



A gripping knightly epic

Tonke Dragt The Letter for the King

IT IS NIGHTTIME, long ago. Five young men are keeping vigil by a 'pale flame' in a chapel. They are allowed to neither speak, nor react to any noise from outside. They must set

their minds to the task ahead of them. Tomorrow they are to be knighted. But then... A knock at the door. A voice from out of the darkness: 'Open up in Gods name!'

De brief voor de koning is a book you find hard to put down. Unusually gripping, the mystery is narrated in a language rich in metaphors but with not one word wasted. Sixteen-year-old Tiuri opens the door of the chapel and discovers, in the conviction that he will now never become a knight, what real chivalry is. He has to deliver a letter to the neighbouring kingdom, on the other side of the 'Mighty Mountains'. Many a danger awaits him. *De brief voor de koning* is an initiation novel, in which Tiuri grows from vulnerable youth to manhood.

On his journey, Tiuri meets a host of people who are not quite what they seem. It appears that Good and Evil cannot always be clearly distinguished from one another. Only a very few figures correspond with the image they present of themselves. On his way through the forest Tiuri meets Marius, the 'Fool of the Forest'. This character is Dragt's version of the 'noble savage', simple in spirit, but nonetheless wise. Marius lives in perfect harmony with nature. The message is clear, but Dragt is no moralist. She wastes no time in announcing with pomp and ceremony that here, finally, is a good person. Apart from all the things Tiuri discovers about himself and the world in which he lives, he finds out what true friendship means. He meets the shepherd boy, Piak. Dragt has created two large-as-life young men, complete with petty quarrels and the odd twinge of jealousy when Tiuri even falls in love for the first time. Everything in this rich book serves to support the plot. In addition to the expressive language, it is the close-knit construction that makes *De brief voor de koning* so breathtaking.

JUDITH EISELIN

Tonke Dragt, born in Batavia in 1930, writes adventure books that explore the boundaries of space and time. As a child, Dragt found herself in a Japanese concentration camp. Inspired by Jules Verne, Dragt wrote her first 'book' while in captivity. She writes both science fiction and historically based books, always coming up with an unexpected twist to surprise her readers.

In 1948, back in the Netherlands, Dragt became an art teacher. Several of her books are self-illustrated. She debuted in 1961 with the fairytale-style *Verhalen van de tweelingbroers* (Tales of the Twin Brothers). In 1976 she was awarded the Dutch State Prize for Children's and Youth Literature for her collected works. She is a unique voice in the world of Dutch literature.

Plot, style, composition and appearance form a tight unity. The language is evocative and strikingly clear, with a rich vocabulary. The story itself is colorful and intriguing.

LECTUUR VOORLICHTING

A gripping, cleverly written knightly epic in a grand style and with a broad scope – things we seldom encounter in books for young readers.

HAAGSCHE COURANT

A compelling tale of knights, which is strongly reminiscent of a real fairy tale in its depth and symbolism.

BOEK EN JEUGD



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An portrait of Tonke Dragt

“It’s wonderful to discover that you can escape by making up stories”

translated by Nancy Forest

Tonke Dragt was born in Jakarta (Indonesia), where she spent most of her childhood. This has greatly influenced her work.

The Indonesia that she remembers is the pre-war East Indies (then a Dutch colony), especially the mountains where the family went for holidays. In 1941 the Dutch East Indies fell to the Japanese and Tonke’s father was made a prisoner-of-war; she didn’t see him again until 1945. Meanwhile she and her mother and two younger sisters, were put into a separate, women’s camp.

Tonke was twelve in 1942 when she entered Tjideng, a Japanese POW camp. Her memories of the camp are not all unpleasant: “It’s wonderful to discover that you can escape by making up stories, carrying other people along with you.” She remembers telling one story to a couple of sick children that began, “On the great plain of Babina someone got lost in the mist...”

“One of my girlfriends wanted to be a writer, and I liked to draw, so the two of us made a book. There was practically no paper, so we had to beg for it. We finished the book, too: *The Hunt for the Towhead*. It was influenced by everything we had read – Jules Verne and so on. Nothing original about it. It featured wide-open spaces where you couldn’t be locked up, and if the main characters did manage to get caught they always escaped. And all the meals were described in minute detail.”

It was only later on that she realized how much the world of the camp had been worked into the story. After the war she found two carefully wrought Japanese chopsticks in a locked room in the house where the family had come to live. “It felt as if I’d stolen them from the enemy.”

Making up stories and drawings about knights, adventures and elaborate meals in re-used, erased notebooks, on toilet paper, or just in her head – these were the first steps that Tonke Dragt took on the road to becoming a writer.

In August 1945 the war in the East Indies also came to an end. There was no Liberation Day as there had been in the Netherlands, but Tonke had every reason to rejoice because her father came back and the family was reunited.

In 1946, Tonke, her mother and her sisters moved to Holland. It was a cold, unfamiliar country where they were not made to feel particularly welcome except by relatives and a few friends. She and her sisters often felt like foreign and unwanted. It didn’t help that many Dutch people were ignorant and scathing

about the war in the East Indies. It couldn't have been as bad there as in the Netherlands, they's say. After all, the sun shone there and it was warm.

The Dutch looked strange too: fat, with white faces and red cheeks. Tonke was glad to be able to return to the East Indies when her father got a job there, even if it was only for a short time. She finally left Indonesia in 1948, a difficult parting.

