



INSIDE THE CURTAIN

A man sat at a table across from a wizard.

The man's name was Štefan and he used to own a successful chain of barbershops across the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia. The wizard hadn't given a name and only a ridiculous reason for this visit. Probably here to kill him, Štefan mused, or trick him in any of the ways wizards found amusing. But Štefan didn't dwell on that thought now, because in between them, on the table, a newspaper lay.

The paper was yellowed, the pages crackling, fragile with age. Štefan reached for the corner, straightening the sheet where it was bent and revealing the date printed underneath. January 1983. His fingers traced the date, inadvertent, almost reverent. A whole sixteen years back, right when the world broke.

His fingers flicked to the name of the paper, sliding over the bold letters, not quite touching them, foolishly worried he would smudge them. *The New York Times*.

New York. The name echoed through his mind with the faint familiarity of long-disused knowledge; he knew that city, used to

hear its name often, back when the world was normal. He remembered on which coast New York lay, on the other side of the ocean, on a different continent and out of Europe. *Outside the Curtain*.

He looked up from the faded issue, his eyes only reluctantly leaving the printed words.

They narrowed at the wizard sitting across the table, the one who announced himself as a *smuggler*. Or was it a she? He considered the chin; the only part of the face he could glimpse from underneath the wizard's hood. It could belong to a cleanly shaved man or just as well to a square-jawed woman. His gaze slid to the collar and the neck sticking out of it. Ah, a woman, after all.

"How can I know it's a real deal?" he asked her, eyes readily flicking back to the newspaper. "How can I know the papers really come from outside the Curtain?"

She shrugged. "You can't."

No, he couldn't. "You could have con— *conjured* it up from thin air just before entering my home and I would be none the wiser."

"I could have, yes."

He frowned at her chin. Bad things happened to people who trusted a kindness from a wizard's hand. They had very little reason to offer it, other than for their games and entertainment.

And yet, a small voice in his head argued. *And yet*.

The lady wizard sat quietly on one of their rickety stools, seemingly patient to wait through the long silence that stretched between them as he thought. Her palms lay spread and visible on top of the table, and it occurred to Štefan she was trying to appear non-threatening. It didn't work; his heart had sped up the moment they'd heard a stranger knocking on their door, and only increased its frantic thumping since he'd recognised what she was.

He risked another comment. "I've never heard of anyone getting smuggled out of the Curtain."

She nodded. "You'd be among the first."

"Why me?"

"I have to start somewhere. And you fit."

"Fit what?" Štefan asked.

“You want to get out, don’t you?”

He scoffed. “As does everyone.”

“Consider yourself lucky, then.”

Štefan had yet to decide about that. He looked down at the newspapers again.

“Is Magic Real?” the big, bold headline read. “A week has passed since the world awoke to a morning without Europe – the entire continent now unreachable, with all communication and transportation links abruptly severed. Seven days on, the panic and confusion show no signs of easing, as scientists and government agencies alike struggle to provide answers. In their absence, theories abound. Some point to rogue technology, others to alien invasions or freak phenomena of the atmosphere. Yesterday, heads of state and senior officials across the globe issued nearly simultaneous statements, reporting contact from a group of individuals claiming to be wizards. These self-described exiles from Europe offered a new theory for the continent’s disappearance. Several witnesses – government personnel among them – now allege that these individuals have demonstrated abilities that defy the known laws of physics. A public demonstration, open to press and camera crews, is scheduled for tomorrow.

While the world holds its breath with cautious disbelief, this reporter must ask: Are we living in a fantasy world? And if so, has evil won? The released statements suggest that the–”

The article continued under the fold but Štefan didn’t dare touch the paper to straighten it. It seemed folks outside the Curtain had got a gentler introduction to magic than us poor souls inside.

Though what could Štefan know? The article was from sixteen years ago; maybe those wizarding bastards had got to ruling the rest of the world by now too.

His wizard visitor spoke again and Štefan tore his eyes from the text.

“Your two girls won’t remember the world as it used to be, will they?” she asked.

Her hood tilted to the left and she nodded at the seemingly

unremarkable wall at the back of their hut.

Štefan's breath hitched. Of course, she would know of the others.

"The boy might; he was what, six or seven when the Curtain dropped? He probably still dreams of the world as it was before. I'm offering you all a chance to live in it."

The fake wall shifted as someone behind it shuffled the planks to the side and then Matej stuck his head out, peeking into the room. "Ujo?" the young man asked, his eyes shining.

