



DRINA
STEINBERG

ARKONA PURPURE
THE TRILOGY

The
SCENT of
LEGACY

THE REVELATION
BOOK ONE

The PURPLE of ARKONA Trilogy

THE SCENT OF LEGACY

THE REVELATION

BOOK ONE

by Drina Steinberg

Translated by Aleksandra Ilić

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This book is a work of fiction. All characters in this novel are fictional.
Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead,
is entirely coincidental.

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To my son
In your eyes, I can do anything. That is why I fear nothing.

Prologue

March 20, 1973

Rügen Island, the Baltic Sea, the GDR

3:37 after midnight

Vigorous clatter of worn-out women's clogs resonates through the empty hallway of the disturbingly peaceful maternity ward of the Garz Hospital, north of Binz. Maria, a midwife, her gray hair meticulously combed into a bun, hastily opens the door to room NB2. Quietly, she sneaks between the seven tall picket fence cribs. She stops for a moment, turns around, and gently approaches a cradle covered with faded pictures of fawns, right next to the window, and slowly lays the tiny swaddle onto the ironed military bed sheet.

- You're lucky—she smiles.

- No roommates tonight – she says softly, pulling the pink baby cap over the sleeping infant's eyelids. She pivots on her heels and tiptoes through the room, making sure the massive doors don't slam shut. She lingers, still holding the doorknob, and leans onto the door.

Maria, a midwife, retiring this June, sighs loudly and shivers, realizing how quiet it is in normally the loudest part of the hospital. Her hand slides from the doorknob and she walks towards the open hallway window. She looks into the sky. Not a breath of wind. It is a clear March night, and the darkness envelops the treetops of the tall pines, standing on the cliffs like the guardians of the night, with their tops reaching for the stars gathered around the full moon. She flinches, noticing the strange purpurescent moon. She feels a shiver running down her spine. In one sudden movement, she lowers the inner windowpane.

- It's going to be a long winter – she thinks to herself, gazing at the watch fixed to the upper left pocket of her uniform.

The hands of the watch indicate it is 3:43 after midnight.

The midwife heads down the hall, slowly towards the break rooms, failing to notice how the moon loses its unusual shade, which, like the dust, carried by the wind, rushes towards the right wing of the hospital and the maternity ward. A thunderous blast, with

its invisible force, opens wide all the windows and doors of the old building, causing a blackout and panicked bustle followed by hysteric scream of the awakened babies. The purple dust stops above the window of room NB2, and then, transforming into a thick matter, flies into the room. It spreads across the entire ceiling, making it resemble a Baltic tempest. Revolving around its axis, the strange mass begins to boil, creating a vortex, the center of which begins to shine thin beams of blinding light, whilst the edges of the mass reenter the core, reducing its radius. Floating at a meter from the ceiling, the cloud rests above the cradle covered with faded pictures of fawns. The violent cry of the newborn begins to die down as the child becomes consumed by the glistening of the beams in the specter of unusual shades in the form of an eight-toothed cogwheel. Finally, the floating mass turns gray and takes the shape of two eyes. Hypnotized by the warm and benevolent gaze, the baby raises its tiny right hand, spreading its fingers towards the eyes. A touch of dust, turning purple, no bigger than a tear, falls from the floating mass, right in front of the little girl's nostrils. She breathes it in. Her eyes glisten. Her lips take the shape of a smile. Lazily, she closes her eyelids. Sleeping like nothing happened. The cloud vanishes, suddenly and unexpectedly. The hospital is dead silent.

Maria, a midwife, retiring this June, sighs loudly and shivers, realizing how quiet it is in normally the loudest part of the hospital. Her hand slides from the doorknob and she walks towards the open hallway window. She looks into the sky. Not a breath of wind. It is a clear March night, and the darkness envelops the treetops of the tall pines, standing on the cliffs like the guardians of the night, with their tops reaching for the stars gathered around the full moon. She gazes at the magnificent fullness of the moon, mesmerized. Her mind wanders off for a second. She feels a strange shiver running down her spine and in one sudden movement, she lowers the inner windowpane.

- It's going to be a long winter – she thinks to herself, gazing at the watch fixed to the upper left pocket of her uniform. The hands of the watch indicate it is 3:43 after midnight. The midwife heads down the hall, slowly towards the break rooms...

