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The Letter for the King

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1 The Vigil in the Chapel

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

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

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

What was Jussipo thinking about?

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

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

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

Tomorrow morning! Tiuri could already picture the celebratory

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

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

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

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

Tiuri looked again at his friends. They were still kneeling in the same position. He knew it must be after midnight. His candle had almost burnt down; it was the shortest of the five. Perhaps it was because he was sitting by a window. The chapel was a draughty place and he could feel a chilly gust of air. *When my candle goes out*, he thought, *I won't light another one*. The others wouldn't be able to see him in the dark, which was an appealing thought, and he wasn't worried that he might fall asleep.

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

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

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

Then there was another knock.

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

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

All five of them sighed at the same time.

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

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

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

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

2 A Stranger's Request

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

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

It sounded even more urgent than before.

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

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

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

Then Tiuri made a decision. Quietly, he stood up, stiff from kneeling on the cold floor for so long. Feeling his way along the wall, he tiptoed towards the door. He glanced at his friends and thought at first that they had not noticed anything, but then he saw Arman looking in his direction. He knew his friend would never betray him.

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

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

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

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

"Thank you!" whispered the stranger.

Tiuri did not reply.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The stranger stopped beside a small, dark alcove. "Let's hide here," he whispered, "and we must speak quietly, so that no one

can hear us." Then he released Tiuri's hand and asked, "What is your name?"

"Tiuri," he answered.

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

"What do you want of me?" asked Tiuri.

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

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

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

"You don't expect me..." Tiuri began.

"No," said the stranger, interrupting him. "The man who shall deliver the letter is the Black Knight with the White Shield. At this moment, he is in the forest, at the Yikarvara Inn. What I need you to do is to take this letter to him. I cannot do so myself, as I am old and there are enemies all around, who are pursuing me and who know my face."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Understood," said Tiuri.

"And mark this well: when you find the Black Knight with the White Shield, you must ask him: Why is your shield white? And he will respond: Because white contains every colour. Then he will ask

you: Where do you come from? You must answer: I come from afar. Only after that exchange should you hand over the letter."

"Like a password," said Tiuri.

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

"Yes," said Tiuri. "Please give me the letter."

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

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

"You won't lose it if you keep it there, will you?" asked the stranger.

"No," Tiuri replied. "That's the safest place."

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

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

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

3 The Ride to the Inn

It was a beautiful summer's night and the sky was full of stars. Tiuri found the horse behind the chapel, as the stranger had said he would. It was tied to a fence, but it had neither bridle nor saddle.

It's just as well I've ridden bareback before, he thought, as he undid the rope, his fingers trembling slightly. The rope was tightly fastened with lots of knots and he wished he had brought his knife. In fact,

he had no weapons with him at all, as he had left everything behind in the chapel.

The horse whinnied quietly, but it sounded so loud in the stillness of the night. Tiuri glanced around. His eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and he could see a building nearby, probably the house of the farmer who owned the meadow.

Finally, Tiuri managed to get the rope untied.

"Come on, horse," he whispered. "Come with me."

The animal whinnied again. A dog barked and a light shone out from the farmhouse. Tiuri climbed up onto the horse and clicked his tongue. "Come on!" The horse slowly started walking.

"Hey!" someone shouted. "Who's there?"

Tiuri wasn't about to answer him.

The barking grew loud and fierce, as a man dashed out of the farmhouse with a lantern in his hand. "Thief!" he shouted. "Stop right there! Jian, Marten, get out here! A thief's making off with my horse!"

Tiuri gasped. A thief? He hadn't meant to steal anything. But there was no time to lose. He leant forward and urged the horse on. The animal started trotting.

"Faster!" Tiuri whispered urgently. "Faster!"

Behind them, there was a commotion of shouting, yelling and furious barking. The horse flattened its ears and ran off as fast as the wind.

I'm sorry I had to borrow your horse, Tiuri imagined himself saying to the poor farmer, who was still shouting after him. *I'm not really stealing it. I promise to bring it back soon.*

When he looked back, the farmhouse was already a long way behind him and there was no sign of anyone following. All the same, he kept racing onwards at the same speed.

Tiuri thought the stranger really should have mentioned that the horse belonged to someone else, no matter how important the letter was and how secret its contents were. He reined in the horse and

checked that the precious document was safe. Yes, there it was, still in the same place. He looked around cautiously, remembering that the stranger had mentioned that enemies might be on the lookout. But Tiuri saw no one. He gazed back towards the city, which was almost completely in darkness, and looked up at the chapel, dimly visible on the hillside, small and white.

