaker and an excellent debater, no one would be bored in her company. She was intelligent, she read lots of books and had a good knowledge of different sciences. Miranda showed Evilas her huge library.

-Oh, what a rich library? - said Evilas, - Who knows how much interesting books were written, till I was a stone statue?

- You can take any book you like. I have read almost every book here, - she declared. - I am glad you also give value to books. It's very hard to communicate with ignorant people. Unfortunately I have to do it quite often.

"She is very smart, so pretty, merciful, responsive, not like others," - Evilas was thinking, - "at the same time there is something inconceivable about her, I can't even say what it is, and this mystery is something very, unpleasant and as if it builds a wall between us".

The days passed. The Prince frequently visited Nil, the boy was getting better - it was evident.

As a result of training and massage his feet toes became more flexible. He liked the gift given by the Prince very much. He was wheeling around the yard of the Hospital having great fun with his friends.

Miranda did not like the idea of the Prince going out to the Hospital without her, but she did not want to show it. She was trying to have him constantly close by and demanded particular attention from him as well. It was pleasing and interesting for the Prince to be near her, he was admired by her virtue of mercy, but somehow inwardly he felt it was not love. He was thinking: "It is unfair to demand an act of self-sacrifice from someone if you do not love her with all your heart. I was devoted much more to Elvira, Eleanor and Cecilia. But what to do, most probably my petrified heart is unable to give love anymore, otherwise I would have definitely fallen in deep love with Miranda, and she deserves it. As for burning feeling, probably I will never have it, but if she falls in love with me and decides to help me, why should I reject her? If I feel loved by her I will be faithful to her all my life and if needed I would sacrifice my life for her without a moment of hesitation".

And the day to celebrate the birthday of Princess Miranda has come. The Prince gave a very delicate, impressive gift to the Princess: an egg cut from rock crystal adorned in translucent filigree ornament. Its inner part was embedded with diamond spheroid with deeply set rose-cut ruby and gold stalk of exquisite design. No traces of any link between the egg and the spheroid was visible it was cut of a whole rock. It was really amazing how the spheroid was set into the egg. Everyone was enchanted by masterful creation. The Princess was gazing at her gift in amazement.

Lots of guests gathered in the Palace. The Princes, nobles from distant countries, dressed for the feast, were walking around the halls showing proper pride and dignity.

- They say the Princess has to choose the bridegroom, - the guests kept whispering in the Palace.
- I think it is a vain attempt. Princess Miranda has already chosen the bridegroom for herself.
- Right you are. Prince Evilas is the best match for our Princess is the.

The rumours reached the Prince as well. Exaggerated expression of praise, worship or glory was so usual for the Princess that she felt sure in devoted love of the Prince and she could not imagine any other version. Miranda danced only with Evilas at the ball. She was very curious why he was slow in asking for her hand. That is why she was the first to speak:

- Do you see how many guests we are having? All of them arrived because of me. They are dying for at least of one dance with me. And such esteem has fallen only on you.

- I am happy to become worthy of it, - answered the Prince.

- I can make you happier, - she said with a delightful smile.

The Prince did not answer her comment, just smiled back.

On the third day of the festivity the King declared solemnly:

- I would like to express my gratitude to all of you who have come to share our joy. We have decided it's time to think of the wedding of Princess Miranda. We all agree that she is the prettiest Princess and deserves the best. I give high value to my daughter's nobility and wisdom. I trust in her prudence that is why I give full freedom to her to make choice herself.

Princess Miranda took Prince Evilas' arm leading him to the middle of the hall.

- My dears, - she addressed the guests, - I know you are anxious to know who had been chosen as my bridegroom. I would like to present him to you Prince Evilas. I hope you will all share our happiness.

The Princess was very charming. Evilas was looking into her eyes and all of a sudden his heart was disturbed by an unpleasant sensation that overtook him again. "What is it so annoying in her that I cannot define?" - the Prince was thinking in surprise. Miranda was looking at him with gentle smile waiting for his return smile.

- You have overtaken me, - said Evilas to the Princess, - but there is some reason of my delay. There is a certain mysterious danger in my life and only thoroughly true love and devotion can save me from possible, but it's very difficult to demand it from anyone.

- If that is the only reason then you must know that I love you with all my heart and I am ready even to sacrifice myself.

Miranda stretched out her hand. Evilas took off his ring and put it on her finger. The fourth facet of the diamond gave out a sudden bright light.

- What an amazing ring, though it seems a little bit sullen for such a happy event.

- This ring is my fate, - said the Prince and when they were left alone he told her all about his life. The Princess was listening to him looking down. She was trying to preserve her usual smile, but it appeared to be difficult. When the Prince finished his narrative Miranda looked at him and said smiling:

- Oh goodness...darling! What stresses you had experienced! And nobody felt compassion on you! Why did not you tell me all about it from the beginning? Now, please, don't worry, I will take care of you. Let's agree upon one thing: only one week is left before you turn into stone let's not talk about it. Let's pass these days joyfully and happily. And then I will do everything to help you.

The Princess confided the Prince's mystery to her parents. It was a great distress for them through they tried not to display their emotions.

- No scandals, no rumours, everything is to be settled peacefully, - declared the Queen,- Our daughter is quite reasonable. She will settle the matter herself.

Soon the whole city knew about Prince's mystery. Miranda demanded not to talk in her or his presence about it in order to protect him from disturbing thoughts.

- Oh, she is so generous and noble! So loving! - The people kept whispering.

The Royal feast went on. The Princess looked cheerful as if nothing had happened. She continued dancing in the dance-hall but already not only with Evilas but with others too interpreting it as "Royal etiquette" and "the hostess's duty". Her ringing laughter seemed a little bit inadequate to Evilas but he kept silent. The days passed. There was only one day left for the Prince to be alive. But even that day she behaved as if nothing extraordinary was happening. Everything was going on in a habitual manner. At night Evilas went to the Shelter to see his little friend. Nil was already moving around using a pair of crutches and there was almost no need in the carriage made by Evilas.

The Prince returned to the Palace quite soon. A great number of guests were moving around the great hall but Miranda was neither with them nor in the garden, or on the veranda. Then he heard her voice from a distant room, he went that direction:

- There is an old woman at the gates asking for alms, - A young maid of honour was telling the Princess.

- Don't you know, my dear, today is not a charity day. Why do you bother me when you know I have a lot of other things to do, - she asked her with surprised note in her voice while looking into mirror and trying on different ear-rings to choose the best suitable for her dress.

- Sorry, I said the same to her but she was crying bitterly and was pleading for alms, - said the maid of honour.

- Now the Royal Palace is having a great feast and I want to have peace and joy here. I am obliged to attend to my guests, aren't I? I don't want anyone to be bored by somebody's sorrow. Warn all the doorkeepers that no poor and wretched are allowed to enter the Palace whenever we expect guests. I have already given out what was intended for feast. The charity purse will be now empty until the next month. Make it as a rule, there must be order in everything, - she continued in sweet, delicate voice, - otherwise everything becomes uncontrolled, disordered, confused. If I, the Princess obey the established rules, my inferiors should also obey them. Tell that woman to come for alms at an assigned day. Then come back to me, you have to help me to put on a ceremonial gown.

The maid of honour bowed her head and left the room. Miranda approached the window from where she could see the gates and the old beggar standing there. In a few minutes the maid of honour went up to her, told her something and put a small bag in her hand. The old woman kissed her hands to show her gratitude and left. Miranda flew into rage, she moved away from the window. She started walking up and down the room. The maid of honour returned to her.