Back in the Netherlands she graduated from secondary school and went to the fine arts academy in The Hague to learn to draw. She then in turn became a drawing teacher. But her time in the Japanese prison camp had got her into the habit of writing. Tonke made her writing debut in 1961 with the fairy-tale style *Verhalen van de tweelingbroers* (Tales of the Twin Brothers). The stories took place in Babina, the land she had invented in the camp and which later on came more and more to resemble Italy, a country Tonke had only seen in pictures.

One year later *De brief voor de Koning* (The Letter for the King) was published and was awarded the prize for the best children's book, a forerunner of the Gouden Griffel. That was followed by a sequel, *Geheimen van het Wilde Woud* (Secrets of the Wild Forest; 1965).

During the sixties most of the writers of children's book wrote realistic stories, but Tonke was creating her own worlds, such as the Lands of Dagonaut and Unauwen. A number of the stories in *Het gevaarlijke venster* (The Dangerous Window, 1979) take place there as well.

She drew while she was writing. "Sometimes there are things that you just can't draw, so you have to write about them instead. And othertimes the drawing comes first."

In 1964 Tonke was asked to write the gift book for Children's Book Week. This became *De Blauwe Boekanier* (The Blue Buccaneer), based on a book from the "Junior Library", small, hand-written booklets, an idea conceived by Tonke's sister Ada in 1948. Whoever wanted to become a member had first to fill up a book.

An old abandoned café and six intersecting roads in the country, gave her the idea for *De Zevensprong* (Where Seven Roads Meet, 1967).

Tonke Dragt did write fairytales in her first books, but now she's set her sights on the future. Take the time machine in *Het geheim van de klokkenmaker* (The Clockmaker's Secret). And *Aan de andere kant van de deur* (The Other Side of the Door), where a robot woman and a man from Mars mingle with the human population. Are these fantasy figures, or might we see them some day walking among us? Whatever the answer, Tonke is never satisfied with ordinary reality. She enjoys blending reality with fantasy, and does it so well that her readers sometimes become confused. Every day she receives letters from children and

adults who want to know *the word* that might lead them to another world (read *Do torens van februari*; The Towers of February).

Tonke is fascinated by the question “What if...?”, by the idea that nothing is for certain, by the difference between thinking and doing, and by the thought “It could have been different.” Tonke is out to discover – over and over again, and always using a different form.

The main characters in Tonke’s books are often confronted by choices. They begin searching and find themselves in adventures that often turn out to be quests. Who am I? What do I want? What am I doing in this world – not to mention other worlds. For Tonke those other worlds are not just fantasy. They exist in this world, too, if you learn to look in a different way, with wondering eyes.

She went on to write reading primers in De Blauwe Maan series. And for an entirely different age group there was *Torenhoog en mijlen breed* (Sky High and a Mile Wide, 1969), which contains elements from *Geheimen van het Wilde Woud* but takes place on Venus. This work was awarded the Nienke van Hichtum Prize.

The sequel, *Ogen van tijgers* (Tigers’ Eyes), published in 1982, is something of a reversal. It takes place on earth some time in the future when there are neither forests nor tigers.

The “time” theme often plays an important role in her books, as in the diary *De torens of februari* (1973) and in the series *Zeeën van tijd* (Seas of Time), the first volume of which appeared in 1992 (*Aan de andere kant van de deur*). Part of that book was published earlier under the title *Het geheim van de klokkenmaker* (1989) and was awarded a Vlag en Wimpel.

Tonke is now working hard on the second volume of *Zeeën van tijd*, which will be called *De weg naar de cel* (The Road to the Cell).

In 1976 Tonke received the National Prize for Children’s Literature for her oeuvre. Her books have also been successful beyond the borders of the Netherlands. German children are big fans, and there are translations in the Czech Republic, the U.S.A. and Denmark.

Tonke now lives in The Hague in a home filled with dolls’ houses and boxes containing materials for collages and ideas for books that have yet to be written. The dolls’ houses are fully furnished, or to put it another way, crammed with just about everything featured in her books. You can almost see *Zeeën van tijd* happening before your eyes! Her telephone is answered by a telephone robot called Xantippe, a very familiar name to anyone who’s read *Ogen van tijgers*.

Sample translation from

The Letter for the King by Tonke Dragt
(Amsterdam: Leopold, 1962)

Translated by David Colmer

INTRODUCTION

The Knights of King Daganaut

This is a story from long ago, from the age of chivalry. It is set in two kingdoms: King Daganaut's realm to the east of the Great Mountains and the realm of King Unauwen, to the west. The capitals of the two countries bear those same names: Daganaut and Unauwen. There is talk of another land as well, but more about that later.

The story begins in the realm of Daganaut. But first you need to know a little about him and his knights. To that end, I have copied a few passages from an old, old book.

Our monarch, King Daganaut, is a mighty ruler; his reign is praised as wise and just, and his kingdom is large and beautiful. There are hills and meadows, rich fields, wide rivers and vast forests. Mountains lie to the north, and in the west, the mountains are even higher. Beyond them lies the land of King Unauwen, about which our minstrels sing so beautifully. To the east and south there are no mountains, and from these directions enemies sometimes try to attack our country, jealous as they are of our prosperity. But no one has ever succeeded in

conquering the realm, as the king's knights guard it well and defend it bravely. Within our borders it is safe and peaceful, and life is kind.