Then he rode towards the forest.

The forest was not far from the City of Dagonaut. It covered a large area and there were places within it where no human had ever set foot. Tiuri knew the way to the lodge, as he had hunted in the king's retinue on many occasions.

It was much darker in the forest, but the road was wide, so he could keep riding at a quick pace. Now and then, he slowed the horse and took a good look around. He saw no one, but he felt as if the forest was full of men lurking and spying on him, just waiting to attack.

He reached the hunting lodge without incident and had no trouble finding the track that the stranger had mentioned. It was narrow and winding, which forced him to ride more slowly.

I hope I'll be back in time, he thought. *Just imagine not being there when the king's knights come to fetch us for the ceremony! But the stranger said I should be able to reach the inn in three hours.*

He thought about the Black Knight with the White Shield, the man to whom he was supposed to give the letter. He had never heard that knight's name before. Who was he? Where did he come from? None of King Dagonaut's knights wore those colours, so he was probably one of King Unauwen's men. Why he was here, so far from his own country, was a mystery. Tiuri had heard stories from travellers who had met Unauwen's knights. They sometimes rode along the Great Southern Road on their way to Eviellan, the hostile land on the other side of the Grey River, where one of Unauwen's sons ruled.

Tiuri wondered how long he had been riding. An hour? That would make it quarter past two. Maybe it was even later than that – it seemed such a long time since he'd been kneeling in the chapel and had heard the voice asking him to open the door.

There were more hills now and the track went up and down. The horse seemed able to see better in the dark than Tiuri. Sure of foot, it kept on going.

The forest was quiet at night, but not as quiet as the chapel. Tiuri could hear all sorts of strange, soft noises, probably animals. There was the sound of leaves rustling, and the steps of the horse, and dry twigs and branches snapping as he rode by. Something flew into his face and gave him a fright, but it was just a moth or some other insect.

The track led uphill again, and the sky was growing lighter. The trees and undergrowth became less dense. *I must be close to the clearing now*, Tiuri thought.

And indeed, he soon came to a treeless glade. It had to be the place that the stranger had mentioned. Tiuri knew he should take the path to the left.

As he rode across the clearing, he heard more noises, noises that were unlike anything he'd heard so far during his ride. Horses neighing and the clatter of hoofs!

From his high vantage point, he could see out over the forest and, in the distance, he made out dark figures and the gleam of weapons. A group of horsemen was passing swiftly through the forest.

Tiuri retreated to the trees, wondering who the horsemen were and what they were doing in the forest in the middle of the night. When he finally ventured back out into the clearing, there was neither sight nor sound of the riders. It was as though he had been dreaming. However, he did not stay there puzzling about it for long, but took the path to the left, which led down from the clearing.

The path was not a clear track, but more like an overgrown trail. Tiuri sighed, because it was going to slow him down even

more. He was soon forced to dismount and lead the horse on foot, following the path one hesitant step at a time and constantly worrying that he would lose his way altogether. Branches whipped at Tiuri's face, and the dew on the long grass soaked his feet and legs.

Tiuri kept wondering about the time. The path was so tricky to navigate that he feared he would not get back to the chapel by seven o'clock.

By then, the sky was much lighter and, here and there, birds were starting to sing.

Tiuri was relieved when the path finally improved and he could climb back onto his horse.

In the grey moment just before daybreak, he came upon another clearing. A small wooden building stood in the middle – it had to be the inn.

4 The Yikarvara Inn

Tiuri climbed down from his horse, tied it to a tree, and ran to the inn. It was silent and dark, and all of the doors and windows were closed. He rapped the knocker on the front door; it made a loud, resounding bang that was sure to wake up everyone within. But no one answered. He rattled the door, but it was locked. Impatiently, he banged the knocker again. This time, a window opened upstairs. A man wearing a nightcap leant out and asked in a sleepy voice what Tiuri wanted.

"Is this the Yikarvara Inn?" asked Tiuri.

"Yes, this is it," the man replied. "Did you really need to wake me to ask that, and probably my guests too? We've had little enough rest tonight!"

"Are you the innkeeper?" asked Tiuri. "I'd like to speak to one of your guests."

"In the middle of the night?" spluttered the man. "I'm afraid that won't be possible, young man! You'll have to come back tomorrow."

"This is important!" Tiuri said in an urgent tone. "Please... don't close the window."

The man leant out further. "Who are you?" he asked. "And who do you want to speak to?"

"It doesn't matter who I am," Tiuri said. "I'm looking for the Black Knight with the White Shield."