- How dare you do such a thing! - She exclaimed indignantly, - want to show you are more merciful than me, don't you? Leave the palace right now I don't want to see you anymore!

The maid of honour left the room weeping. Evilas was listening to all these horrified. "How could she be so ruthless?" - he felt indignant.. All of a sudden his mind seemed to brighten up: "Everything was false, deceptive in her! Now I know what that mysterious, unperceivable, unpleasant thing is that always I felt in her behaviour. False is her generosity, her sensitivity, charity, love, even her

smile... now I have to take back my ring and leave this place as soon as possible". He did not want to do it in presence of the people, and Miranda was always with them. It was far beyond midnight when he managed to talk to her in private:

- I came to say good bye, at dawn I will turn into stone. Now I want you to give me back my ring, - he said.

- To give you back? Why? Do you reject my love? - She exclaimed in amazement.

- You know it perfectly, that ring is only a burden to you, - said the Prince. - I want you to be released of it right now.

She took a cold look at him and took off the ring.

- Good, everything has been cleared up, - she said.

The Prince bowed his head and left the Palace. Not much time was left so he was not able to go somewhere far. He went towards the sea shore. "I will stay here. It's not so bad to stay at the seaside," - he thought to himself and looked over the sea. The sky was gradually growing pale. The plaintive cries of seagulls were carried away from above. The sun was just rising. The Prince stretched out his hand, welcoming the sun rays and turned into stone. The King and Queen were immediately informed about this event.

- Don't talk about it in the presence of the Princess. She is so gentle, emotional. Why should we sadden her with unpleasant events? - The King ordered.

- You are right, she has suffered so much because of the Prince, - agreed the Queen.

As for the Prince, he was standing at the sea shore, with curious visitors constantly messing around, telling all sorts of non-sense.

- They say the Prince himself demanded his ring back.

- How strange!

- Our poor Princess, she must be devastated as she had no chance to help him!

- Princess Miranda has done so much for him she has chosen him out of the most brilliant Princes - her worshippers... Doesn't she deserve far more than this marble statue?

- What ungratefulness! They say, this is about a maid of honour, who was just expelled from the palace.

-What?! Is it possible that some maid of honour was given preference as compared to our Princess? Abominable!

- Our poor Princess, she was so hurt.

- Well, let him stay now turned into stone.

The Prince could not bear their chattering any more. Only once he rejoiced when he saw his friend little Nil walking up to him early in the morning. He was cured completely. He looked at the statue for a long time with his eyes filled with tears, then he put his arms round him sobbing intensely, gasping for air. The only person, who felt compassion for the Prince in this town, was that little boy.

In a few days after the Royal couple took the decision and related it to their daughter:

- My darling, - said the Queen, - you have done so much for the Prince, all these days you devoted much of your time to him, helped him to feel happy till his last moment. Now it's time for you to think about yourself. You are the prettiest and the noblest and you deserve to be very happy. You shouldn't let your thoughts about the marble statue to bother you. If the statue remains here it will remind us constantly of himself and your gentle, loving heart will be hurt. That's why we decided to send the statue to some remote country. It will be safe there and we hope the Prince will also be happy.

Miranda was listening with her head bowed, sad smile on her face.

- All right, - she said, - as you say, but set it up somewhere in a beautiful place.

- Oh, you are so kind, you care about everyone, - uttered the Queen with tears in her voice and left the hall.

As ordered by Royal couple the statue was taken to a far off country by a ship. It was placed in an abandoned Royal garden. The place was really beautiful, among dense trees and on the shore of a crystal clear lake. At that time nobody lived in the Palace and the garden was also wild. The Prince was not annoyed anymore by tiresome callers. And the Prince would stand there and wait for forty days to pass until he would completely be petrified. He was standing and thinking: "That old witch appeared

to be right, no love exists in this world and I also should not lay any hope to find it. Have I ever loved really someone? Have I ever had the feeling of real, true love?"

The days passed in such thoughts. On the fortieth day Evilas finally turned into stone".

Emilia ended her narration.

- And then? - asked Princess Leticia.

- Nobody knows what happened after that. Probably the following one century has already passed and Evilas managed to get released from witch's captivity, - said the maid of honour.

- How can it be that nobody knows anything about it? Who told you about him?

- I was a little bit older than you are now when I heard this story. I lived in another town at that time. My grandfather served in the Navy in his youth and old sailors often visited him. I heard about Prince's adventures from one of them. He would tell us, that he was that very little boy, Nil, whom Evilas saved from miserable life. The man assured us that the statue was taken aboard the ship on which his father and brothers served and taken from Princess Miranda's country.

- Where was it taken? - The Princess exclaimed.

- He wouldn't say, - said Emilia.

- Was that man very old?

- About seventy.

- And you? How old were you when you heard about it?

- About fourteen-fifteen, - answered the maid of honour.

- And how old are you now?

- Fifty.

- It means a century is to pass soon, - Leticia exclaimed impatiently.

- Or may be has already passed? As I don't know the exact age of that sailor, - answered Emilia.

- Please, Your Royal Highness, don't frighten me. Promise me, that you will not think about it anymore, as it is only a fairy tale and nothing else.

- All right, I will not think about it anymore. Now just tell me what you know about that black cliff and the well?

- That mountain is in the North, about one month's walk from here. I heard much about it from the travellers and merchants. Everyone avoids taking that road. Its desert is like a labyrinth, it captures you, misleads, makes you take wrong turns, get lost. Very few people had ever found the way out.

- Good night, - said the Princess closing her eyes. The maid of honour bowed her head and left the room.

That night Leticia had a dream: a huge hall full of marble statues. The little Princess was walking among the statues, holding a candle and watching closely at each of them but she could not find Prince Evilas among them.

Since then she was constantly thinking about the marble Prince, though she never again asked Emilia anything about the Prince. She went all over the Palace from hall to hall watching closely at all statues. She also went all round the garden, but could not find the statue of Evilas. "Where should it be? It might be so that a century had passed and a Princess appeared who rescued him. Or who knows, maybe he lost his hope and now he is finally perished?" - Such thoughts were gnawing at her heart, she became restless. There was not a single day when she was not thinking about him. And she did not know that the statue was in the garden of her Palace. It was the statue the Queen found years ago in the remote part of their garden and under which the roses grew. The climbing roses have already grown creeping around the statue and spreading over the nearby trees. The Prince wrapped in wonderful climbers was not visible. Leticia has never been there. Once she went to that part of the garden together with her maids of honour and friends. They saw roses. Leticia liked roses very much, she was circling around, smelling flowers, removing weathered leaves, but she did not notice the statue wrapped inside them.

Leticia was also thinking whether she would have been really been able to help him if she found Evilas? This also worried her. Once immersed in such thoughts she peeped into the fencing hall where the King with the Knights and Warriors was training in using the sword.

At a break the King noticed his daughter standing at the door.

- What are you doing here? - asked the King smiling

- Could you teach me also how to use the sword? - asked the Princess shyly.

- You? What do you need it for?

- Who knows, it may turn useful when I grow up. Should not the Princess be able to do everything? - answered Leticia.

- All right, if you want, we can start right now. I shall be your trainer.

- Find the proper weapon for my daughter, - the King gave the order.

A small sword, almost of a dagger size was chosen and brought for the Princess. The King handed the sword over to his daughter and put her in a starting posture ready to fight. Then he began advancing carefully, moderately. Leticia was trying to beat off her father's attack, but it turned out to be quite difficult. The King would stop periodically to teach her various methods and ways of fighting. The little Princess was diligently trying to acquire the skill of using the weapon. Gradually she was using it more boldly and skilfully.