There was no real choice, Štefan suddenly realised. He'd be strong-armed into going, either by the wizard or by the children. With that understanding, half of Štefan's anxiety evaporated.

"Is it safe?" he asked. "To cross?"

She hesitated. "I hope so, but I do not know."

A loud whoosh of air sounded behind his back. Štefan jumped in fright and spun in his chair. Their gas cooker ignited. The same gas cooker which was connected to a tank Štefan knew painfully well had stood empty for the last few days. A pot levitated itself onto the hob and next, the bubbling of boiling water filled the shocked silence of their home. A sack of oats appeared by the cooker, pouring its contents into the water.

"You should all eat before we go," the wizard said. She was staring at the gas cooker, frowning in obvious concentration. "Ujo – may I call you Ujo, too? For what it's worth, I think you're being very brave. That will make all the difference."

Foolish, that was what he actually was. Not for entrusting his family's safety into this stranger's hands; in that, he had no choice. He was foolish for the sliver of hope he was doing it with.

He fingered the corner of the newspaper's front page again. Wizards had turned his world upside down before; what was the chance that one of them might right it again?



ØLSA

CHAPTER 5: LESSONS AMONG TREES INSIDE THE CURTAIN

Uncle Viggo's homestead was an old one, having served his family for many generations. Its library wasn't just an ordinary row of shelves; it boasted a true *Biblioteka*.

The first time Ølsa set foot into the barn that housed the Trylles' Biblioteka, she had walked among the forest of books in baffled awe, eyes dancing from one overarching tree to another. She had been nine back then and her head felt horribly empty. She looked up at the rich canopy of books above her head and told herself that it was alright, she would fill it up.

That was eight years ago. Ølsa considered herself a smidge wiser now.

The trees were planted by topic and grew chronologically, rooted to the library floor with a book or two. These were the thought-fathers, the writings which gave birth to the whole field and its tree. Strong trunks grew from these roots. They branched out, and branched out again. Boundless twigs sprouted and offshoots tangled with other trees. Books and scrolls and articles sprouted like leaves, forming so dense a canopy that the high

ceiling of the library hovered somewhere above it all, unseen.

Some of these trees were Ølsa's good friends. She had climbed their trunks, from the ancient scripts at their roots to the newest publications at the very top of their crowns, and she understood the main ideas in the volumes in between. Other trees seemed determined to frustrate her, their branches sending her on wild hunts across the whole forest.

The day after the incident with the Ever-Grounding Mortar was a Saturday, a school-free day. Ølsa spent her morning up in the trees. She was reading up on disbanding spells when a nut hit her forehead. She looked up from her book and then down at the ground. Uncle Viggo stood by the tree she perched on, tossing another hazelnut into the air. She swatted it away with her book. Her sudden swing tipped her off balance and she nearly toppled over the side of the branch. A thick branch swayed in, gently bracing her shoulder and righting her onto her bum again. She patted the wood in silent gratitude, its semi-translucent bark as soft as a plush cushion.

"Hurry down," Uncle called up. "There's a letter for you."

Ølsa closed her book with a tired sigh. Disbanding spells *were* complicated. They seemed beyond her ability to understand, let alone cast. She had wasted enough time stubbornly ignoring that fact.

She released the book and gave it a slight nudge. It floated back to its branch as Ølsa climbed down from her perch. The tree made it easy, offering thick branches for her steps. She descended around the trunk as if it were a spiral staircase.

Uncle Viggo was nowhere to be seen once she touched the ground, but she knew where he was headed. It was Saturday morning and there could only be one reason why he was in the library. She picked her way through the forest to the grove of magazines. Trees in this section of the Biblioteka grew differently, lower but bushier, with countless tiny leaves reflecting the front pages of periodicals. Sure enough, Uncle was there, tapping his foot impatiently by the Filmed Fictionettes Review shrub, waiting for the

Saturday issue to sprout.

Ølsa cleared her throat.

"Hmm?"

"My letter," Ølsa said.

"Oh, right." He reached into his breast pocket and took out a thick envelope with a red and black stripe printed along its bottom edge. "Your conscription papers, if I'm not mistaken. Flew in this morning."

"That can't be it," Ølsa said. She eyed the red-and-black interweaving lines with confusion. "It can't be," she repeated firmly, despite the knot tightening in her stomach. "I haven't signed up."