I'm watching a child crossing a bridge. Wooden. Hanging. Rotten and flimsy. If what I'm watching had sound, there would be a squeak at every step of the tiny feet. If there were smell, it would be the smell of cold and fear. If there were color, everything would still be gray. At the end of the bridge, there is an old man. Lamé, wrinkled, lifeless. Empty, sunken eyes carefully following the child's movement.

Thin lips distort into a smile as he raises his skinny arm. A bony-fingered hand appears under the ragged cuffs. He's waving. Calling the child over. The kid is standing in the middle of its way. Hesitating. Firmly holding onto the intertwined ropes of the bridge. I know that it's a boy, although he doesn't turn around. He's got ruffled short hair.

He takes another step. The bridge is swinging. He looks down timorously. He sees clouds. The dark clouds give the impression that he's far above the ground. I feel a shiver down my spine. I can't move. I can never move. I call for him. He doesn't hear me. He never hears me. He is still moving forward, towards the end. Towards the old man.

- Stop! - I scream without a sound.

I'm begging him to come back, to wait for me, because I'm coming for him. But my legs are nailed to the ground, my arms bound to my body. The terror of helplessness makes me break into tears. Without a sound. Without a flinch. Stop, I'm begging him, but no words come out. It's not right! It's not good! A sudden sound cuts through the air. Sharp and thin, like a moan, breaking the silence. At first, I'm not sure whether it's real, or whether it's all in my head. I look towards the bridge and wonder whether he heard it, too. But all he does is stand, little hands clutching the ropes, as the hunched old man waves his withered hand invitingly. The boy doesn't notice me. He never notices me.

- Stay! Stop! - I pray silently.

Daunted, I realize that the boy is moving forward again. Every muscle in my body is strained, but I'm still frozen. Fear for his life causes pain I cannot stand. Sharp, unbearable. I suffocate in the silence of the cries and numbness of the body. And then, from the depths of greatest grief, comes a cry I don't even recognize as my own. Sad and thin, carried by a sudden gust of wind, spreading all around me. The boy stops. Did he hear me? I watch the back of his head as it moves slowly, first left, and then right. He heard me! The horrified expression on my face gives place to a smile of relief. I look towards the old man. I'm surprised to see that he's not there anymore. The boy is still standing there. Still. Too still. That's not good. I'm panicking. I know that's not good. I look around. Some unusually sweet smell fills the air. It's floral. I don't know what kind of flower it is, but I know it's purple. If you could smell colors, purple would smell just like that. Fresh, sparkly, sensual, yet simple. God knows why, but I instinctively close my eyes and try to take a deep breath. I feel dizzy. Somnolent. Lazily, I open my eyes and freeze as I suddenly meet those eyes. Gray, heavy, glistening. I boil with rage!

They're so close I can see the face they belong to. I look intently into those threatening eyes. I can see the reproach in them. That's not right. Nothing here is right! Those eyes are dangerous! Why, then, instead of fear, I feel only discomfort? Did I do something wrong? The child! I look back at the bridge in panic. His back facing me, the tiny body in a red shirt still holds on tight to the ropes, but it has moved backwards in the meantime, so it's in the middle of the bridge again. I am wreathed in smiles. I did it. I made him hear me for the first time. And then I realize: there's no color. There's never color here!!!

All of a sudden, everything around me starts to collapse! The invisible strings that had been chaining me are now ripped. I'm free! I can move. I run to the bridge. Suddenly, there's a sound. Loud, deafening. I hear thunders echoing, ground cracking, haunting winds howling. I can't move as fast as I'd like to. I'm close. The bridge is shaking violently and starting to crack...

- Just a bit longer! Don't be afraid, I'm coming! – I'm shouting at the top of my lungs.