The years passed and she was growing up. She was still thinking about the Prince, though not so often as before. Soon she would have been sixteenth. That very spring the hundredth year of Prince's petrification was coming to end. May was drawing nearer. And finally the day has come when stone Prince could see and hear again. To his surprise he found himself wrapped up in thorny bushes. He could see a garden and a lake through climbing roses. The surroundings have slightly changed, the trees grew up and the branches thickened. Lake was as clear as before, the lilies of the valley were waving above its surface. Inside the rose bush crested red breast birds have built their nests and now were chirping all the time in Prince's years.

That day Leticia was particularly exhausted. She was hosting guests from foreign countries. The young Princess was not very fond of official ceremonies. She would search for solitude after hard days. And one evening, after a very busy day she decided to be alone. She climbed down the stairs of the Palace and walked towards the lake shore where she found a boat tied. She stepped down into the boat, moored it and sailed into the lake. It was a calm, moonlit night. From time to time the night quietness was disturbed by eagle-owl's cries. Leticia was rowing the oars with little effort just to move the boat and was slowly entering the remote part of the dense garden. She almost approached the place where the marble statue was standing. The Princess stopped rowing and let the boat drift. Sitting in the boat she gazed at the sky full of stars. The boat finally stopped near the statue rippling gently. With the moonlight shining in the darkness Leticia's robe looked dazzling white. Her hair was shining. Among water lilies she resembled a fairy from Fairy Land. "Who is she? Is she a human being or a fairy of this lake?" - thought the Prince. Leticia turned her head back and put it on the stern of the boat. She plunged her hand into the water and sat still. She stayed so quite long. It was so pleasant after busy day to watch the stars and relax. All of a sudden she started singing. Her clear, velvety voice sounded exceptionally sweet in nocturnal stillness. And the melody was lovely. Leticia's song was about the studded with twinkling stars; about the shining moon, shimmering on the lake waves, that were rocking her boat like a cradle. She was singing about the birds hiding away from the darkness longing for the sun to rise, what will certainly happen the next morning. She was thanking the Creator for creating such a glorios and wonderfui world to live in and for giving her the glory of living for kindness and love. The Prince was listening to her breathlessly. "Who is she?" - Evilas was thinking, - "What brings her here at such an hour? Let her stay here longer. So much kindness and love is emanating from her! I feel my heart has been warmed up. It seems to me I am reviving ahead of time". The feeling of revival was so real that Prince even decided be release himself from thorny climbing bushes. But no, he still remained to be the marble statue. The Princess ended her song and then sat still for a long time. All of a sudden she straightened up, struck the water with oars and moved the boat backwards - towards the Palace. After that night the Prince was constantly thinking of her. He was waiting for her every night. At each rustle of wave he was imagining it was the sound of oars. But Leticia would not come. "Probably she was not a human being," - the Prince thought. That very day Leticia appeared again. This time it was a noon. The sun was shining brightly. When the boat came up the statue, she stopped the boat, and looked at the shore. A climbing rose bush has spread all over hanging like garland over the branches of

a century aged trees. Swollen white buds were going to open out. Leticia moved the boat to the shore and disembarked. She approached the rose bush, stroked it fondly, smelling flowers. The fragrance was still faint. She looked around and thought: "It's so wonderful here. Why didn't I know about it until now!" And she sat down beneath an enormous tree. She has been sitting leaned against the tree for quite a long time. Then she lay down on the grass and looked up at the crown crests. This way the trees seemed to be much taller. Lying beneath the tree she was looking how the tree crests were swinging against the background of the sky. "She is just like me, she loves lying under a tree and gazing at swinging crest of the trees" - thought the Prince.,- "Who is she? Since it is the Royal garden she might be a maid of honour of the Palace, or a daughter of a door-keeper. Could she be a Princess? Oh, no, in such a case she would not be alone. Besides, she is so simple, there is neither magnificence nor inordinate self-esteem in her, that is so common for all the Princesses. At the same time she is so gracious!" He was looking at her and could not take his eyes off her. She was really elegant and gracious. Her large, shining dark blue eyes were emitting amazing warmth and gentleness. Her silvery blond wavy hair was heaving under sun rays, her slightly swollen pink lips were adorned with cheerful smile. Leticia had been lying under the tree quite a long time. Then she got to her feet, stepped down into the boat and returned to the Palace. Since then she was coming there almost every day and the Prince was looking forward to see her soon. If she was late or did not appear at all, fear would seize him, what if she would never come? Her appearance filled him with joy, he missed her constantly. Her beautiful eyes warmed his heart up.

More Leticia visited this place more she liked it. Sometimes she would bring books with her, sit and read under the tree, sometimes she would play the mandolin singing a song with her sweet voice, just sit quietly beneath the trees gazing at the sky. Evilas watched her and felt that more he saw her deeper he loved her. He loved to watch her sitting quietly among the garlands of roses. He loved to listen to her sweet voice whether it was a lively or sad melody. He loved to see her thoughtful, earnest face when reading books. He loved her watching the sky; at that moment it seemed to him that the whole world was captured and reflecting in her big beautiful eyes. He loved to watch her face so sweet when she screwed up her eyes and held a hand up to shade them from the glare of bright sunlight. He loved to see her rejoicing at the red breast birds chirping and sitting on her head, her hands treating her with so much familiarity as if they had known her long before. "It's amazing! I could never imagine my hardened heart was able to feel such a passionate and ardent love! I can't wait until these forty days pass!" - the Prince was thinking counting the days. And one night when a few days were left before his revival the weather drastically changed. Violent flashes of lightning, fierce crashes of thunder were followed by heavy wind storm. The whirlwind was growing more and more violent during the whole night. The trees, branches in the garden were falling down with a great crash. The wind also crushed down the thorny bushes of climbing trees, its branches, with roses in bloom fallen on the ground. At dawn the wind calmed down and the sun was again shining brightly.

Leticia did not show up for two days. After two days she set off to her beloved place. She looked much distressed as she saw the roses on the ground. "My roses are all broken down!" - she exclaimed worryingly, stroking the flowers tenderly. She started to clean the place from dry leaves and branches stuck to it. All of a sudden she startled as she noticed a man's hand among the climbing rose trees. When she watched closely at it she calmed down, it was a marble hand. "It might be a statue there," - she thought and again she was frightened as she saw a big five-facet ring on its finger. "Impossible!" - she said to herself and started to uncover the statue from thorny bushes. It didn't appear to be an easy thing. Though her hands were scratched, bleeding, she wouldn't stop. Finally she released the statue from thorny bushes and now she could see it in its full height. She smiled. It was really Prince Evilas in front of her. He was exactly the same as she had imagined him: of a stately, dignified appearance, handsome, generous but looking gloomy. Leticia took off her cloak, wetted its edge in the water and started to clean the statue from dust and moss. As she finished cleaning she looked at him closely again. Her heart was beating fast. She was the happiest one in the world, she couldn't believe her eyes. The Prince was looking at her and wondered: "She looks as if she knows I am alive. Why is she looking this way?"

And Leticia was standing and gazing. She wanted to say something, but she couldn't collect her thoughts. She stood there for quite a long time. Then she jumped into the boat and returned to

the Palace. She was excited very much. She was trying to pass the door-keepers and maids of honour unnoticed. She ran up the stairs hastily and locked the door of her room.

- May, the month of blooming roses... he was always brought back to life in May, - the Princess was whispering to herself, - It means if he is to be revived this year, it might be done now, any day!

Leticia was restless. She was so much excited that she couldn't find a place for herself.