Uncle glanced at the envelope Ølsa still hadn't taken from his hand. "Well, then the Army must be writing to you about something else."

But his brows were furrowed now and he turned away from the Filmed Fictionettes Review shrub, facing Ølsa fully.

Ølsa took the envelope and broke its wax seal.

She skimmed the first empty phrases until her eyes latched onto something of substance. *You have been accepted to begin your two years of military training and honourable service with the upcoming draft. You are to report to—*

She lowered her hands. "It is my conscription."

Viggo lifted an eyebrow. "Are you sure you didn't sign up?"

"I'm *seventeen*," Ølsa hissed. "I planned to wait for five more years!"

Viggo frowned at the envelope. "Then this is unexpected." He threw a furtive glance back at the shrub behind him, before he reached for the letter. "I'll take this to the Army Office and ask around. Might be someone's oversight."

Ølsa gladly handed the papers over, anxious to have their inked words of condemnation away from her. "Thank you."

Uncle left with quick strides. Ølsa stood there stunned for a bit longer. Behind her, the newest issue sprouted in a beautiful flush of green light, opening from a bud to a blossom with elegant flourish.

Ølsa walked out without turning to appreciate it.

From the outside, the Trylle homestead looked like the very picture of a Nordic farm, with a red-and-white cottage sitting up front, outbuildings scattered around the property and, in the middle, a large barn that housed the much larger Biblioteka. Ølsa marched from the barn into a sprawling meadow, colourful with winter blooms. She crushed a path through them, her left hand frantically fishing in her pocket. Grasping the correct Hook at last, she crooked her thumb through its latch and pulled. The metal clicked into place, the Hook went taut, and Ølsa disappeared mid-stride.



The Hook was one of those she always kept at hand. It was anchored to a forest south of Myklandsvatna nature reserve, near the bottom of the noodle shape of Norway.

The first time Ølsa had visited the Myklandsvatna forest she had been twelve and somewhat prone to dramatics. *She's in her difficult years*, the adults around her had commented, giving each other knowing looks. Ølsa maintained that her mood had been imbalanced less by hormones and more by the fact she had just been expelled from school. She had felt so very small and so very angry.

Around that time, Uncle Viggo had shown her the forest. She remembered looking around the trees – all spruce, all planted in obvious, artificial rows. “I thought all man-planted woods had been torched down by now,” she had asked, staring at the uniformed tree lines in confusion.

Uncle nodded. “True. This place is an exception. I left this bit standing because– well, you’ll see soon enough.” He paused and looked down at her with narrowed eyes. Then he leaned closer and whispered with a smile, “No need to ever mention this to the authorities, eh?”

He looked back at the perfect rows of trees. “I left this abomination standing for occasions such as these. The place’s just one

flick away from home and not another soul near it. Now, observe.”

With a quick clench of his fist, he released three harsh screeches from his sapphire that carried far through the air. The forest burst into motion around them. Shrubbery shook as rabbits and rodents fled from them, birds took flight from the branches over Ølsa’s head and the tree trunks and forest floor suddenly seemed aflood with streams of ants, beetles and caterpillars scattering away. “The spell is called the Jay’s-Call. Just as jays warn the forest of intruders, the spell warns of danger. If cast right, the spell pushes all animals to flee, even those with the instinct to hide or freeze. I will teach you to cast it soon, at a more opportune moment.”

Ølsa had perked up at the offer. Uncle *hated* teaching, especially the elementary stuff she was in need of. “Really?”

“Really. A wizard’s fury can be a potent thing. No innocent bystander should be caught in it. Now, this place is empty but for the two of us. *Burn it down.*”

Now, five years later, her Jay’s-Call still wasn’t as smooth as Viggo’s. It took her several long seconds to lead her fingers through the spell. When she finally clenched and released the ruby in her hand, the sound that came out wasn’t nearly as piercing as Viggo’s had been. The second one had more force behind it. When she released her fist for the third time, she felt the gust rushing through her clothes and ruffling her short hair. A shrill screech burst from her hand and into the trees and bushes around. Next, she heard the skidding and rushing of panicked flights.

As the animals fled, Ølsa fixed her eyes on the closest spruce tree. Behind her back, the ground was ash and burnt stumps, the results of Uncle Viggo’s latest fit of vented fury.

Today, the conscription papers were no oversight. Ølsa knew that as surely as she knew her expulsion from the Academy to the one-trade school had been no standard procedure.