King Daganaut has many knights in his service: bold, courageous men who preserve order and help him to rule over his kingdom. Many of them have grown famous: who has not heard of Sir Farumar or Tiuri the Brave or Ristridin the Southerner, to name just a few? The king has given most of his knights estates to administer in his name. These knights are duty bound to answer the king's call immediately, helping him with their men-at-arms and all their strength.

Some knights own no land; most of these are young and will later succeed their fathers. But there are also those who desire no possessions: knights-errant who roam the country offering their services wherever they go. They guard the borders and even travel beyond them so that they can return later and report to the king on events outside his kingdom.

There are many knights in King Daganaut's realm, but still it is very difficult to join their ranks. Those who aspire to knighthood must first prove their worth. They undergo an arduous apprenticeship, first serving an experienced knight as his squire and then spending a year in the royal army. They must be skilled with arms and knowledgeable in many fields, but they must also prove that they are true and honest, generous and brave. They must be chivalrous in every way.

Once every four years, in the summer, King Daganaut summons all his knights to his city, where they stay for seven days. They tell him of the state of affairs in the different parts of his realm and give an account of their own activities and achievements.

And in that week, on Midsummer Day, the king solemnly dubs the young men who have been found worthy, making them knights.

What a great day that is! After the accolades there is a service in the cathedral, followed by a feast at the palace. Then comes a magnificent procession through the city, with all the knights on horseback, in full armour and bearing

shields and banners, and with the new, young knights leading the way. From near and far, people come to see it. It is a great celebration, not just in the palace, but all over the city. There is a fair in the marketplace, musicians play everywhere, and people sing and dance in every street, first in the sunshine and later by the light of hundreds of torches. The following day the king summons his knights to a great meeting, which the new, young knights attend for the first time. And the day after that, they participate in a grand tournament, for many the highlight of the week. At no other time is there so much grandeur on display, or such an exhibition of skill and bravery.

But before these glorious days, the young knights must endure their final test. For twenty-four hours before being knighted, they must fast – they are allowed neither food nor drink. And in the night before the ceremony they must keep a vigil in the small chapel outside the city walls. Dressed in white robes, they lay their swords before the altar and contemplate the great task that lies before them. They resolve that, as Daganaut's knights, they will serve their king faithfully and uphold his realm, their motherland. They promise to be unswervingly honest and helpful, and to struggle for what is right.

All night they must stay awake, thinking about their task and praying for the strength to fulfil it. They must neither sleep nor talk, nor listen to voices from the outside world until seven o'clock in the morning, when a delegation of knights will arrive to escort them to the king.

This story begins on just such a night, in the small chapel on the hill outside the City of Daganaut. Five young men were keeping vigil there on the night before they would be dubbed into the knighthood: Wilmo, Foldo, Jiusipu, Arman and Tiuri. Tiuri was the youngest; he was just sixteen.

PART ONE

The Task

I. The Vigil in the Chapel

Kneeling on the stone floor, Tiuri stared at the pale flame of the candle in front of him.

What time was it? He was meant to seriously contemplate the duties he would have once he was a knight, but his thoughts kept drifting. And sometimes his mind was a complete blank. He wondered whether his friends felt the same.

He looked to the side at Foldo and Arman, Wilmo and Jiusipu. Foldo and Wilmo were gazing at their candles, Arman's face was buried in his hands. Jiusipu was kneeling bolt upright, but suddenly turned to look Tiuri straight in the eyes. They stared at each other for a moment; then Tiuri turned his head to look back at his candle.

What was Jiusipu thinking about?

Wilmo moved, scraping his shoe over the floor. The others all turned toward him at the same time. Wilmo hung his head as if embarrassed.

It's so quiet, thought Tiuri a little later. In my whole life it's never been this quiet before. All I can hear is our breathing and maybe, if I listen closely, the beat of my own heart.

The five youths were not allowed to speak to each other, they weren't allowed to say a word the whole night long. And any kind of contact at all with the outside world was strictly forbidden. They had locked the chapel door themselves and would not open it again until tomorrow morning at seven o'clock, when King Daganaut's knights came to fetch them.

Tomorrow morning! Tiuri saw the festive procession before him: the knights on their beautiful caparisoned horses, the colourful shields and the

fluttering banners. He saw himself too, mounted on a thoroughbred, wrapped in shining armour with a helmet and a waving plume.

He shrugged off the image. He must not think of the external trappings of knighthood, but should resolve to be honest and true, brave and courteous.

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

Tomorrow there will be two knights bearing the same coat of arms, he thought, my father and I. His father was called Tiuri as well, “Tiuri the Brave”. Was he lying awake now and thinking of his son? I hope, thought Tiuri, that I will prove as worthy a knight as him.

A little later a new thought occurred to him. What if someone were to knock on the door? We wouldn’t be allowed to open it. He remembered something that Sir Farumar, who he had served as a squire, had once told him. During his vigil in the chapel, in the night before he was knighted, someone had suddenly pounded on the door. He was there with three friends, but none of them had opened the door. Fortunately for them as it turned out, because it had been one of the king’s servants sent to test them.

Tiuri looked back at his friends. They were still kneeling in the same positions. It must have been past midnight by now. His candle was almost burnt down; it was the shortest of the five. That might have been because he was closest to a window. There was a draught: he could feel the cold air leaking in. When my candle goes out, I won’t light a new one, he thought. The idea of kneeling in the dark was more appealing, the others wouldn’t be able to see him then. He wasn’t worried about falling asleep.