At dinner sitting at table with the King she didn't seem to notice what was happening around her. She was giving confused answers, dropped down her spoon, spilled wine....

- Anything wrong? - asked the King.

- No, nothing, probably I am a bit tired, - she answered.

- A completely different birthday is awaiting us this year, - said the King. - You will be sixteen and we are going to have many guests. Isn't it already time to think about your wedding? Shall we invite young Princes? You could have new acquaintances.

- Oh, no, - exclaimed Leticia, - they will guess the purpose of their invitation and my birthday will resemble a convention of self-esteem, ruffled up cockerels.

- All right, all right, - smiled the King, - as you like, we'll invite only your old friends.

That day Leticia did not leave the Palace. She couldn't sleep the whole night, she was thinking about the Prince. The day was just dawning when she got up, dressed, put on her cloak. Holding the lantern she went down the back stairs to the garden. She found her boat on the shore, stepped down into it and moved towards the statue. It was still dark. She stepped out onto the shore and went towards the statue. As she approached it, she directed the light of the lantern on the statue watching him carefully. There was not a single sign of life. Leticia was still standing and watching. The sky gradually grew pale and the first light of the day began to rise upon the land. The statue shook. The Princess moved backwards from fear. The Prince was brought back to life. He smiled to her bowing down his head.

- Don't be scared, I am an ordinary human.

- I know, I am not scared, - quietly responded the Princess.

- How do you know? - asked the Prince in surprise.

- The story of your life was narrated to me as a fairy tale when I was a child. You are Prince Evilas, aren't you?

- Yes, I am, and you? I think you are a maid of honour of this Palace, what is your name?

- Leticia, - answered the Princess, though she didn't tell him she was a Princess.

- Leticia, it's a beautiful name, - said the Prince, - I have known you for quite a long time now. I have been watching you for forty days already. I was anxiously looking forward to my revival, to see and talk to you.

- Me too. I have been thinking about you all the time, - Leticia smiled back at him, - I didn't know whether you remained a statue or finally found the real love.

- Yes, I have found it many centuries after... I have found you. You have returned warmth and joy to my heart. Allow me to pass the remaining part of my life with you, it's about forty days.

- Why? You have got the whole life ahead of you.

- I prefer to be next to you for forty days than to acquire the whole life without you.

- But you don't know me.

- I have a feeling that I have known you all my life. You made me find myself. I can't demand love. I don't want you to suffer because of me. Just let me be next to you, that is the only thing I need.

- All right. Will you come to the Palace? You are a Prince, aren't you? You will be warmly welcomed.

- No I will not. I have nothing to do there.

- Why?

- The Palace has its own regulations - the etiquette, official ceremonies. I have no wish to engage into that, especially if a Princess is there.

- Yes, there is a Princess, - said Leticia.

- You see, I told you. If I come to the Palace, I will have to spend all days with the King and the Princess and I shall not be able to be near you. The only thing I want is to be with you.

- Don't you want to meet the Princess?

- No.

- Are you sure?

- Quite, - answered the Prince.

- All right. If you don't want, let it be so, - said Leticia, - Now I have to go. Sorry I have to leave you for some time, or they will be searching for me. I will come back soon.

The Prince helped her to step down into the boat. Leticia moved the boat towards the Palace. She accomplished all the etiquette related matters during the day, filled up a big basket with different pies and cakes; also took a bottle of wine and set off towards the Prince. Evilas was looking forward to seeing her again. As he saw her his face brightened.

- You must be terribly hungry, you haven't eaten anything for a whole century, - smiled Leticia and passed him the basket. They laid a small table under the tree and regaled themselves with delight on the food.

- It is not proper for the Prince to live under the open sky, to be homeless. Why not come and live in the Palace? - The Princess said.

- I do not feel homeless at all, just the contrary. When I see you it seems to me I have finally returned home after aimless wanderings for centuries in this world. I feel so happy and relieved.

- Yes, but only the Princess is able to save your life, don't you think about it?

- I don't need anybody's help anymore!

- Why? Lost hope that you will find such a Princess?

- There is no such Princess in the world, but even if there is, I have no intention to meet her and will never have.

- Why?

- Because I met you. Let me be near you all these forty days. I would be the happiest man in the world. All those hardships I've gone through for centuries, loss of hope, grief, solitude, were worth meeting you. I'm grateful to all those Princesses who had rejected me. Should it not be so I could never find you.

- But if the Princess doesn't help you, you will turn into stone forever. This is the chance of lifetime, isn't it?

- I prefer to be near you these forty days, than to be alive without you. I won't be able to live such a life.

- Do you reject being saved because of me?

- Yes, but you can't imagine how happy I am that you are not a Princess.

- Why? In such a case I would have helped you.

- I can't even think that you might take that horrible, dangerous trip. It's better to die. Now I understood I had never loved anyone before with real, true love. Otherwise I would spare them from the risk of losing their lives.

- All right, if you are sure you are not trying to find anyone anymore then give me your ring.

- The ring? What do you need it for? - The Prince exclaimed. - It is wretched. I don't want you even to touch it.

- It will not do me any harm, - Leticia answered, then, stretching her hand out, she said, - Just put it on my finger as a sign of your love.

First he hesitated. Then took the ring off with some fear and put it on Leticia's finger.

The fifth facet glimmered.

- Very strange! - Evilas said in a low voice, - I thought it was glimmering only on Princesses' fingers.

Leticia didn't answer. Some voices were heard from the remote part of the garden:

- Your Royal Highness! - called someone.

- They are looking for the Princess, - said Evilas.

- Yes, - she agreed and the expression of anxiety spread on her face.

- I hope they will soon find her and will not come closer.

- I have to go, I have so many things to do. The birthday of the Princess is advancing and the whole Palace is preparing for the great event.

- Can't it be done without you? - Asked the Prince.

- No, I have to be there. If you come to the Palace, I promise I'll be with you all day long.

- Your Royal Highness! -Leticia was being called.

Leticia rose to her feet and went towards the boat.

- Please, stay a little bit more, - asked her the Prince.

Leticia looked at him with fear as all her attention was directed towards the remote voices.

- Princess Leticia! - The voice from a distance has reached them again.

Evilas startled.

- Is the Princess' name Leticia?

- Yes, - she said in a low voice looking down.

- It's you? You are the Princess? It's impossible! Tell me, that it is not true, - exclaimed the Prince.

- I am waiting for you at the Palace, - she replied, stamping her feet into the water she pushed the boat hurriedly, stepped in, stroke the water with oars to move the boat towards the Palace.

Evilas was standing on the beach bewildered.

Leticia didn't want anyone to see the ring on her finger. As she reached the Palace she turned the ring down and put on the gloves. She had been waiting for him the whole evening, but he didn't appear.

"Have I offended him? And what if he would never come?" - Leticia was thinking worriedly. The next day she was deeply upset from early morning. She decided to go to the garden and search for the Prince. All of a sudden the voice of a door-keeper announced the arrival of a guest:

- Prince Evilas!

Leticia's heart was beating fast. Prince Evilas entered the Hall. His face was pale and sad. Everyone was watching him closely out of curiosity, as nobody knew anything about him. Leticia was deeply worried and it was seen on her face.

- Do you know him? - asked the King in a low voice.

- I have heard a lot about him, - answered the Princess, - I will tell you all about him later. And now, please pay him your special attention, he deserves it.

The King received him with high esteem; talked to him, offered him the best place at table. The Prince was talking to the King, but he didn't talk to Leticia. "He must be deeply offended. I have deceived him! If not then, he would not give me the ring" - Leticia was thinking to herself.

After dinner Prince Evilas approached her.