She brought the palm with her ruby to her eyes, looking across its sharp tip at the spruce in front of her, fire at the forefront of her mind.

Then she lowered her arm.

Was she actually angry?

As the shock of the black-and-red envelope ebbed, she felt only a cold lack of surprise behind it. The Realm would do something like this, wouldn't they? They could thwart her education, so they did.

Fury came from expecting something better and being let down. Ølsa wasn't a twelve-year-old brat anymore. She had learned what the Realm had in mind for the likes of her. She knew better than to set herself up for disappointment.

She turned away from the spruce trees, leaving them intact.



When Uncle Viggo tracked her down some time later, she was sitting on a log, a small bonfire flickering in front of her. She was staring into the flames when she spotted him over the fire.

A short, sturdy woman walked beside the willowy figure of Viggo. Ølsa's eyes widened at the sight; Aunt Marit didn't spend much time around Ølsa. Unlike Viggo Trylle, his wife had never quite warmed to the role of a guardian. Uncle had taken to the family's ward out of curiosity more than anything else; Ølsa had the sense he found her almost as engaging to observe as the other projects developing in his lab. Aunt Marit was a private person, though, spending most of her time in her workshop.

She had read the conscription papers, then. Her sudden appearance touched Ølsa a bit. It marked the occasion as extraordinary. Perhaps Ølsa's anxiety over the letter wasn't entirely out of place.

Uncle sat down onto the log beside her and handed her back the black-and-red envelope. "They wouldn't tell me whose order it was, only that it was an order."

Ølsa nodded, stuffing the dratted letter into her pocket. "Do you think... could it be because of something my parents did?"

Uncle was quick to shake his head. "If the conscription was a punishment for your parents, we would have known by now.

These things are done overtly, not hushed. How else could they serve as a deterrent to others? Why, when they cut off the thumbs of the young Pictoranimas girl, it was all over the news. I remember the headlines and they were not at all ambiguous: *This is the only language the Sheridan Mad Dogs understand*. Mind you, that was fresh out of the war and tempers were running high.” He paused, “Though, I can’t say our Warden has learned much subtlety since. So no, I don’t think your parents are the cause here. Actually, I rather suspect it’s me.”

“You?”

“The clever people at the Bureau probably think I’m not doing a good enough job, moulding you into a proper believer of the Realm. If I were to guess, they feel like they have some catching up to do whilst you’re still young and impressionable.”

“Nevertheless,” Aunt Marit spoke up, “we promised you could stay here until you turned twenty-two, or until you felt ready for conscription.”

“That we did,” Uncle agreed. “It’s the wizard’s decision, or their guardians’, when their two years should be served. The law is clear on that. You could contest the conscription papers if you wanted to. We would help.”

His tone was hesitant and Ølsa suspected she knew why. “What do you think would happen then?”

“Most likely? This January conscription would be annulled but before the next term started, you’d be taken from our hands and made a direct ward of the Realm. The Bureau of Family Affairs would be your guardian and with that authority, they would sign you up for September.”

A half year of postponement, paid for by the shield the Trylles’ guardianship provided. Meagre as it was at times, Ølsa knew her situation would worsen considerably without them. Not to mention she’d lose their Biblioteka.

It worked the same as with Foreman Holst. Fight one bully, and attract a bigger one. “I’ll go this Wednesday.”

And didn’t that sound much nearer, when the end of life as

she knew it wasn't just a date on a paper but a day next week, just four sunrises away?

"It won't be all that horrible, you know," Uncle said. "You won't be tested and drilled, none of that usual slog. You'll be placed among other conscripts like you."

He meant the other unreliaables. *You won't be tested and drilled* – wasn't that a nice spin on the fact she wouldn't be allowed to learn to fight? Ølsa wasn't comforted. "Others like me?" she echoed, and couldn't quite curb the bitterness that crept into her tone. "There'll be other butterfingereid idiots? With less than a third of Academy training behind them?"

Uncle tsked in disapproval at her but it was Aunt Marit who spoke. "You have one of the brightest minds I've had the pleasure to encounter. You'll do fine."

Ølsa blinked at the woman, so floored by that compliment she quite forgot to doubt it. For one precious moment, she also forgot to be afraid.



Her parents' next visit wasn't due for another month but given that she'd be holed up somewhere in the Army by then, Uncle worked his influence and managed to reschedule it for Monday.