Had Wilmo gone to sleep? No, he could see him moving.

I’m not keeping vigil as I should, thought Tiuri. He put his hands together and fixed his eyes on the sword that he would only be allowed to use for a just cause. He ran through the words that he would speak to King Daganaut the next

day. “I promise as a knight to serve you faithfully, and all your subjects as well, and all those who call on my help. I promise...”

Then came a knocking on the door – soft but unmistakable. The five young men held their breath, but remained where they were, motionless.

Whoever it was knocked again.

The youths exchanged glances, but didn’t speak a word or move an inch.

They heard someone turn the doorknob. Then came the sound of gradually fading footsteps.

They sighed, all five together.

Now it’s happened, thought Tiuri. It was strange, but he felt as if he had been waiting for it all through his vigil. His heart was pounding so loudly he was sure the others could hear it. “Calm, stay calm,” he told himself. “Maybe it was a stranger who didn’t know we were keeping vigil here, or someone who wanted to tease us, or test us.”

But he still waited anxiously, listening for any further sounds. His candle flared brightly for a second, then went out with a quiet hiss. Now he was in the dark.

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

And then he heard a voice, as quiet as a breath, whispering, “For God’s sake, open the door!”

2. A Stranger's Request

Tiuri straightened his back and looked at the window. There was nothing to see – not even a shadow – and he almost convinced himself that it was all in his imagination. If only it were! He couldn't do what the voice asked anyway, no matter how urgent it sounded. He hid his face in his hands and tried to clear his mind.

But again he heard the voice, very clearly, even though it was only a whisper: "For God's sake, open up!"

It sounded even more urgent than the first time.

Tiuri looked at his friends. They looked like they hadn't heard a thing. But he'd heard it all right! "For God's sake, open up!"

What now? He wasn't allowed to open the door. But what if it was an emergency, someone being pursued and seeking sanctuary?

He listened. It was quiet again. But the voice still echoed in his ears: he would never forget it. Why did this have to happen now of all times? Why did he have to be the one to hear the plea? He wasn't allowed to answer, but he would have no peace of mind until he had.

He hesitated. Then he made a decision. Quietly he stood up, with difficulty, because he had grown stiff through kneeling on the cold stones for so long. He began to creep towards the door, feeling his way along the wall. Now and then he looked back at his friends. They didn't seem to have noticed anything – or had they? Yes, Arman was looking in his direction. But Arman would never betray him.

It seemed to take forever for him to reach the vestibule. He glanced back once again at his friends, at the altar and the shields above it, at the light of the four candles and the dark shadows between the columns and under the arches. Then he walked through the small vestibule to the door and put his hand on the key.

If I open it, he thought, I will have broken the rules. Then I won't be able to be dubbed a knight tomorrow.

He turned the key, opened the door slightly and peered out through the chink.

A man was standing on the threshold, wrapped in a baggy habit with the hood pulled down over his eyes. Tiuri could not make out the man's features, it was too dark for that. He opened the door a little more and waited silently for the other to speak.

"Thank you!" whispered the stranger.

Tiuri remained silent.

The stranger waited a moment and then said, still whispering, "I need your help. It's a matter of life and death!" When Tiuri didn't answer, he continued, "Will you help me? Will you..." he repeated. "My God, say something, why don't you?"

"How can I help you?" whispered Tiuri. "Why have you come here of all places? Don't you know that I'm supposed to be knighted tomorrow? I'm not allowed to talk to anyone!"

"I know that very well," answered the stranger. "That's why I'm here."

"You should have gone somewhere else," hissed Tiuri. "Now I've broken the rules, I won't be able to be knighted."

"On the contrary," the stranger replied, "you will have earned your knighthood. A knight is supposed to help those who ask for his assistance, isn't he? Come out here, and I'll tell you what you have to do for me. Quickly, hurry up now, there's not much time!"

What next? thought Tiuri. I've already spoken and opened the door – I may as well leave the chapel now as well.

The stranger seized his hand and led him away, along the outside wall 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 it be?

The stranger stopped at a small alcove. “We’re out of sight here,” he whispered. “Talk quietly, so that no one can hear us.” As soon as they were standing in the alcove, he released Tiuri’s hand and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Tiuri,” the young man answered.

“Ah, Tiuri, I can trust you.”

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

The stranger bent toward him and whispered, “I have a letter here, a very important letter. It’s no exaggeration to say that the prosperity of an entire kingdom depends on it. A letter for King Unauwen.”

King Unauwen! Tiuri had heard a lot about him. He ruled over the land west of the mountains and was considered a just and noble monarch.

“This letter must be delivered to the king,” said the stranger. “As fast as possible.”

“You don’t want me to...” began an incredulous Tiuri.

“The letter will be delivered to the king by the Black Knight with the White Shield,” the stranger interrupted him. “He is waiting in the forest at Yikarvara Inn. I am asking you now to take the letter to him. I can’t do it myself: I am old and enemies are following me.”

“Why don’t you ask someone else?” said Tiuri. “The city is full of knights: there are plenty of men you can trust.”

“I can’t ask any of the knights,” the stranger answered. “They’re too conspicuous. Didn’t I tell you that there are enemies everywhere? The city is full of spies, just waiting for a chance to steal this letter. No, a famous knight is of no use to me. I need someone unknown, someone inconspicuous. But it still has to be someone I can trust with the letter. I need someone who is a knight, and yet not a knight! You’re the one I need: you have been found worthy of knighthood, but you’re still young, no one knows you.”