- I am sorry, I didn't mean to offend you, - said Leticia.

- I am not offended. No, not in the least, - said the Prince. - It was just quite unexpected for me. Now, please give me back the ring.

- Give it back to you? Why? You want to say you don't love me anymore because I am a Princess?

- How can you even think about it, I love you with all my heart and because of it you have to return me that wretched ring. I will never admit you to be put in any trouble.

- No, please, don't force me to do that. If I give you back your ring I will die from grief.

- Please, do not object. I can't even think of those horrible dangers that you may encounter.

- Don't be afraid. I promise I will not put my life at risk. In case I found myself in hopeless situation I will immediately remove the ring. Let's not talk about it anymore. I am not going to set off right now.

Leticia came closer to the Prince, grasped his hands and looking straight up into his eyes, said:

- Please, don't worry, let's spend these days happily and joyfully. I promise you I will always be next to you. Didn't you miss fancy riding? Let's go tomorrow morning, shall we?

The next morning they went horse-riding, galloping the thorough-bred pedigrees or going at a slow pace, talking gaily. They spent the following day walking around the garden of the Palace and the grand-halls. There were lots of weapons hanging on the walls in one of the halls.

- These weapons belonged to my ancestors. This one is my grandfather's sword. With this sword he defeated his enemies and won numerous battles... You see, over there is a sword of his moth-

er, my Great-grandmother, - Leticia pointed to a sword of smaller size with highly refined carving and of sumptuous metal work.

- It seems to be specially forged for a woman, - said Evilas, - its small hilt is just to suit a woman's hand. It also looks light. It means your Great-grand mother was a good fighter, wasn't she?

- Yes, she inherited the throne at her early years after her husband's death and she ruled the Kingdom until my grand-father reached full age. And also she had to beat off the attacks of the enemies. I can also use the sword, - Leticia took the sword off the wall and took the starting position in front of Evilas with her sword raised, -Let's fight.

- All right, but I don't see any need for it, - smiled the Prince, - you are not suited for it.

- A vain imagination. Come on and fight me, - she said raising her sword.

Evilas was beating off her strokes smiling. Gradually the fight became more agile. Leticia moved quickly, easily and was beating skilfully the Prince's attacks.

Finally Evilas said:

- Not bad, your hand is not strong enough, but you are quite smart, move lightly and react skilfully.

- My father tells me the same, the most important in fighting is not the strength itself but rather the ability to be skilful and flexible.

- Yes, but fighting is not a women's business. You are so generous and kind, you will feel sorry even for your deadly enemy.

- I do not intend to kill anyone. Important is to be able to defend yourself in case of any need, - answered Leticia.

- I hope there will never be any need, - responded Evilas and looked down at her hand, wearing a ring under the glove.

And the birthday of the Princess has come at last. Evilas gave her his present, a very beautiful diamond rose. Leticia fixed the rose on her ceremonial dress near her heart. The great hall was full of guests. The whole day was strongly scheduled for festive ceremonies and promenades. In the evening there was a magnificent ball. Leticia danced with Prince Evilas all the time. Gradually Evilas cheered up. He was very happy with Leticia next to him, though a sudden fear would struck him from time to time, whenever he recalled the diamond ring. "There is plenty of time ahead, I will manage to get back the ring," - he was calming himself down.

As for Leticia her thoughts were focused on the plot how to flee. "I have to go as soon as possible, as Evilas may tell all about himself to my father, or Emilia might suspect there is something wrong, in such a case my escape will be impossible," - thought the Princess.

And Emilia was really worried, suspecting there was something wrong. When she heard the Prince's name her heart sank. She was looking at him closely. She was relieved when she didn't notice a ring on his finger. And still she was looking at him with suspicion. She didn't dare to reveal her suspicion to the King. She knew she was to be blamed. It was she who told the story about the Prince to the Princess.

The ball continued for three days. After that the royal hunting was planned to last for two days. The guest Kings and Princes were particularly preparing for that occasion expecting a magnificent entertainment. They were also planning to take women with them. Leticia decided to escape just at that moment. The place for hunting was at a considerable distance from the Palace. It was a proper time for her to escape when the King and Prince Evilas would be hunting. She was making arrangements to get everything ready for that day. With the help of a trustworthy maid she bought a man's wig as if she needed it for a fancy-dress ball, got man's clothes and a sword. She has chosen a horse for herself, filled a small bag with gold and prepared some food supplies.

At night before hunting Leticia told the King that she was not feeling well and would not be able to go with them and asked him to go for hunting without her. She went to their chapel and spent all night raising prayers before the Crucifix in tears, asking for Lord's assistance and strength to vanquish all the dangers.

Evilas did not know anything about it, when he learnt Leticia was not coming with them he felt uneasy and suspected something but he couldn't break his word to the King and joined him and the

hunters early in the morning. Leticia left a very long letter to her father telling him everything about Evilas and asked to forgive her and not to blame Evilas for anything. She also left a leave-taking note for Evilas. After that she put on the man's clothes, combed her hair, weaved into plaits, coiled over the head, pinned up tightly and put on the chestnut-coloured wig and a hat over it. She looked like a boy, nobody could recognize her. She put on leather gloves on her hands, to hide well her ring. She fixed her grand-mother's sword to her waist-belt strip, took a bow and the arrows and went to the stable. Having mounted the horse she galloped off northwards at full speed. She rode away at full gallop without stopping anywhere, trying to cross the border of her Kingdom as soon as possible. She would stop only to take a short rest for her horse or to spend a night at an inn. She was rushing forward galloping, asking the way from the passers-by. Whenever they heard her intention to reach that cursed and wretched land all of them would feel embarrassed as everyone avoided even coming near to that place.

Leticia was trying to move as quickly as possible because of the fear of being chased. And she was right. Having returned from hunting the King sent out people to chase her in different directions. The same night Evilas mounted the horse and went on galloping alone. Leticia was already at two days and one night's distance away from Evilas. Galloping at a full speed he was gradually shortening the distance between them. Leticia has already left the borders of her Kingdom, being on a foreign land and approaching the desert. As it was getting dark she dismounted her horse at an inn to spend the night. The servant boy took the horse, Leticia entered the inn. The hall was full of people. The owner of the inn welcomed her warmly:

- Welcome, welcome, we have lots of guests. If you don't mind there is one place beside that wanderer. - He pointed to a relatively dark corner in the remote part of the hall. The stranger was sitting there at the overturned barrel serving as a table. He was eating bread and drinking wine wrapped in his overcoat. She bowed her head as a sign of agreement and moved towards the end of the hall.

- Anything to eat or drink? - The land-lord asked Leticia.

- The best of what you have, for two persons, - said Leticia pointing to the wanderer.

- Oh, seem to be generous and also rich! - exclaimed the stranger.

- To be generous does not necessarily mean to be rich, - replied Leticia.

- Right you are, the rich are much greedier than the poor, - agreed the stranger.

A little son of the land-lord approached them with a tray full of different meals. At the same time a warrior entered the inn looked over the hall and went out.

- They are looking for Caspar, it's the second time they come here, - said the boy.

- Who is Caspar? - asked Leticia.

- You don't know Caspar? It means you are a stranger here. He is a reckless robber, valorous and smart. They are trying to capture him for so many years, but in vain. Now the governor ordered to shoot him at site without a trial. The prize is 1000 coins for those who captures or shoots him.

- Hurry up, you boy! If smart enough you might be lucky to get that prize, - muttered the wanderer in a low voice.

- Don't say so! May God save me! To betray a man to death and get "bloody money"? - exclaimed the son of the land-lord.