The man made a strange noise. Tiuri couldn't quite tell whether it was anger or surprise. Either way, all traces of sleepiness had gone from his voice when he answered. "Wait there a moment, I'm coming down." The head disappeared from the window, and soon Tiuri heard the bolts of the door sliding aside. Then the door opened and the man was standing there, wearing a nightshirt and carrying a candle.

"Well, then," he said, looking Tiuri up and down. "Yes, I'm the innkeeper. And now you can tell me why you've got me out of bed."

"I've come to see the Black Knight with the White Shield," answered Tiuri. "I have to speak to him immediately."

"You're the second one tonight," said the innkeeper. "But you won't be able to speak to him right now."

"Can't you wake him up?" said Tiuri.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," the innkeeper said again. "The Black Knight with the White Shield isn't here. He left earlier tonight."

Tiuri gasped. "No!" he said. "He can't have done!"

"And why not?" the innkeeper responded calmly.

"Where did he go? Quickly, tell me!" said Tiuri.

"If I knew, I'd tell you," replied the innkeeper. "But I don't have a clue." He seemed to have realized how anxious Tiuri was, because he added, "He should be back before long, at least if he's as good a knight as he seems to be. What is it that you need to say to him so urgently?"

"I can't tell you that," said Tiuri. "But it's urgent. Do you know when he'll be back?"

"Again, if I knew, I'd tell you," said the innkeeper, "but I don't know that either. In fact, I don't know anything at all about that knight. It's a strange business." He scratched his head so hard that his nightcap fell off.

"You must know something!" said Tiuri. "When did he leave and why? And which way did he go?"

"That's too many questions at once," said the innkeeper. He slowly stooped to pick up his cap. "Come in," he said. "I'm not keen on this damp morning air. It's not good for my stiff joints."

When they were inside, he placed his candle on the table and put his nightcap back on. Tiuri asked impatiently, "So which way did the Black Knight go?"

"He got here yesterday morning," said the innkeeper. "Bit of a peculiar fellow. Not that I doubt he's a brave knight, oh no. In fact, he was most impressive. He was all alone. Didn't even have a squire with him! He was wearing a pitch-black suit of armour, but the shield on his arm was as white as snow. He'd lowered his black visor and he didn't raise it when he asked me for a room, or when he came into the inn. Well, I gave him a room, of course, and later in the day I took some food to the room, as he'd requested. I thought I'd see his face then, but no! He'd taken off his armour, including his helmet, but he was wearing a black silk mask, and all I could see were his eyes. Don't you think that's strange? He must have taken some kind of vow. Would you know anything about that?"

"Which way did he go?" Tiuri asked again.

The innkeeper looked a little irritated, but he continued. "I was just coming to that," he said. "At about one or two in the morning, when I was already in bed, there was a loud knocking at the door. I looked out of the window and saw another black knight! 'Open the door!' he shouted. 'Is the Black Knight with the White Shield within?' Well, I told him that he was here, but I said it was a little

late. And then this knight yelled at me to open the door or he said he'd knock it down. So I flew downstairs and opened the door. The knight was dressed in a pitch-black suit of armour too, but he had a shield that was as red as blood. Then he just barked at me! 'Where is the Black Knight with the White Shield?' he said. I told him he was asleep and he ordered me to wake him up. Said he had to speak to him and that I should be quick about it! Well, to be honest, he gave me a bit of a fright. But my guest was already coming down the stairs. He was dressed in his black armour and his helmet, and his visor was down. He was carrying his weapons and had the white shield on his arm. The Black Knight with the Red Shield walked towards him and then stopped, and they stood there, facing each other, right here in this very room. The Knight with the Red Shield pulled off his glove and tossed it onto the floor at the other man's feet. The Knight with the White Shield picked it up and said, 'When?' And the Knight with the Red Shield said, 'Now!'"

The innkeeper stopped to catch his breath before finishing his tale, "And then, without saying another word, the two of them marched out of here and rode off together, into the forest."

"To fight a duel," said Tiuri.

"Yes, that's what I thought too," said the innkeeper. "And neither of them has returned as yet."

"So they left at about two?" asked Tiuri. "And what time is it now?"

"Half four, or thereabouts," said the innkeeper. "The sun's coming up."

"Which direction did they ride in?" asked Tiuri.

The innkeeper went outside with Tiuri and pointed out the path they had taken. "But I don't know where exactly they were going," he said.

"I'll try to follow their trail," said Tiuri. "Thank you!" And before the innkeeper could ask any questions, Tiuri had run to his horse, jumped on and ridden away.