It all made perfect sense and there was nothing Tiuri could object to. Again he tried to make out the stranger’s features, and again he failed. “Is the letter really that important?” he asked instead.

“You can’t imagine how important!” the stranger whispered. “Now stop hesitating,” he continued in a tremulous voice. “There’s no time to lose! Near here, behind the chapel, there is a horse in a meadow. If you take it you can reach the inn in three hours – even less, if you ride hard. It’s about quarter past one. You can be back here by seven, when they come to take you to King Daganaut. Please, do as I ask!”

Tiuri felt unable to refuse. The rules for aspiring knights were important, but this appeal for his help was even more important.

“I’ll do it,” he said. “Give me the letter and tell me how to get to the inn.”

“Thank you!” sighed the stranger, before continuing in a whisper, “The inn is called Yikarvara. You know King Daganaut’s hunting lodge? Behind it, a small road leads off to the north-west. Follow that road until you reach a clearing in the forest. From there, two paths lead on. Follow the one on the left and it will take you straight to the inn. As far as the letter goes: promise on your knight’s honour to protect it as if your life depends on it. You must not give it to anyone except the Black Knight with the White Shield.”

“I’m not a knight yet,” said Tiuri, “but if I were, I would promise on my knight’s honour.”

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

“Understood,” said Tiuri.

“And remember this well: when you find the Black Knight with the White Shield, you must ask him: *Why is your shield white?* He will answer: *Because white is made up of all colours.* Then he will ask: *Where have you come from?* You must answer: *I come from afar.* Only then may you give him the letter.”

“The password,” mumbled Tiuri.

“That’s right, the password. Do you understand exactly what you must do?”

“Yes, sir,” said Tiuri. “You can give me the letter.”

“One last thing,” said the stranger. “Take care. Make sure no one follows you. Here is the letter, look after it well.”

Tiuri accepted the letter. It was flat and small and he could feel seals on it. Carefully he hid it under his tunic, against his chest.

“You can’t lose it like that?” asked the stranger.

“No,” said Tiuri. “It’s safe here.”

The stranger seized his hands and squeezed them. “Go then,” he said. “God bless you!” Then he let go of Tiuri’s hands, turned and walked away. Soon he was lost from sight.

Tiuri waited a moment, then strode off silently in the other direction. He glanced at the pale light in the windows of the chapel, where his friends were still keeping vigil before the altar. “Go,” he told himself, “I have to hurry.”

And he went looking for the meadow where the man had said a horse was waiting for him.

3. Riding to the Inn

It was a beautiful summer's night; the sky was full of glittering stars. Behind the chapel, Tiuri did indeed find a horse. It was tied to a fence, but was neither harnessed nor saddled.

It's a good thing I'm used to riding bareback, thought Tiuri. His fingers trembled slightly as he began to untether the horse. It was a shame that he didn't have his knife with him, because the rope was tight with many knots. He wasn't carrying any weapons at all; he'd left them behind in the chapel.

The horse let out a quiet whinny, but in the silence it sounded very loud. Tiuri looked around. Now that his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he could see that he was quite close to a building – probably the house of the farmer whose meadow this was.

At last he had untied the rope.

“Here,” he whispered to the horse. “Come with me.”

The animal whinnied again. A dog started barking and a few seconds later a light went on in the farmhouse. Tiuri mounted the horse and clicked his tongue. “Giddy up!” Slowly the animal started to move.

“Hey!” a harsh voice suddenly shouted. “Who's that?”

Tiuri had no intention of answering!

The barking got louder and more ferocious and a man with a lantern emerged from the farmhouse. “Thief!” he shouted. “Stop right there! Jian, Marten, quick! Someone's stealing my horse!”

Tiuri was shocked. Stealing – he hadn't counted on that at all! But he had no time to lose. He bent forward and spurred the horse on. The animal obeyed and started to trot.

“Faster!” hissed Tiuri in an urgent whisper. “Faster!”

Behind him there was a jumble of noise: loud cries, calls and furious barking. It spooked the horse, which laid its ears back and went like the wind.

I'm sorry that I have to borrow your horse, Tiuri said mentally to the man whose shouts he could still hear behind him. I'm not stealing it; I'll bring it back soon.

When he looked back a little later, the farmhouse was already far away and there was no trace of pursuers. All the same, he rode on just as fast.

The stranger could have told him that the horse belonged to someone else, he thought to himself. The letter seemed to be very important indeed, and top secret to boot. He restrained the horse a little and checked that the valuable document was secure. It was still safe where he had put it. He looked around carefully, remembering the enemy spies the stranger had mentioned. But he couldn't see anyone anywhere. He peered in the direction of the city, which was almost completely dark, and glanced at the chapel, a small, white glimmer on the hillside.

Then he rode toward the forest.

The forest was not far from Daganaut City. It was enormous and there were places within it where no man had ever set foot. Tiuri knew the road to the lodge well; he had joined several hunting parties as a member of the king's retinue.

It was much darker in the forest, but the road was wide and he could keep riding swiftly. Now and then he slowed the horse to walking pace so that he could look around carefully. He didn't see another soul, but still the forest seemed populated by invisible creatures, peering and spying and ready to leap out at him...

Despite this, the journey to the lodge was uneventful and behind it, he soon found the road the stranger had described: it was narrow and winding and forced him to ride more slowly.