- Money is money, it doesn't matter from where you get it, at the same time you will help the people to get rid of that villain robber, - answered the wanderer.

- Father says Caspar is not such a villain if he is treated as a man.

- Really? Your Father says so? Rubbish! - The wanderer smiled ironically and looked at the land-lord.

- Be careful, if you happen to meet him by chance, you must know he has a deep scar on his forehead, - the boy warned the travellers and left.

As Leticia hasn't eaten anything the whole day and felt hungry she was eating with pleasure. Accidentally she pushed a piece of bread with her elbow and it fell down on the floor. When she bent down to pick it up, she noticed a sword hanging from wanderer's overcoat. She looked hastily at her companion and noticed a deep scar on a forehead under his hood.

- Caspar, hide your sword or someone may notice it, - Leticia said in a low voice.

Caspar bent forward swiftly, grasped the hand of his companion and hissed tight-lipped:

- Look here, little boy, if you are going to betray me you must know I will stab you with this sword, I promise I will manage to do this.

- Release your grip, set me free and don't threaten, I am not going to betray you, - Leticia answered quietly, - No intentions someone to be killed because of me, even if he is a villain like you.

Caspar kept gazing at her, still holding her hand.

- Release your hold and don't be afraid, - repeated Leticia.

- Afraid? Me? - Caspar answered ironically and released her hand.

- Yes, since you are threatening it means you are scared.

- Strange logic, and you seem to be a strange boy too, - said Caspar taking a sip of wine, - where you hold the path?

Leticia wavered, looked at Caspar and muttered:

-To the Black Cliff. Have you ever been there, or can you tell me how to get there?

- What do you want it for? There is nothing but fire, stink and death there. Once I happened to be in the horrible desert that encloses the Black Cliff. I almost choked there; got out of it by some miracle. It is not advisable for you to go there.

- I have to go there. Will you show me the way?

- The only way is through that mountain range, when you pass it you will see the Black Cliff over the sky-line and you have to go all the way straight. And what do you need it for? Oh, there must be some hidden treasure! I should have guessed. Generally a treasure is always buried in such aloof places. Tell me now, little boy, what is there: gold and jewellery, some gems?

- There is much more valuable treasure than gold and gems in this world.

- And what's that?

- Human life, - answered Leticia.

Being amused by her answer Caspar continued taking his meal.

All of a sudden a great number of warriors rushed into the inn. Their voices were also heard from outside, the building was apparently surrounded with armed forces.

Caspar felt a nervous strain and reached out for his sword.

- Hide down here, they won't find you there, - Leticia pointed to the barrel they were sitting at.

Caspar looked at her with suspicion.

- I'll manage to fight them down.

- Isn't it better to get out without bloodshed? Believe me it is the best way out.

- How can I trust you, I don't know you.

- There is no other way out, you have to trust me, - answered Leticia.

The warriors were moving hurriedly, observing each traveller. They were almost approaching Caspar and Leticia. Now only one wanderer was sitting at the barrel wrapped into an overcoat, fully covering him. Having a hood on the head he was sipping the wine.

- Hey, you, look at, - addressed the warrior loudly.

The wanderer raised his head. It was Leticia wrapped in Caspar's clothing.

- Who are you? - asked the warrior.

- A traveller, - answered Leticia.

- Someone else was sitting with you, - he said.

- He went out, - responded Leticia.

The warriors looked around the inn, went upstairs, searched the yard and left. Leticia knocked on the barrel several times. Caspar lifted the barrel, climbed out and took his clothes.

- I owe you, strange boy, - Caspar addressed Leticia, climbing out of the window and disappeared in the darkness.

Leticia spent the night in the inn and set out for her journey at dawn. Before climbing the hill she had to pass through the forest-covered hillside. She moved through the wood trying not to lose the necessary direction. Suddenly she heard horrible whistling and whooping. In a trice she found herself surrounded by highwayman. Leticia drew out her sword, but they were numerous. In a blink of her eyes she found herself disarmed. Leading the captured Leticia ahead of them the robbers were moved towards their den. They stopped at a large cave hidden under dense trees. The robbers were there too.

An old man was sitting under the barrels piled up at the entrance of the den and was smoking a pipe. A heavy door of the cave opened and Caspar came out shouting at the old man:

- Hey, you old slapdash, how many times should I tell you not to smoke near the gunpowder barrels?! One day you will blow us all in the air! - The old man got up grumbling and entered the den.

Caspar approached Leticia.

- Look at our booty! - The robbers passed a small bag filled with gold taken away from Leticia to their chief.

- Oh, it's you, strange boy! - Caspar took the bag from the robbers bouncing it up and down in his hand, - was not I saying that you are rich? Now what would you say?

- Let me go, - said Leticia.

- You ask me, a big road lawless wanderer to let you go? It's my deal to capture ones like you. I feel a very large sum of money will be given for your release, - said Caspar and turning to his band ordered, - Take him down into the cave and lock him. When I have time I will talk to him... Yes, tie tightly his hands and look after him not to escape as he seems smart enough.

The robbers rushed upon her, one of them took her overcoat off, another one - her hat and the third robber snatched her gloves.

- Diamond! Look, what a large diamond! - An outlaw cried out and caught her hand to remove the ring from her finger. Giving him a sudden slip Leticia seized the flaming torch fixed in the wall and jumped over the gunpowder barrels:

- Don't touch me, or I'll blow up the gunpowder barrels! - Leticia cried out.

- Don't be silly! Come down! - Caspar said.

- I'm not joking, if you don't release me I will blow up your den, - repeated Leticia.

- You will also be blown up together with us, - Caspar said.

- You don't leave me any other choice.

- Listen to me! You must be grateful if we retain you from going to the Black Cliff. There is nothing but death awaiting for you there. Come down, - Caspar moved in her direction.

- Don't come near! Keep away! - Leticia cried out and bended the torch towards the barrels.

- How long are you going to stay there? Finally you will get tired!

- Yes, I will get tired and the torch will fall out of my hand and we'll all blow up, - replied Leticia, - I don't need gold, set me free and give me back my horse and the sword, the only thing I need.

- And what makes you think I will let you go? - Caspar said smiling.

- It was you who said you owed me, wasn't you? Please, set me free, that's a matter of life and death. If I don't go there a man will die.

- And what's the point of your going there?

- He must be released of witchcraft. Only I can do that with this ring.

Caspar was thinking watching Leticia closely.

- All right, go, you are free! - Caspar said suddenly.

- Hey, what's happening? - The surprised robbers shouted out.

- Stop it, - Caspar ordered. - Come down, I let you go.

- Let them all go into the cave, lock the door, don't allow them to come out until I leave, - said Leticia.

- Do you think I won't be able to hold you back alone? Why don't you trust me? I'm telling you, you are free.

- I don't know you and I don't know if you really can keep your word.

- Do you doubt my word? You have to trust me, there is no other choice, - Caspar smiled, - They all know me well my word is a law. Bring her horse and sword! - He ordered, - We'll keep the gold, you will not need it any more. I doubt you'll come back alive from your journey.

The robbers brought the horse. The Princess climbed down the barrels, holding tightly the torch, as she didn't trust them fully. Another robber brought her the sword, her mantle and the hat. Leticia took them, mounted the horse and pricked it with her spurs.

- Wait! - Caspar called her, catching the horse bridle.

Leticia's heart sank with fear and dread. Caspar passed her a leather bag filled with water with

his other hand, - take it, you will need it in the desert.