They had been told the news; that much was obvious the moment they walked into the Trylles' sitting room. Her father wore a thunderous scowl and her mother's hug was even fiercer than usual. "Oh, sweet pea, I'm so sorry for this," she whispered into Ølsa's ear.

Mother had to rise to her toes now to reach that far. Over the past year, Ølsa had gained a few inches on her. She had always been the spitting image of her mother and now it seemed she'd still be so even as an adult, except with her father's long legs.

The room had a mirror over its fireplace mantel. During some of their quarterly visits, Ølsa would catch her mother's gaze in it. The two would keep squinting at their reflections, sat side by side on the sofa and more alike as the years passed. Her mother

would roll the too-big eyes they shared, making them bulge out even more, and she would scrunch up the too-large forehead Ølsa had also inherited. “Well,” mother would commiserate sagely. “At least you were spared the horrible Sheridan rust,” she would say, and father would bristle.

Ølsa’s father was as ginger as the Gaelic gingers could get. So were the rest of his family, at least in all the pictures Ølsa had seen of them. Her uncle, her cousins – all sported the same shock of crimson hair that Ølsa saw when she closed her eyes and thought of her father. Ølsa shared none of the colouring; where her Sheridan cousins had freckles and ruddy cheeks, Ølsa’s was pale and cold. A small mercy, Ølsa’s practical side thought whenever she came across a picture of Ruslo Sheridan printed in her textbooks. Life was difficult enough for the daughter of the last captured war criminals; people didn’t need to remember she was also a cousin to the man who had started the war in the first place.

“Could the conscription be a punishment for you?” Ølsa asked her parents now. Uncle Viggo might have dismissed the idea, but she hadn’t.

“I doubt it,” her father said. “Everything’s the same in the old crib. Our jailors would have told us otherwise; they wouldn’t be subtle about punishments.”

He managed a weak smile in greeting as he strode over and clasped her hand gently. Inside the secret space of their hands meeting, he swept his thumb once across her palm. A dash, for the letter T. *True*.

It would be years until Ølsa learned that their code hadn’t been something her parents had invented, and that the name *Morse* wasn’t something they’d picked for it at random. Right now, she only knew the code as something her parents had painstakingly trained into her, in covert touches over many of their visits, until they could pass whole sentences in secret.

Why, Ølsa had written onto her mother’s hand when they had started their training.

They always listen, was the answer her mother slowly spelt back,

letter by letter.

The dashes and dots made it much easier.

Now, when her father's thumb brushed the single dash, it was enough to confirm he wasn't lying for the sake of listening ears.

Ølsa found herself strangely unnerved by his words. It would have been easier if the conscription papers had been sent as a punishment. She had lived as a hostage to her parents' good behaviour for nine years now. The fear of being hurt for their actions felt old – not entirely stale, but definitely familiar. She would have understood that explanation. She would have accepted it with pride, she thought. Now it seemed that someone had a different motivation, one unknown to her. The uncertainty was harder to bear.

"I'll be so far behind," she whispered, the anxiety resurfacing. A recent memory flashed in front of her eyes, of a conscript standing proudly by a creek and beside him the perfect water knight he had shaped.

"By no fault of yours," her mother insisted just as her father hissed, "We should have tried harder to get you a tutor."

Ølsa shook her head at him. "You pestered everyone you could have."

"The *Trylles* should have tried harder, then," he said.

"They did try," Ølsa pointed out and hoped he would, for once, leave it at that.

"Obviously not enough. They are hardly worth the name of guardians."

"It wasn't their choice to take me in, was it? They've been very kind, considering."

"Kind! They have a *responsibility*."

"Cillian, that's quite enough," her mother snapped. Her voice was calm where his was raised and Ølsa threw her a grateful look.

Dad deflated. "I'm sorry, Ølsa. It just grates something awful when you go defending the likes of Viggo Trylle."

Her mother shook her head at him. "Then don't force her into an argument where she has to defend him, you dolt."

Ølsa smiled at her mother. Ølsa understood her father's frus-

trations. But she couldn't forward them along, not to anyone who deserved to hear them. They ended up bottled inside, mixing with her own.

"The Army is a sham, anyway," Dad said, mercifully dropping the subject and smirking at her conspiratorially. "They play at being soldiers and ignore conscripts who have no interest in competing in their little tourneys. They'll leave you be."

The two years in the Army wasn't the true problem, though, was it? It was the rest of her life as an uneducated wizard that loomed beyond. But Ølsa didn't say that. As things stood, it was hard to voice her fears and troubles without making her parents feel guilty for every bit of it.