"I hope I'm back in time," he said to himself. "What if I'm not there when the knights come to fetch us to King Daganaut? But the stranger told me that it only takes three hours to reach the inn."

He thought of the Black Knight with the White Shield, the man he had to deliver the letter to. He had never heard of him. Who was he? Where did he come from? None of King Daganaut's knights wore those colours – he probably served King Unauwen. His presence here, so far from his homeland, was just as mysterious. Tiuri recalled stories from travellers from the south who had met Unauwen's knights. They sometimes passed down the Great South Road on their way to Eviellan, the hostile country on the far bank of the Grey River. One of Unauwen's sons reigned there.

He wondered how long he had been riding. An hour? That would make it quarter past two. It could be later – it seemed ages since he was kneeling in the chapel and heard a voice asking him to open the door.

The countryside grew hilly; the road led up, then down again. The horse seemed able to see better than he could; at any rate, it kept going and didn't hesitate.

The forest was quiet at night, but not as quiet as the chapel. He could hear all kinds of strange, hushed noises, animals perhaps. He heard rustling leaves and the horse's steps and the snap of dry branches breaking off when he bumped against them. Something hit him in the face, momentarily startling him. Of course, it was just a moth or some other insect.

The road led up again and the sky grew lighter. The trees were further apart here. I must be getting close to that clearing, he thought.

A little later he reached a high flat area without a single tree. It had to be the clearing the stranger had spoken of. Now take the path to the left!

Crossing the clearing, he suddenly heard something completely unlike the noises he had heard so far. Neighing and the stamp of hooves!

He had a view out over part of the forest, and when he looked carefully, he could make out dark forms in the distance and the gleam of weapons. A group of horsemen was passing swiftly through the forest.

Tiuri drew back under the trees and wondered who the riders were and what they were doing in the forest in the middle of the night. After a while he dared to

go back out into the clearing. Once again there was neither sight nor sound of another soul; as if it had all been a dream. He didn't stop to think, but quickly took the path on the left, which led down off the clearing.

I wouldn't really call this a path, he thought, riding on. It's hardly more than a deer trail. He sighed in exasperation – now he had to ride even more slowly. A little further along and he was even forced to dismount and lead the horse, feeling his way and constantly worried about getting lost. Branches hit him in the face and the dew on the long grass soaked his feet and legs.

He kept wondering what time it was. If it's like this for much longer, I'll never get back in time!

Meanwhile it grew lighter and here and there birds began chirping.

He sighed with relief when the path had finally improved enough to allow him to remount.

In the grey moment just before dawn, he reached a second clearing with a small wooden building; it had to be the inn.

4. Yikarvara Inn

Tiuri got off his horse and tied it to a tree. Then he hurried over to the inn. It was silent and dark. All the windows and doors were closed. The youth raised the knocker and let it fall against the front door; it banged down with a loud boom that would surely wake up everyone. But inside the inn there wasn't a sound. He fumbled at the door, but it was locked. Impatient, he slammed the knocker down again. This time a window opened upstairs. A man in a nightcap leant out and asked him what he wanted.

“Is this Yikarvara Inn?” asked Tiuri.

“This is it,” the man grumbled. “Did you have to wake up me and my guests just to ask that? We're not getting much sleep tonight!”

“Are you the innkeeper?” asked Tiuri. “I need to speak to one of your guests.”

“In the middle of the night?” the man replied angrily. “That's impossible. Come back in the morning.”

“It's important!” Tiuri insisted. “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,” whispered Tiuri. “I'm looking for the Black Knight with the White Shield.”

The man made a strange noise: Tiuri couldn't tell whether it was anger or surprise. Either way, all traces of sleepiness were gone from his voice when he said, “Wait a moment, I'm coming down.” His head disappeared, and soon after Tiuri heard the creak of bolts being slid aside. Then the door opened and the man appeared on the threshold. He was wearing a nightshirt and holding a burning candle.

“Well,” he said, looking Tiuri over from head to toe. “I'm the Yikarvara innkeeper. Now tell me why you've got me up out of bed.”

“I’ve come for the Black Knight with the White Shield,” answered Tiuri. “I must speak to him immediately.”

“You’re the second one tonight,” said the innkeeper. “But speaking to him immediately will be a bit difficult.”

“You can wake him up, can’t you?” said Tiuri.

“That would be a bit difficult,” the innkeeper repeated. “The Black Knight with the White Shield isn’t here. He left earlier this evening.”

Tiuri was shocked. “No!” he said. “He can’t have!”

“Why not?” the innkeeper replied calmly.

“Where did he go?” Tiuri asked nervously.

“If I knew, I would tell you,” the innkeeper replied. “But I don’t.” He seemed to have noticed how shocked Tiuri was, because he added, “I expect he’ll come back, at least if he’s as good a knight as he seems to be. You’re here to see him, aren’t you? You’re not one of his men.”

“I’m here to see him,” said Tiuri.

“What do you have to tell him?”

“I can’t say,” said Tiuri. “But it’s urgent. Do you know when he’ll be back?”

“If I knew that, I would tell you,” answered the innkeeper, “but that’s something else I don’t know. I don’t know anything about that knight at all. It’s a strange story.” He scratched his head so hard his nightcap fell off.

“But you must know something!” said Tiuri. “Why did he leave and when was it? And which way did he go?”

“That’s a lot of questions all in one go,” said the innkeeper. He bent down stiffly to pick up his nightcap. “Come into the bar,” he said. “I don’t like the damp cold of morning; it’s not good for my old bones.”