Leticia took the waterskin, and said in a low voice:

- The land-lord was right about you, - she stroke the horse with a whip and went galloping.
- Today you are too gentle, - said his companion.
- He deserves to be free, - replied Caspar and entered the cave.

The same night the robbers captured Evilas. The Prince was fighting fiercely, his swinging sword was flashing, nobody could approach him, but the robbers threw several lassoes upon him from the trees, meshed him, pushed down to the ground and bounded, then brought him to Caspar.

- He really must be a Prince, - Caspar grinned, when he saw richly engraved design of the sword taken away from Evilas and looked into a small bag full of gold.

The Prince kept silence.

- Where are you heading? You may also be going to the Black Cliffs like that boy, is that so?
- What did you say? Where is he who was going to the Black Cliff? Was he captured by you? -

Evilas cried out.

- Do you know that little boy?
- Yes, I am following him. If I fail to catch him up he will die.
- I was telling him the same, but he didn't take my advice. He seems to be too stubborn. What could I do? I set him free.

- Set him free?

- Yes, sometimes it happens so... That boy helped me in a small matter and I felt obliged to return favour and release him.

- Listen to me, if you care at least a bit for that boy, set me free. He is sacrificing himself for me. I have to stop him by all means.

- You won't be able to catch him up. He will already be at a desert.

- I'll catch him up.

- It's out of question to find anyone in a desert.

- I'll find him, let me go. Upon my return I will shower you with gold.

- No one will ever return from there.

- If you already know what hazards he may come across there, don't let him stay alone. He is quite inexperienced to hazards and battles.

- I wouldn't say so, he is a brave boy, - objected Caspar.

- He is not a boy! - Evilas burst out, - She is a Princess, my bride and she went there to save me from witchcraft.

- What?! I was saying he was a strange boy! - Caspar exclaimed in amazement. He kept quiet, he was thinking. Then he jumped up hastily and cut the ropes with his sword, saying to Evilas, - You can go, you are free.

Evilas bowed his head, took his sword from the robbers, mounted the horse and rushed towards the desert.

- Today is a very unusual day, you have never been so kind, - The same robber rebuked Caspar.

- Yes, you are right, it is not a way of my ordinary attitude, but I wouldn't say it is not pleasing.

At that time Leticia was forcing her way through the rocky desert. First she was riding fast than she reduced the speed. The horse was so exhausted it could hardly draw its legs with difficulty. The days passed. The Black Cliff was sometimes visible and, sometimes not. It seemed to Leticia she was circling around. But still she didn't want to stop. The heat was devastating. She removed her wig and the mantle. She would sprinkle water on her hat to protect her slightly from the scorching sun. She was using water given by Caspar with care, sharing it with the horse. And the Black Cliff appeared again, it seemed it was very near. A feeling of confidence returned to Leticia and made her horse to pace up. All of a sudden she heard a moaning sound. First she thought it was an illusion.. Then she lent an ear and heard someone's moaning. She turned her horse and headed towards the place from where the moaning was heard. She saw a man covered wrapped up rags lying among the rocks on the sand. All his body and face were covered with festering sores. The scorching sun has cracked his skin. The poor man was passing away. Leticia bended down and poured some water into his mouth. Then she wiped

his face and neck with a wet cloth. The man opened his eyes, seized greedily the waterskin with both hands and emptied the whole bag.

- Help me, take me out - he entreated her.

Leticia suffered deeply from grief. She looked over the Black Cliff. She spent so many days in the desert and now when the end was so close she had to go back. But if she left the man there he would have surely died. "I can't leave him here, even if I manage to overcome all the obstacles and all ends well quite soon, he wouldn't survive. I have to help him now!" - she said to herself and tried to raise the diseased a little bit. His festering wounds were giving out a strong, nasty smell. She felt an aversion but she forced herself to put her arms round his waist and raised him. Then with much difficulty she pulled him over the horse. When she turned to seize the bridle and set off she saw that everything brightened all around. When she turned back there was no sign of the old man, everything around was lit with quite unusual gladdening joyful light.

- May your goodness prosper you, Leticia, go ahead, peace be with you, - she heard the Voice.

The light has disappeared. The Princess turned around and saw the waterskin was full of water, the horse looked vigorous, as if it hadn't spent these days in the desert, and the desert was already behind her and Leticia found herself on the fringe of the forest. She felt encouraged, mounted the horse and entered the dense forest, as she moved ahead it was gradually getting darker and scarier and she felt oppressed. She was stricken with some obscure fear as if someone was hiding in an ambush to attack her but Leticia couldn't see them. Every moment she was expecting some danger. The torn branches were hanging down from immense trees. Their rustling sound was threatening, foretelling some evil. Leticia accidentally caught on a branch and it immediately started to climb over her body, she was taken up, another branch captured the horse. The Princess was crying loudly trying to free herself, she tried to cut off the branches with her sword, but ten new branches would immediately grow instead of them, they were squeezing her harder and harder, she could hardly breathe. "Remove your ring from your finger," - someone was screaming in her ear in a shrill voice. "Remove it quickly while you can still move your hands, be quick, or you will die!" - a voice kept screaming from all sides. Leticia was struggling to get away from crawling branches, but they started to crawl over her hands. In a moment she would not be able even to move her finger. "Ring, remove the ring," - someone was repeating in a screaming voice. Momentarily her mind brightened her: "Fire, the trees are afraid of fire!" She took a flint from her pocket with a difficulty, stroke it against the steel to get fire. Its sparks reached the trees and branches. As they burst into flames, Leticia immediately was released from their clasp and she fell on the ground. Again she stroke the flint against steel and the dry branches burst into flames, turning into fiery torches in her hands. The trees moved their branches aside with fear. The horse was also released. Leticia mounted the horse and moved forward with fiery torches. The trees bowed down to make way for her. So she passed through the forest and came up to a marsh. As the horse wouldn't be able to pass it, she dismounted. She plunged a long stick into the marsh to measure its depth. She looked at her ring, tore a strip of cloth from her blouse and tied the ring with it firmly to her finger to prevent it from falling into the marsh.

"Now it won't slip out," - she thought and stepped cautiously in. She moved forward with one step at a time, sometimes plunging up to her throat, but still continued her way step by step. All of a sudden she felt she was sinking. She tried to seize something but plunged deeper and was already completely covered with marsh. "Remove the ring!" - again she heard the screaming voice. "I will not remove it, even if I am drowned!" - she said to herself. She made her last effort to come up to the surface. All of a sudden some power pulled her out and she stepped on a beach. It was getting dark. Her mantle, hat and shoes sank in the marsh. She was standing barefoot looking ahead at the fiery field. She took a step forward. The earth beneath her feet was burning and shaking. Though feeling horrible pain she kept running. Her clothes were on fire, her hair scorched, but she never admitted a possibility to stop and remove the ring. With great difficulty she was trying to endure horrible pain and move ahead. The shrill voice was screaming in her ears. Exactly at that moment the Prince reached the marsh. He managed to pass the desert with many efforts, to go through the forest and reached the marsh. He saw Leticia in the fiery field. He saw her enwrapped with flames.

- Leticia! - He cried out loudly, - Leticia, remove the ring!

Leticia didn't hear his voice, she was moving ahead. Evilas looked up at the sky and stepped into the marsh. "It's my last night, at dawn I will turn into stone... I have to hurry, otherwise I won't be able to save her and will stay forever at the bottom of the marsh," - Evilas was thinking. But would he be able to reach the other bank and catch Leticia up before daybreak? It looked very doubtful, but he still hastily moved ahead not admitting the thought of stopping. He moved with difficulty, his feet slowly sinking into the bog. Leticia has almost passed the fiery field and was approaching the cliff. The day was already dawning and as the first sun ray hit the surface of the marsh Evilas turned into stone. He was sinking slowly down to the bottom. Everything darkened around him. Prince wouldn't be able to help Leticia anymore.