A massive explosion scars the sky and I lose the ground beneath my feet, landing on my back. In an instant, my leg slides between two cracked boards. I realize that the bridge is about to collapse. I desperately reach for a piece of rope and tie it around my left hand and elbow. Strong blasts of wind make whirls of dust all around me. I can't keep my eyes open. They're beginning to sting. I try to protect them with my right hand. Through clouds of dust, I see a red shirt and ruffled hair in front of me. I put my hand on his shoulder and try to outvoice the noise. I'm telling him that everything is going to be all right. Finally, I feel his little hand in mine. It's so warm and soft! He turns around. I want to see his face. Why can't I see his face? I can clearly see only his small lips moving, as if he's trying to say something. I'm not sure whether I can't hear him, or I don't understand his words. A cloud of dust blinds my sight as an unbearable blast throws me to the ground. This time, I land on my knees. I'm still clutching the little hand in mine. I rub my eyes against my shoulder in an attempt to regain my sight. The dust begins to enter my eyes and nose. I cannot breathe. I'm suffocating. I am horrified, realizing the little hand is beginning to slip from mine. I am holding it as tight as I can. He's slipping! I can't allow that.

- No, No!!!- I scream.

I throw the rope coiled around my left hand. Now with both hands, I try to reach the child. I barely touch his hand, a moment before I realize I'm now alone on the bridge. I look in terror as the little red shirt vanishes in the dark clouds. A second before it disappears completely, it turns gray. The colors are gone again... Why is there never color?

I don't know how long I stare into the abyss, paralyzed. I don't remember when everything went back to the way it was before. No sound. No smell. No life. Once again, I see the lame old man at the end of the bridge. A crooked smile on his thin lips as he waves. I am sure that I can see a trace of sorrow in his eyes before I jump. I'm falling.

Plummeting so fast! My back brushing against the clouds. So dark, and yet so soft. Fleecy. I can feel their delicate scent. The smell of early morning, freshly-cut grass, light rain. The smell of spring. I love spring... I was born in spring, and I will die in spring. I feel no fear. Nor happiness. Nor rage. Nor pain. I feel nothing. I just want this to be over. I'm still falling. Before I touch the ground, the last thing I see are bright gray eyes, looking at me with reproach and concern. I don't know why, but I give them a comforting smile. Before everything vanishes into the silence of the dark.

My name is Purple. Purple Devan. Today is March 20, my birthday. Thirty-ninth.

What's that saying – I raise my right eyebrow and a frown wrinkles my forehead – live your dreams and you'll live in the land of milk and honey?!

- Something like that - Luka shrugs.

- Still, if they'd known what you'd be like, they would've just said the land of milk. Spoiled milk, at that. Like this one in your fridge.

- Take the unopened one! –I roll my eyes, taking the milk carton from his hands. I throw it into the garbage, returning to the stove, crossing my arms as I wait for the water to boil.

He slams the fridge door shut and, stopping for a moment, he gives me a concerned look:

- You've never got this far. Why now? Do you think this is the end?

- I don't know. Everything was different tonight. The sounds, the smell, the colors, the fear, and the serenity in the end - for a moment, I'm in my nightmare again. I shiver. - ...and... and... I've never killed myself before.

The hissing sound of the teapot jolts me. I remove it quickly. As I'm getting the cups, I notice that my hands are shaking uncontrollably, which makes the hot water end up all over the countertop.

- Still, you almost saved him this time – he says, taking the teapot and pouring the water over the chamomile tea bags. – Maybe you'll make it next time! – he utters, sneaking a look at me.

- Next time?! – I turn pale. –I don't want there to be any fucking next time! Don't you get it?! Never again! I can't... - my voice is trembling as I struggle not to cry.

He puts his arm around me and I bury my head into his shoulder. –

Shhhh, darling. Everything is gonna be all right.

- I can't... - I sob – I can't do this every fucking year!! I want it to stop! Please, make it stop...

He rocks me in his arms, trying to comfort me by saying that everything will be fine. That it's just a stupid dream that will never happen again. Although I don't believe that, the comforting words calm me down. I sink deeper into his chest and I can feel a faint trace of his scent through the heavy bathrobe. I smile to myself. I love that scent. Luka smells of forest.

The first time I had the nightmare, I was five. Since then, I've had it on every birthday. My parents, realizing that talking, comforting, leaving the lights on, and sleeping in the same room and the same bed did no good, decided to take my nana's insistent advice and take a more radical approach – they turned to chants, fear banishing rituals, hanging ghost traps, screamers, and finally, dream catchers. However, as they were a respectable married couple, and acclaimed scientists, at that, after I turned seven, they started taking me to therapy sessions. First I went to see psychologists, then psychiatrists, as well as other experts. Now, thirty-two years later, exactly eleven scientific experts, two hojas, and one witch doctor have my record misplaced somewhere, with same notes and different diagnoses. They all agreed on one thing. – I must have had the nightmare before, but I first realized I was having it when I was five. However, the reason I have it, as well as why it's always the same and why I always have it on my birthday, was explained differently and incompletely by all of them. Whenever I have this dream, I wake up exactly at 3:43.