In the bar room he put the candle on a table and put his nightcap back on his head. Tiuri, who had followed him in, asked impatiently, “Where did the Black Knight go?”

“He arrived yesterday morning,” said the innkeeper. “A strange guest – not that I doubt his valour, not at all, in fact he made a great impression on me. He was completely alone, without even a squire. His armour was pitch black, only the shield on his arm was as white as snow. His black visor was down and he didn’t raise it to ask for a room. Even after he’d come in, he kept it down.

“Well, I gave him a room of course, and later in the day I went up with the meal he’d ordered. I thought I’d see his face then soon enough, but I didn’t! He’d unbuckled his armour and taken off his helmet as well, but now he was wearing a black silk mask that only showed his eyes. Strange, don’t you think? He must have taken some kind of vow. Do you know anything about it?”

“Where did he go?” asked Tiuri again.

The innkeeper seemed a little annoyed, but answered anyway. “I was just about to tell you that,” he said. “At about one or two o’clock – I was in bed – someone suddenly pounded on the door. I look out of the window and there’s another black knight! ‘Let me in!’ he shouts. ‘Is the Black Knight with the White Shield staying here?’ – ‘He is,’ I say. ‘But it’s a little late...’ – ‘Open the door!’ he roars. ‘Or I’ll knock it down!’ I fly downstairs and open the door. The knight’s standing there before me; he’s wearing pitch-black armour as well, but his shield is as red as blood. In a grim voice he asks, ‘Where is the Black Knight with the White Shield?’ – ‘He’s asleep,’ I say. ‘Wake him up then,’ he says. ‘I have to speak to him. And get to it, if you please!’

“To be honest, I was a bit frightened and I rushed to do his bidding. But before I’d even made it to my guest’s room, he was coming down the stairs, fully dressed, in his black armour and his helmet, and with his visor down. He was carrying all his weapons and the white shield was on his arm. That was how he came down the stairs, and that was how he marched into the bar. The Black Knight with the Red Shield walks up to him and the two of them stand there facing each other. The Knight with the Red Shield takes off his glove and throws it down at the other’s feet. The Knight with the White Shield picks it up and asks, ‘When?’ – ‘Now!’ says the Knight with the Red Shield.”

The innkeeper stopped a moment to catch his breath and then concluded, “Then they walked out of the bar side by side and a few minutes later rode off together into the woods without another word.”

“To fight a duel,” said Tiuri.

“That’s what I thought as well,” said the innkeeper. “And up till now neither of them has come back.”

“They went off at two o’clock, you say?” asked Tiuri. “What time is it now?”

“Almost half four, I’d say,” the innkeeper replied. “It’s getting light.”

“Which way did they go?” asked Tiuri.

The innkeeper went outside with him and pointed out the direction they’d taken. “But I don’t know where they were riding to,” he added.

“I’ll try to track them,” said Tiuri quickly. “Thank you!” And before the innkeeper could say another word or ask another question, he had run over to his horse, jumped onto its back and ridden off.

5. The Black Knight with the White Shield

In the east the sky was pink and orange; the sun was about to appear. Birds chirped and whistled, twittered and warbled cheerfully as if delighted with the beautiful day that was dawning. Tiuri was not happy at all; he was angry about it being so late, he hadn't even fulfilled his task yet. How could he ever get back to the chapel in time? Nevertheless he rode on down the trail the two black knights had left in the forest. He had given his word to deliver the letter and did not want to break his promise. But that didn't stop him from constantly grumbling to himself. He cursed the Black Knight with the Red Shield for challenging the Black Knight with the White Shield, and he blamed the Knight with the White Shield for accepting the challenge. And he cursed them both for not leaving a clearer trail for him to follow: instead of taking a path, they had cut straight through the forest.

It must be five o'clock by now, he thought. The day has begun. Where have they gone, for heaven's sake?

He thought about how astonished Daganaut's knights would be not to find him in the chapel when they got there at seven o'clock. What would the king, his parents, his friends and all the others think when they heard that he had run away on the night before being made a knight? He went through the stranger's words once again and concluded with a sigh that there was nothing else he could have done. Then he came back to reality with a thud: he had lost the trail.

He had emerged in a glade whose sandy soil was all ploughed up and covered with tracks! Which ones were the two knights'?

He studied the area carefully. It looked as if a whole company of horsemen had passed this way – perhaps the group he had seen in the night. They had stormed right through the forest, trampling plants and snapping branches. But he could no longer find the trail of the two knights. Finally he took the direction from which the horsemen had come, the path they had left was clear to see. Following it, he wondered whether the horsemen had anything to do with the

black knights. Although it was now light, he suddenly felt more afraid than he had at any time in the previous night.

After a while he heard something – a quiet, anxious whinnying. Moments later, he saw a horse standing before him, tethered to a tree. It was a magnificent black with simple tack. It looked at him with sad dark eyes and neighed again.

Tiuri rubbed its nose briefly and whispered, “Be patient, I’ll see where your master’s got to. He must be somewhere near here. Isn’t that right?”

He rode a little further and then saw something under the trees in the pale green grass. It was black and white and red. His breath caught in his throat, but he still leapt off his horse and ran up.

Lying on the ground was a man in damaged and dented black armour. The shield lying beside him was white. The red was blood. Tiuri had found the Black Knight with the White Shield, but he was wounded, or dead.

