

VOICING THE PAST

The wedding feast of 1270. Flutes enchanted by their sweet voices were jiggling around. The King himself was present. There were red sparkles of wine caught in the silver woods on his chin, crowned by a broad smile, deep cuts of troubles gone, at least for that night. Isabelle felt the cashmere's gentle embrace around her wrists, the long gown's golden threads talking to the opposite silky slippers.

Bela IV. The man who saved her life. Twice. Or so he claimed. In the midst of all the juveniles he stood as a rock of basalt, one hundred feet high, his gaze our eyes. The husband-to-be, one of his close commanders, made the hall resonate with the mirrors of his huskiness.

Why was Isabelle doing this? She needed to pin herself down in the solidity of oak. She knew how it would be. That night he would penetrate into the remote corners of who she was supposed to be. His sturdy flesh against her broken limbs. The face was still pretty, they said. That's all that mattered.

But did it? Didn't she once swear she would go back? Swore not to be anybody else's? How come she was here then? Being a bride again while her old groom was still alive?

The promise of tomorrow whispered it into her ears. She wanted to bathe her past in the Danube and let the river arms gently rub the old stains away. A flood of mud was pouring from her heart to her lungs and back again, suffocating the sparks of her selfness. A sharp pain hit her in the chest, making her float above the happy-go-lucky courtiers and their immaculate attire. Liberation coming closer?

The husband-to-be was already close at hand offering liquid rubies in solid crystal.

"Drink. Strength will come back."

Strength for what? Ah yes... the Danube. Getting lost in the burgundy sea in her goblet was all she was left with. Until she saw the vision again.

She was riding on the waves of dreamland, sweet hay in her nostrils, coziness of her older sister next to her, but then a cry cut through the belly of the night. A drop of silence caught the breath of the moon until it fell to the ground. That's when it began. Isabelle with a body of five-year-old girl got up and leaned her little head next to the narrow slits between the wood. A hooded demon was cutting the limbs of her brother Jacob, the same way father used to chop wood. Next to him, was a weasel with a long tail, dragging by the hair not her mother, but a fish whose mouth was opening and closing. He thrust himself against her, pushing her neck deeper and deeper into the pointed edges of the cart. Purple torrents came running down the wheels, the colour of plum jam. Isabelle noticed a bonfire from the next-door house when she heard something moving at the back of the shed. Her sister jumped up, put a finger on her lips, uttered a word of unrecognizable substance – Tartar – took the rake from behind the door and disappeared into the night. Isabelle was still standing by the narrow slits, looking but not seeing how two thousand villagers were spiked in the grass of blades.

After the demonic visions were long gone, Isabelle stepped from one cold foot to the other and wanted to find mother. She pushed open the door of the shed and was covered with

scarlet rain that had penetrated the naked patches of terrain. The Unspeakable, frozen in ice cubicles, was lying scattered around the burned stones once listening. No more. They were taking their secrets to the graveyard of history. Clip-clop. Can you hear it? Clip-clop, clip-clop. The sound of wheels against the forgotten past.

It was a red flannel, a *glocken* as they used to call in the language of the Rhine river, Isabelle was wearing that day they arrived into Buda. It was covered in mother's, no *moeder*'s lace, hiding the violets, Isabelle remembered – *violen* – that smell of winter grass. Magyars said Rhine people were welcome. Big, clumsy letters whispering:

'Let all who come to this place

Rejoice protected by sword

Let the fallen receive grace

And the just get the reward.'

The Just. Isabelle clung to that word feeling its sound was important. It was the imprint of freedom. All gone now.

But that day there was a feast. Chestnuts with honey syrup, waffle with caramel filling, baked pears with sugar crème. A hurricane of voices sweeping you off your feet as you entered, altering your very substance. And a song that now echoes in the eternity of Isabelle's caged soul, amidst those pools of crimson, blood dripping from the sky. She just stood there, with hands in the pockets of *goune*, the thin night shirt woven by *moeder*'s small hands. The soul petrified.

Husky words rebounding in the crowd.

Today we ride to East-Land

To East-Land now we go

Soon come green hills at hand

Fresh pastures there will grow.

A better place awaits us

A place of hopes and dreams

Enjoying grape's sweet succus

Freedom's bell there gleams.

Isabelle didn't know how long she had been standing there, her feet numb, breath chained to the chest. If it wasn't for the phantoms of the future, she would still be standing there. Liberty's statue *in memoriam* of the fallen Grace. *Magyars* took her away, *they* brought her to the Sanctuary of Peace. They said *life* was given to her. How?

The candle was burning low and through the blurriness of salt's curtain she didn't see it. Isabelle could not take hold of the sands of words being blown away by eastern wind, how could she ever live again? There was no self. Only broken pieces of shell. They glued them together

saying it looked like new. But she knew better about that self, the one that was gone and the other one who was now here. Trying to live. The only angel who understood Isabelle was *Her*. Isabelle dared not to call *her* by the real name, too afraid *she* would vanish as they all did. Sometimes Isabelle whispered that name to herself. *Her* presence was Grace. The very one that was to shine on those who fell. Isabelle's arms trembled, she mustn't, mustn't speak this way. *She* would hear.

'Is it done?' a voice from Heaven descended, gently touching what used to be her left arm, brushing the remains, sweeping off the dust.

No voice came. It was locked in the misty towers from which angels were singing with *Her*, their Queen. *She* was the Savior of the Lost Kingdom. *She* who was born to protect this land in the realms of the Holy House built for her by the King. Vowed to the life in isolation, coat of piety woven for her by the Dominicans, the same coat which *she* extended over the entire Land and even beyond. If it wasn't for *her*, none of them would be there, not Magyars, not the remnants of the Rhine people. Not even her, Isabelle. *They* often said Bela saw *her* in Isabelle. Bela knew that this was the reason he had saved Isabelle. But Isabelle and *she* knew better. By saving Isabelle he tried to save *her* but ended up imprisoning both of them. Destiny with its purest intention had a way of turning the coin from good to evil and back again.

Only one petal of hope remained for Isabelle. It was the absence of alienation they felt when kneeling together by the altar, merging, rising on the wings of divine, prayer after prayer, psalm after psalm until reaching beyond. No words could incarnate their journey. It had to be travelled. None understood. None cared. Only them. Margaret and Isabelle.

The feast was over, the music gone. Isabelle stood in the thin white nightgown moon's rays playing with the loose hair.

"So beautiful," the husband-to-be put his strong arm around her waist as if he, too, wanted to join the moon in her play.

Margaret was dying. Fever took her and left Isabelle behind. Isabelle felt it should have been her all along, not Margaret. Stains were still there, itching her, causing rashes on the hidden self, the one she wanted back, but couldn't grasp.

Isabelle let the husband-to-be caress her, like a little girl. Every gentleness sliding down her neck, opened one petal of a water lily lying deep in her. It was a white lily that reminded her of Margaret. Isabelle had been thinking for a long time before she concluded that no man could ever have the wisdom of patience to see a lily, when it was still only a bud. And yet, she was greatly in the wrong. This man, was no longer just a husband-to-be, but something much more. She took his hand and kissed it with devotion and peace. In his ocean, she could be free. Free at last.