I take a look at the clock. It's already six. It's been an hour and a half since I left Luka sleep over on the sofa and I returned to bed. While he dozed off talking to me, actually – while my self-pity put him to sleep, I remained awake. His head buried between a pile of pillows and the sofa armrest, his arms bent at the elbows and hands fisted, resembling a boxing guard, he breathed evenly. I snuck out of the bottom part of the white sofa speckled with dark green flowers and got up. I carefully put a blanket over him and pulled out two crossed pillows that were holding his head up in an unnatural position. The sudden pull and loss of body support made Luka shift position and turn towards me. His right hand, still in the shape of a fist, fell onto the floor, and his head was now exactly in the middle of the sofa, thus, although in twilight, completely revealing his boyish good looks.

His symmetrical face, fresh, velvet skin, dreamy amber eyes with long eyelashes. The strong jaw and square jaw line further add to his masculinity. He would often say that he's got a thick beard thanks to serving in the army, because they made him shave every day while he was there, although he was basically beardless. His lips are full and in their corners I can see two thin laugh lines, which are, actually, the only wrinkles he has. His

forehead is high and smooth, covered with wisps of hazel hair, always greasy, no matter what its length. My Luka is truly gorgeous. Weighing over 200 pounds and being six foot three, this history professor with broad shoulders and ever glistening eyes turns heads wherever he goes. Countless times have I thanked God, the universe, fate, as well as our grammar school administration that hired him. Eight years ago, I moved back in with my parents, and Luka came to live in the house across the street. I gently move the wisp of hair falling over his nose and head towards the bedroom. As I'm going up the stairs, I wonder why the two of us, apart from the unconditional, brotherly love, feel nothing more for each other. Because, no matter how much time we spend together, no matter how close we are in sharing our intimate secrets, or how drunk we are, I always see him as an older brother. My protector, who takes me in his arms, the way he would hug a younger sister, and makes sure to hide me there from all the bullshit and the troubles. Over almost a decade, which is how long he's been living in our town, Luka has truly become a member of my family. A distinguished member of our community, loved by both the students and the parents, I cannot understand how he always manages to find a fresh pair of legs to spread. Behind his innocent boyish face is an insatiable thirty-seven year old playboy. Even at the time when due to our closeness everyone thought we were having a secret affair, both girls and women were literally throwing themselves at his feet. He would always try to keep his distance from them in a polite and chivalrous manner, flirting ever so subtly, so that he managed to stay on the good side of the male population. That's one of the reasons why men, too, enjoy his company, considering him the epitome of strong character, glorifying his fidelity to his girlfriend Christa who used to come visit him perhaps once a month. Regardless of the steady relationships, because after Christa there were several more labeled as steady, Luka regularly brought home the beauties he dated, some of them girls, and some of them already women. He often got into comic situations and I always had to cover for him, and if I started to nag or scold him, he would put on a vulpine smile and say that nature had two things in mind when it created woman: one is fucking, and the other one is giving birth. He would always add, jokingly, of course, that he would explain his claims much better if I just moved my panties to the side. I hate that kind of vulgar jokes, and really, Luka can sometimes be such a savage and a chauvinist, by I still love him, no matter what his flaws may be, because he needs no explanations in order to embrace me, my insanity and everything that goes with it.

I drag myself out of bed and sit in the corner of the sheets. My bare feet touch the massive floor, but as soon as I feel how cold it is, I pull them back up. I shiver and start searching the bed for the parti-colored winter socks my nana knitted for me. As a person who hates indoor footwear, I accepted winter socks as an ideal solution. Everyone stopped nagging about putting the slippers on, and I could stop wearing things that hamper my movement. As I'm putting the left sock on, I hear some sort of bustle on the other side of the door. Followed by the sound of suppressed laughter, the doors open slightly and for a moment, there's nothing but silence. Then, they suddenly fling open, letting in a typhoon of ginger hair, with the little person it belonged to

jumping on me and leaving me breathless for a second. Strong grip of the little hands and a million kisses of the soft lips banish all the dark thoughts from my mind.