They settled down onto the couches, Ølsa's hand clutched by her mother now. "You'll go to the Auxiliary Corps, of course," Dad said. He sounded all business-like now, as if once again giving out orders. "The rumours vary, but there are some things we've pinned down. You won't be doing any true military training, that's for sure. No Fighting Arts. Hopefully, you'll be taught some defence, though the only class we know of for sure is led by a certain Markus Pilcher and he is a well-known rat. He's supposed to be teaching the Realm's History. Now, pumpkin, do not let that man get a rise out of you, whatever dung he goes spouting."

Ølsa nodded.

"Don't stand out, Ølsa," her father continued. "Dance to Pilcher's tune if need be and keep your toes in line with others. The two years will fly by."

"There was no time to find out whose kids will be joining your unit," her mother added, "but given they'll also be sent to the Auxiliaries, there's half a chance they have their heads screwed right."

Might still be snitches, she was tapping onto Ølsa's palm. "Never stop being careful."

"On paper," her father said, "the Auxiliary corps are described as technical support or military engineers. In practice, you'll most likely be doing maintenance. It shouldn't be all that different to

what you've been asked to do at the one-trade school."

"Hm," Ølsa sounded. Flashes of the recruitment campaign rolled through her mind; Reels of conscripts learning the celebrated Fighting Arts and earning medals on the revered sands of the Arena. None of this for the likes of her, apparently. "*Maintenance*. What glorious deeds to write home about," she said, "and make one's parents proud."

Her father chuckled, as she intended. But then he grasped her shoulders, eyes turning wholly solemn as they rarely bothered to and Ølsa knew he saw right through her attempted nonchalance. "You're growing into a wonderful young woman, Ølsa; resilient but kind despite this wretched life we've been dealt. You couldn't make us any prouder even if you went and blew up the Palace, with all Ersmus's Perpetuals in it."

Mother slapped his back for that.

He grimaced. "I suppose you should forget I ever said that."

Ølsa laughed at his frown of genuine worry. As if she planned to take his blurted suggestion for a life goal. The idea! Her life, as far as she could remember, was one big reminder why rebelling against the Realm and its Warden was a tragic choice. She wouldn't forget that truth anytime soon.

"Forget pride. Make us happy instead," her mother said. "By finding some happiness yourself. We wouldn't want— My little pumpkin, resilience is all good and useful but it shouldn't come at the price of allowing yourself to feel nothing."

Ølsa managed a smile for her mother, though her good humour disappeared. Mother always meant well, Ølsa knew, but she didn't see what her words actually meant for Ølsa. Finding happiness for herself already seemed a tall order; doing so for the sake of two more people was a hefty burden to carry around.

The afternoon waned. Soon their visiting time was up and her parents left for their confinement on the British Isles; their prison and workshop Ølsa had never been permitted to see.

Ølsa felt drained, as she always did after their visit. It was an exhausting affair, packing all of their family life into these quar-

terly afternoons. Her parents tried, though – oh, how they tried! Ølsa wouldn't forgive herself if she answered with anything less than equal effort.

It didn't mean they always managed. It had been a good visit, this one, Ølsa judged as she sat waiting in the sitting room. The three of them had had a lot to talk about, for once. More often than not, daughter and parents would frantically search for something to say, stumbling over thoughts and issues they didn't want to trouble the others with. Sometimes, Ølsa felt relieved when the time for goodbyes came and then felt wretched for it. It was the truth, though; the hellos and the goodbyes were the easy part, structured shows of affection. The affection was genuine and the script clear. It was the desperate attempts at construing a conversation in between that reminded Ølsa how strange a family they were, and growing only stranger in their years apart.

The Bureau's officer entered the sitting room and they exchanged nods in greeting. Throughout the nine years of her life with the Trylles, it was the same bald wizard who examined her after her parents' visit. They both knew the routine well and never talked. The man would come in, Ølsa would lie down on the couch and he would poke around for any spells her parents might have left her with. He was efficient about his tests, even sounding a singing bowl to help her relax whilst he went about his business.

As the soft hum filled the room and Ølsa sunk into the cushions, barely noticing the sweeps of his spells, she realised there had been no awkward pauses during this visit. It had seemed almost like a normal family afternoon, and Ølsa smiled at that. She supposed that was one good thing her conscription papers had brought.