

Verse 1

We call it Geirr. And everything you see, feel, or touch is a part of it. Some will tell you that Geirr is simply the world. But do not believe them. They are deluding themselves with a flawed understanding of their life. No, Geirr is much more. Of course, it is Jordh, where us humans have made our home, and Vaegr, the never-ending ocean. But it also everything that live and breathe upon it.

Yes, including you and me. The Geirr that you experience, the Geirr that you are, is the God of Life, who sacrificed himself for the benefit of Creation. And we are all a part of him.

Below Geirr lies Faligheir, the realm of the dead, and above it resides the Ivory City, the realm of the Gods.

— Unknown, *Teachings of the Kirjald*

A flash of pain wrenched Verthund from her slumber. She instinctively stifled a groan and stood motionless. She didn't know where she was. She tried to remember, but couldn't even recall when she went to sleep. She couldn't even think of how she got where she was. Wherever here was. She took a slow and deep breath to take in the smell of her surroundings. Dust and wood. Burnt wax and chamomile. She wasn't home.

She involuntarily frowned. Her body was on fire and the pain was preventing her from thinking straight. Knowing where she was could wait, first she needed to check how badly she was injured.

She kept her eyes shut, to avoid being distracted by the sight of her own body, and slowly breathed out, keeping her breath steady. She did it three times before she was confident that she could control the burning pain she felt. Once the spasms had subsided a little, she finally started to get a sense of herself. Staying still, she tensed her muscles to see how they reacted. When she didn't notice anything amiss, she used her hands to check for wounds, moving as slowly as she could. Running them along herself she found various bandages around her belly and legs, but most importantly around her head, which made her wince when she touched it.

Eventually, she opened her eyes and looked around.

The room she was in was plunged in darkness. A bedroom, if the bed she was on could be of any indication. Turning her head to the right, she saw a rickety wooden night-stand, covered by a metal tray cluttered with gauze and various bottles. She tried to read the labels, but couldn't make out any of the writings, her eyes couldn't focus on them and the gloom rendered the task that much harder. The only light came from a small window, sitting on the wall opposite her. The faint, grey light that shone through the tattered curtains told her that it was night. The glow cast by the moon hid more of the room than it revealed, making any attempt at seriously investigating her surroundings fruitless. At least she was alone. She sighed and tried to recall the events leading to her situation one more time but couldn't remember much. An offensive on a beach and a swarm of enemy troops. Everything was a blur in her head. She sat up and the pain in her stomach made her groan. She saw stars dancing in front of her eyes.

“You should stay in bed.”

Verthund jerked her head upwards and saw a silhouette detaching itself from the shadows next to the window and cursed herself for failing to notice that someone else was in the room with her.

“Sorry I spooked you.” The silhouette drew close to her but stayed out of clear sight. She could tell that it was a man, both by his voice and his stature, but with his back turned against the light she couldn’t make up any of his features, and her headache made it that much harder to identify him.

“Who’re you?” Her voice was hoarse and her throat hurt. She felt like someone was piercing it with needles. She reached it with her left hand and gently rubbed it. It didn’t help.

“It’s not important.” The man dismissed her question with a wave of the hand. “What matters is how you feel.”

Verthund coughed. “Drowsy.” It was a bit better.

She ran her hand on the bandage over her forehead. “Thanks. I guess.”

In the gloom, she could see the outline of a smile on the man’s face. He didn’t say anything and instead went to the night-stand. Verthund turned her head to get another look at him, as much as she could. He was taller than her, probably around a meter eighty. And he smelled of chamomile. This must be his house.

He hovered his hand over the bottles and hummed, visibly wondering which one to pick. After a few seconds he mumbled something that Verthund didn’t understand and chose the smallest one. He held it in front of his eyes and made the liquid inside twirl as he uncorked it. A fetid smell immediately filled the room.

“Ugh.” Verthund couldn’t prevent a small gasp.

“It is a nasty smell. But as they say, it means it’s effective.” She saw the man smile faintly in the gloom.