- Happy birthday, mom! –she screams enthusiastically, trying to kiss me with every sound she pronounces. The tickling of her thick curls makes me laugh uncontrollably.

-Thank you, my darling, thank you!–I can barely catch my breath.

Suddenly she screams as she finds herself in the air, wiggling her arms and legs. Luka is holding her like a sack, against his hip, trying to put his free hand around her mouth. Beyla giggles as she tries to break loose.

- This little pain in the ass doesn't let anyone else get to you! – he grins, throws her on the bed, and makes a theatrical jump into bed. He pulls me in for a kiss on the forehead:

– Happy birthday and may our future springs be much merrier! - he whispers gently.

His attempt to nestle me under his head and put his arm around me is interrupted by Beyla's pillow attack.

- How many times have I told you not to hit on mom? – she shouts, jumping at the bottom of the bed, ready for another attack.

- And how many times have I told you not to sabotage me? – he responds mockingly.

She stands stiff, wrinkling her freckly nose, frowning her messy eyebrows, and rests her head on her right hand, pretending to think hard. She speaks slowly, carefully annunciating every word:

-Hmmm, I don't think it's at all polite to talk like that to a nice six and a half year old girl, who catches you in an intimate and daring situation with her mom, and which seems to be a prelude to a delicate activity! – she sticks her tongue out at the end.

We burst into laughter.

- Intimate and daring situation? Prelude to a delicate activity?! For heaven's sake, Beyla! I seriously forbid you to read and watch that kind of stuff, which is forbidden to you anyway!! Luka, let's go straight to her room and find that forbidden literature! – he responds to my order by jumping out of bed, standing up straight and saluting.

– You'll never find it! – she says, still standing at the bottom of the bed, her hands crossed, giving us a fierce, victorious look.

– Soldier, to the doll house, at once! I've always found it suspiciously pink for a little girl's toy! – I say in a strict voice.

- Yes, ma'am! –pivoting on his feet, Luka heads towards the door. Beyla giggles and starts jumping on the mattress.

- You'll never find it! – she yells joyfully.

Luka turns around quickly, winks at me and two steps later he's in the bed with Beyla in his arms.

- If we can't find it ourselves, we can always squeeze the information out of you – I say and laugh as Luka and I start to tickle her.

- Nooo, I'll never tell you! - she squeaks. –I'll pee myself laughing if I have to! Actually, I'll do it for reeeaaal! – she wiggles and smiles. – Stop, stooooop! Ok, I'll tell you! I'll tell mom, I promise I'll tell her! – she senses that we're becoming more lenient. She snuggles next to me and moves a wisp of hair from my ear. Looking at Luka, with his ruffled hair, she whispers gibberish into my ear.

The victorious grin on her face makes Luka try to retreat from the bed.

– Oh, noooo, you're not getting away with this, I'm still – the weight of Beyla's body and mine prevents him from finishing the sentence.

–Oh, fu...! – he bites his tongue – That's exactly what women are like! – he says laughing
– No matter what it is, ahahaha, in the eeeeend, they unite... ahaahaha...

They are now applying a clinch hold on me, trying to take off my winter socks. Suddenly, the phone rings. Everyone jumps up, trying to catch their breath. Luka launches another pillow at Beyla, and she falls down on the bed. Picking up the handset, I watch them as they try to suppress laughter. He raises his arms victoriously, Beyla dangling from his hands, trying to come down.

- Hello? –I answer, trying not to laugh.

- Hello, darling - the monotonous male voice on the other end of the line brings me back to reality – why aren't you answering your phone?

- What do you mean, I'm not answering, Phillip? – I ask, trying to signal Beyla and Luka to be quiet.

- Well, darling, - he continues monotonously – the phone must have rang more than four times before you answered.

- Could be. – I try to justify myself – We were playing a bit, Beyla, Luka, and I. I didn't hear it right away.

- Of course you were playing! – he interrupts me harshly. - And of course Luka is there! Anyway, I have no time to argue. I'm calling to remind you about the tonight's reception. Wear something appropriate!