He knelt down beside the knight; it was clear that he was badly hurt, but he was still breathing. He wasn’t wearing a helmet, but his face was covered with a black mask. Trembling from head to toe, Tiuri stared down at him. Then he pulled himself together. He had to do something, he had to find out how serious the wounds were and bandage them.

The knight moved and whispered, “Who’s that?”

Tiuri bent over him. “Don’t move, my lord,” he said. “I will help you. Where does it hurt?”

He saw that the knight was looking up at him through his mask. “I don’t know you,” he said in a weak voice, “but I am glad that someone has found me before I die. Don’t worry about my wounds; it’s too late for that.”

“Don’t say that,” said Tiuri, cautiously unbuckling his armour.

“Don’t bother,” whispered the knight. “I know I’m dying.”

Tiuri feared that he was right. But he continued with his attempt to ease the wounded man’s suffering. He tore a strip off his robe and bandaged him as well as he could.

“Thank you,” whispered the knight a little later. “Who are you and what brings you here?”

“I’m Tiuri,” answered the youth. “Shall I get some water? Would you like a drink.”

“No need,” said the knight. “Tiuri, I know that name. Are you related to Tiuri the Brave?”

“He’s my father,” said Tiuri.

“What brings you here?” asked the knight.

“I... I came to see you... I’m so sorry that...”

“You came to see me?” the Black Knight interrupted him. “You came to see me? Thank God, it might not be too late...” He looked at Tiuri and behind the black mask his eyes gleamed. “Have you got something for me?” he asked.

“Yes, my lord,” said Tiuri. “A letter.”

“I knew my squire would find a messenger,” sighed the knight. “Wait a moment,” he said, when Tiuri reached to pull out the letter. “Isn’t there something you want to ask me?”

Suddenly Tiuri remembered the password. “Why... why is your shield white?” he stammered.

“Because white is made up of all colours,” the knight replied. His voice sounded much stronger. It was a voice that inspired great trust in Tiuri. Now he asked, “Where have you come from?”

“I come from afar,” Tiuri answered.

“Now show me the letter,” ordered the knight. “No, first make sure that no one is watching us.”

Tiuri looked around. “There isn’t anyone,” he said, “only our horses.” He pulled out the letter and showed it to the knight. “Oh lord,” he burst out, “I’m so sorry you were defeated in the duel!”

“Duel?” said the wounded man. “There was no duel! I have never been defeated by any man. The Black Knight with the Red Shield lured me into an ambush. His Red Riders leapt out and attacked me in large numbers.”

Tiuri was appalled. “How terrible!” he mumbled.

But they didn’t find what they were looking for,” said the knight. They didn’t want to destroy me alone, they wanted the letter as well, the letter you just showed me! Put it away carefully – then I will tell you what you must do with it. But Tiuri, first tell me, how it is that *you* have come to bring me the letter.”

Tiuri told him.

“Good,” whispered the knight and was silent for a moment. Then he said, “Don’t look so worried,” in a friendly voice. Tiuri felt that he was smiling beneath his mask, and wished that he knew what his face looked like.

“Listen,” said the knight. “I must be brief. I don’t have much time left. This letter is for King Unauwen and it is of great importance. Now that I am no longer able to deliver it, you must do it for me!”

“Me?” whispered Tiuri.

“Yes, I know of no one else who could do it better. You are up to it; I trust you. You must set out at once; there is no time to lose. You must travel to the west, through the forest at first, then up the Blue River until you reach its source. There you will find a hermit, Menaures. Take this ring from my finger; if you show it to the hermit, he will know that I sent you. He will help you cross the mountains, because *that* you cannot do alone. On the other side of the mountain, the road you must take is clear to see.” The knight held up his hand and said, “Here, take my ring. I know that I am asking much of you, but at this moment you are the right person for this task.”

Tiuri carefully took the ring off the knight’s finger. “I’m willing to do it,” he said, “but I don’t know...”

“You *must* do it,” said the knight. “But I can tell you that it will not be easy. You already know that enemies are after this letter; you will encounter many dangers. Keep your mission secret; don’t tell *anyone* anything about it. And don’t give this letter to anyone except King Unauwen.”

“What... what it is about?” asked Tiuri, while gradually sliding the ring onto his own finger.

“That’s a secret,” answered the knight. “You are not allowed to open it. Only if you are in danger of being forced to surrender it, may you read it, so that you can deliver the message by word of mouth. Of course you must then destroy the letter itself. But you must only do that in utmost need.” He was silent for a moment and then asked, in a much weaker voice, “Will you deliver the letter?”

“Yes, my lord,” said Tiuri.

“Promise on your knight’s honour,” whispered the knight.

“I promise on my knight’s honour,” said Tiuri. “Except,” he added, “I’m not a knight yet.”

“You will be,” said the knight. “And will you now take off my mask? One should never hide one’s face from Death.”

With trembling fingers, Tiuri did as he was asked. And on seeing the Black Knight’s calm, noble face, he was so moved that he seized his hand and swore that he would deliver the letter safely. “And,” he said, “I will take vengeance on your murderers!”

“That is not your task...” whispered the knight. “You just have to be my messenger.”

He closed his eyes. His fingers moved a little in Tiuri’s hand and then fell still.

Tiuri looked at him and gently released his hand. He knew that the knight was dead and he was deeply saddened, even though he had only just met him. Then he hid his face in his hands and prayed for his soul.