Without saying anything else he gave the bottle to Verthund and she gingerly grabbed it, focusing on her trembling fingers so she wouldn’t drop it. She brought the bottle close to her face. The smell was much stronger now, and she repressed a gag, almost spilling the content on herself. She lifted the flask to her eyes but there was nothing written on it. She could see a distorted image of the man through the glass.

She lowered the bottle. “You expect me to drink this?”

He nodded. “Yes. I used to give it to you, but seeing as you’re awake...”

“Yes, I’d rather do it on my own.”

She wondered if it was wise, drinking a strange drug from a stranger man. But she didn’t see any other options in her helpless state, he could easily force her if he wanted to. She brought the bottle to her lips and gulped the liquid in one swoop. She choked on the smell, but managed to keep everything inside her mouth before swallowing. She had a lot of questions for him. She opened her mouth to speak but fell asleep almost instantly.

She woke up some time later but was unable to tell how long that medicine had made her sleep. All she knew was that it was night. The curtains were closed and a half-consumed candle was burning on the night-stand where the tray used to be. She was still feeling dazed, but the pain in her stomach had subsided, if only a little. She stood on her elbows and took a quick glance at the room, half expecting to see her strange saviour, or captor, standing next to the bed, but didn’t notice anybody. The candlelight enabled her to see a bit more of the place, even though there

wasn't much to see. It was rather small, and the bed was of the same quality as the night-stand, creaking when she shifted her weight. An empty wooden chair was placed on the other side of the bed, facing her. An old wardrobe was taking space in a corner of the room, one of its doors stood ajar, half uninged. Something seemed off to Verthund.

"Still spying on me?" She took a shot in the dark.

She heard the floorboards creak and saw the man getting up from a second chair in a dark corner of the room that she was sure was empty moments ago. She wondered how he was able to blend in the shadows like that. Maybe she was just too concussed to see clearly.

"Sorry. I didn't think you could see me there." He spoke while coming closer to her.

He walked to the edge of the bed until he was next to her, his face lit by the candlelight. The man looked at her without saying a word and Verthund took this opportunity to study his face. He was older than her, by ten years or so, and wore his black hair down to his shoulders. The flame of the candle was dancing in his eyes and cast shadows across his face, hiding its imperfections.

"That's not the point." She grunted. "Can you at least answer some of my questions?"

"Of course." The man flashed a little smile at Verthund. "I have a few of my own too."

Verthund frowned for a second. He was suggesting they trade information, and he was in a much stronger position than her, it would be a dangerous conversation. But she had no choice, she needed to know more. She just hoped he didn't know who she was.

"Fair enough. Where are we, exactly?"

The man stared blankly at Verthund. "Blaut."

She visibly winced at the news. "The capital of the Empire of Zierhild..."

"Is that a problem?" The man was radiating innocence.

Of course it's a fucking problem, she said in the privacy of her mind, *you're the enemy!* She tried to remain neutral. "No. Absolutely not."

The man smirked. "Good. I wouldn't want the war between our countries be an obstacle in your recovery."

Verthund sighed. "So you know I'm from Asfrid."

"Well, it wouldn't be becoming on me if I couldn't recognise one of Asfrid's most renowned fighters. Don't you agree, Vandill-Commander Verthund Dyrfinna?"

Verthund felt a shiver run down her spine. This wasn't good. She tried once again to identify the man, but the darkness and her drowsiness rendered any attempt at recognition pointless.

She shook her head. "You have me at a disadvantage. I fear I can't place you."

The man waved it away. "Don't worry. Who I am is not important."

Verthund disagreed on that point. But she knew she couldn't force him to answer her at the moment and so she kept silent.

"Now tell me, do you remember how you ended up here?"

Verthund shut her eyes and searched the mists of her memory. She was at mercy of this man, and it might help her to fall in his good graces, so she decided to play fair with him, at least for now. He seemed like the kind to know the answer of his questions anyway. "I was part of the attack on the south coast of Zierhild, we thought it would be an easy mission. We were supposed to establish a beachhead on the shore."