The Princess was already at the underground passage leading up to the Cliff. She groped her way in the dark. All of a sudden she bumped into enormous mirror. She tried to pass round it but she again ran into it. Wherever she moved she would clash into a mirror. Each mirror was producing a large number of other mirrors. She saw her face in each of them, she was crying in some of them and laughing in others, running away, or hitting the mirror bitterly with her fists, trying to get out. She felt giddy, there was no way out. She bended down, picked up a stone and hit the mirror with all her might. Horrible roaring sound was heard. A hail-storm of stones poured down from all directions. Leticia threw herself down, covering her head with her hands. Finally pouring of the stones has stopped. She raised her head to look at the mirror. Suddenly she remembered the ring: "Diamond cuts the glass!" She removed the bandage from her finger, stood up pressed the diamond against one of the mirrors and stroke it with all her might. The mirror exploded, first breaking into two parts and then crashing into dust particles. A beam of light appeared at the end of the underground cave.

Leticia went towards the light. She was already half way from the Cliff. She followed the stairs cut as narrow grooves that led to its top. She suffered horrible pain because of her burnt feet. Steep slope was too slippery, her feet were slipping all the time. Suddenly a whole flock of vultures rushed on her. She started to hew them with her sword. They were pecking her, tangling her hair, scratching her hands. Leticia was trying to move her face away, making her way by hewing. Suddenly the birds grouped together and rushed away. Leticia felt relieved. She did not know that they flew away to bring the old witch with them.

The witch was at the other end of the world sitting in her den and looking into the mirror. She looked young and beautiful in four facets and only in the fifth one she retained her real face. She was impatiently waiting for the moment when the last Princess would reject the Prince and remove the ring from her finger, then she would get beautiful face in the last facet as well. In such a case the old witch would acquire longed-for youth and immortality. She was sure that not a single Princess would hamper her from accomplishing her scheme. At that moment a flock of vultures rushed into her den making horrible noise. The old witch rose to her seat. Suddenly she understood there might be some danger. She immediately together brought the whole flock, harnessing them into an air-raid carriage and flew away.

Leticia has already reached the top of the Cliff when the witch's carriage appeared in the air. As she saw Leticia she uttered frightening high-pitched squeal rushing towards her. Leticia swiftly ran into a narrow cave that was leading up to the well. The witch was running after her step by step, she has almost caught her up, took hold of her hair drawing her towards herself. Leticia cut her hair with a sword. The witch was left with Leticia's hair in her hand. She quickly ran towards the well and was already at its edge trying to slip off the ring. The old witch grumbled something stretching out her hands. The Princess was trying to remove the ring, but it appeared impossible, it was too tight. She decided to cut the finger off and rose up the sword. The old witch seemed to read her thoughts, she grumbled something again. The sword slipped out of her hand falling into the wall. The witch approached the well from the opposite side. She kept sniggering looking at Leticia with exultant joy over the victory gained.

- Thought you would defeat me so easily? Ha! Ha! See, what trouble you have got in! Come and give me the ring and everything will come to an end. You will find yourself in your Palace, among your beloved people... Behave like a Princess.

The old witch was trying to come closer to Leticia. She was slowly circling round the wide edge

of the well keeping her eyes on her. Leticia was also looking into her eyes. Then she looked into the well, some black, dense mass was making sizzling sound inside it. That was the only way to save Evilas. Suddenly she dipped into the well with her head down and submerged in the boiling mass.

- Oh, no! - The witch started screaming in despair with her hands stretched towards the well.

Leticia plunged down and in a moment submerged with her ring into the boiling mass. The old witch immediately turned into ashes and disappeared.

A tremendous crush of thunder followed. The black mass of the well turned into a fountain gushing forth crystal clear water. The Black Cliff burst out crashing. The fiery field turned into a flickering garden, making gentle, whispering noise of leaves; stinky marsh turned into crystal clear lake; dark, gloomy forest turned into jolly green trees flickering in the light wind with sweet chirping of the birds sitting on its branches. Revived Evilas emerged from the water, he raised his eyes up to clear fountain gushing forth with rock crystal brightness. Leticia was lying on its top in dazzling white dress. Her golden long hair was waving under the jet stream. She was placed on the bank by the jet water pouring into lake. Evilas went running to her. She opened her eyes and smiled. They gently embraced each other. They were very happy and the whole world rejoiced with them. The fountain was glittering in rainbow colours. The birds were circling around them in a rejoicing dance. The bridge arose over lake and the Royal couple passed to the other e bank where the horses were waiting for them. Leticia and Evilas mounted the horses. There was no desert any more. Everything was in bloom around. A forest became visible at some distance. A group of riders were waiting for them on its edge.

- It's Caspar, - said Leticia.

- Do you think we will have to fight?

- I don't think so. He is not as wicked as they think of him.

They were met by Caspar.

- Welcome back. I am glad for your safe return. I am really surprised to see you alive. Tell me how you managed to turn the desert into a blooming garden?

- We are also glad to see you, Caspar, and I would like to tell you that we have an offer for you.

- I'm at your attention, - said Caspar.

- As I know, you do not feel comfortable here, - started the Princess. - If there is your will to give up your trade forever, we give our word of honour you will be pardoned.

- And your guilt will be pardoned in our Kingdom as well, - added the Prince.

- And if you wish we can find a proper job for you, - suggested Leticia.

- What job? - Caspar asked.

- What would you say about military service, army, soldiers? - said Evilas.

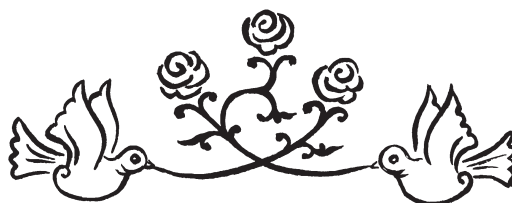
- I think this offer is great. What would you say? - Caspar turned to his companions.

- Wherever you go we will be there, - the outlaws answered in one voice.

- I'm very glad, - said Leticia.

Evilas and Leticia moved ahead accompanied by Caspar and his companions. The riders sent by the King joined them on their way home. They were returning home with a populous suite. They were met by the King and the whole town with great joy and bells chiming.

Evilas and Leticia got married and lived ever happily for many, many years.





Manana (Maka) Chkhaidze

Manana (Maka) Chkhaidze was born in 1965 in Tbilisi (Georgia). She is a writer and an icon-painter and also holds the Ph.D. in History. Her pictorial icons are created in traditional, medieval century technique. She also works in the field of cloisonné enamel and miniature, has illustrated several religious books. For the past few years she has been intensively cooperating with goldwork embroidery workshops and masters. Many pieces of chasubles and religious articles were designed by her.

The most important work from literary and artistic points of view is The Life of Saint Nino, published in 2013, dedicated to IV century virgin saint, enlightener of Georgia. The book was created through the collection and editing of written sources of IV, X and XII centuries. The miniatures, created by the author make the narration particularly dynamic. The illustrations are created on the basis of the traditions of Georgian art school of medieval centuries, being renovated from author's standpoint.

The present fairy tale is dedicated to kindness and love. The main hero of the tale is the bewitched Prince Evilas. Only selfless, true love of a princess can save him from horrible witchcraft. It takes him centuries to find such love. After constant disenchantment he finally finds his beloved. And this happens only when Prince Evilas himself deeply and selflessly falls in love.