The man nodded. "I heard about that attack. Our troops were waiting for you, and what was supposed to be a stroll on the beach turned out to be a slaughter for your soldiers."

The man talked about it matter-of-factly, not taking any pride in this military debacle, nor seemingly considering the death of dozens of soldiers more than a footnote in history. This gave

Verthund's more insight as to who that man could be. Only politicians and warmongers were so callous with other people's lives.

"Yes..." Verthund grimaced as she remembered her companions dying by her side. "I was shot by one of your archers while fighting on the beach." She reflexively put her hand on her belly, feeling the wound that had started to heal under the bandage. "Then I woke up here."

The two looked at one another trying to read the other's mind.

Verthund suddenly realised something. "You found me on that beach."

The man nodded. "Mm-hmm. I arrived a short time after the fight was over, to assess the situation. That's when I found you. Almost dead, in a pool of your own blood. The only survivor of your kind."

"So why didn't you let me bleed? You want to interrogate me?"

The man laughed and held his hands in front of him in an appeasing fashion. "No! Contrary to what you might be taught, we are not blood-crazed maniacs who slaughter without mercy. Well, not all of us."

Verthund was taken aback by the apparent cheerfulness of her enemy. She was not expecting that from her captor, much less from a Zierhildian. "So what? You saved me out of the kindness of your heart?"

"You might say that."

The man was still smiling and handing her vague and ambiguous answers, deepening Verthund hunch that he was a godsdamned politician. She wondered if he was just enjoying toying with her.

"But don't get me wrong. I am neither a fool nor a romantic. I just find it sad when soldiers are robbed from the honour of dying in battle."

Verthund chuckled. "Not a romantic, right. So you plan to nurse be back to health?"

The man nodded slightly.

"And then what? Challenge me to a duel?"

"Of course not, that would be such a waste of time. I plan to smuggle you out of town, and then let you loose. I trust you will be able to find your way back home."

Verthund had trouble believing what she was hearing. Plus, the man smile was unnerving her and she wanted some space to think things over.

"Can you leave me for a while? I can't think straight and my head is buzzing like crazy."

"Sure, take your time."

The man tilted his head at Verthund and left the room by a small door next to the bed which he closed behind him. Verthund waited in silence, listening. She heard the floorboards creak beneath the man's footsteps, and after a short time a door opened and closed. Looking at the window she saw a shadow creep through the street outside. The silence that followed led her to believe that he left the house.

Verthund laid back on the bed and stared at the white ceiling. She relived the events of the assault in her head. She was remembering everything vividly now that the drugs were wearing off, and if she closed her eyes she could imagine herself being back there again. It really should have been an easy mission. Intelligence was suggesting that there was a forgotten beach a mere hundred kilometres away from Blaut that was not guarded due to the treacherous anchorage. They took two small ships and fifty men to seize the place and establish a foothold. But as soon as they disembarked from their vessels they were ambushed by a full squadron of Zierhildians,

outnumbering them three to one. They fought valiantly but they ultimately didn't stand a chance against those kinds of odds.

They sold their lives dearly, and managed to kill almost two-third of the opposing forces, but her troops where completely wiped out. In the end, she owed her own survival to sheer luck. Of course it came at the cost of being captured and held prisoner, if that's what she indeed was.

Verthund turned to the side and looked at the almost burnt out candle, it's flame flickering during its last moments. She tried to remember if she saw her saviour on the battlefield. He obviously wasn't a regular citizen of the Empire. The fact that he knew her face and had the expertise and means to heal her betrayed a knowledge that wasn't available to just anybody in Zierhild. But she didn't remember seeing any officers in the battle. She searched her knowledge of Zierhildians officials to see if his face was the face of someone she knew, but there was no help there either.

She closed her eyes and spent some time trying to understand how Zierhild could have known when and where they were coming to attack. Maybe the intelligence was wrong. Or worse, maybe there was a mole in High Command? She sighed and reluctantly pushed this thought aside. There was nothing she could do about it here. She'll have plenty of time to investigate it back home, if she was ever coming back. She fell asleep while she was pondering what her next move should be.