I smack myself on the forehead. I completely forgot I have to be at the Continental Inn in Belgrade tonight, at the five year anniversary of *Arkona East*. Although I hardly ever

accompany my husband to such events, he specifically demanded that I show up tonight, regardless of the fact that it's my birthday. It's been announced that Alec Liray, the owner and CEO of the *Arkona Group* conglomerate, will attend the event, and Phillip couldn't miss the opportunity to meet him. Showing up with his wife will make him look more serious and respectable, since his reputation as a womanizer is hardly something he'd like Liray to be aware of.

- Hellooooo?? Darliiiiing - Phillip spoke slowly and nervously, which made me pay attention to his words again.

- Hey, I'm here! I'm here. You're breaking up.

- Of course I'm breaking up! – he mustered.

- I'll see you tonight, then, and I beg you, try to be nice to my colleagues!

I can hear shrill woman's laughter in the background.

- Mia says hi – he adds quickly.

- Kiss Beyla for me. Say hello to that clown and tell him he should find some decent chick. Call me when you arrive at the hotel.

- Ok, ok. Fine, just, what do you mean, when I arrive at the hotel? You're not coming to the apartment first?

- I can't make it. I'm busy all day – he says in a rush. – Make sure you arrive at seven thirty at the latest. Happy birthday! See ya – and the call ended.

Red with anger, I put down the handset. Luka's looking through the window, trying to ignore my conversation with Phillip, the way he's been trying to ignore my marriage to him. Beyla comes closer and sits on my lap. She lays her head on my chest:

- Tell daddy I said hi, too... - she whispers.

And then there's silence. I pull her head closer to my lips and give her a comforting kiss. I feel like her curly hair smell strange. I frown. I sink my face into her hair and take a deep breath. My whole body fills with the aroma that makes my skin crawl. My daughter smells like early morning. Freshly-cut grass, light rain... My daughter smells like spring. I goggle at her, petrified, and then move away from her.

- Mommy, are you all right? –she asks me, noticing my reaction.

- Y..yes... - I stammer. Luka turns away from the window. He raises his right eyebrow inquiringly. - Is everything ok?

- Y..yes... I just remembered I've got tons of things to do. – he knows I'm lying.

- Well, then, let's not waste any more time. Get ready, and let's get the party started. If he stopped me from hitting on your mom, we can't let him ruin her birthday as well, can we?! You, pain in the ass, go to your room and get dressed, and you, old lady, straight to the bathroom and clean yourself up a bit!

Beyla squeaks with joy and runs after him, then stops, returns, and gives me a hug.

- C'mon, mom, you have to see the present you got from grandma and grandpa. If Luka promises to be nice, I'll let him hit on you for 15 minutes.

Then she gives me a soft kiss and I notice that her hair smells the same as always, it smells of kids' raspberry shampoo.

My daughter goes out of the room with her godfather, pushing and shoving all the while.

Sometime around ten o'clock, carrying a large tray filled with hot drinks, I go out of the kitchen and into the spacious living room, in our family house in Old Skies. In accordance with our family tradition, the gifts are to be opened after breakfast, when the birthday boy or girl serves all the guests, and this morning, I have five of them. My parents, my aunt, Luka, and, of course, Beyla. As she's messing around the boxes with presents lying on a low table, my father Milos is waving his hands in front of the wide windows looking into the backyard, showing Luka the strategic points where mole traps should be placed. Emma, my mother, and aunt Amelia are sitting comfortably in the sofa, flipping through old photo albums. As I carefully pour the coffee, I watch them all. Warm, kind people, honest and open-hearted. Milos, a determined contrarian, with fair skin and white hair, slump posture, keen eyes, always peering over the tops of his tortoiseshell glasses, a real enthusiast when it comes to his work. My dad has a PhD in biochemistry. He's a true Darwinian. A natural scientist, who strongly believes that every living creature has the right to decide about its own destiny. He likes his coffee strong, with a lump of sugar and just a drop of milk. He winks at me as he passes him the indigo porcelain cup with a worn-out cobalt pattern around the rim. As always, he frowns, darting his tongue as he takes a sip of hot coffee, and then continues his conversation with Luka.

Mum gives him a quick, stealthy glance and smiles gratefully as she accepts the cup I offer her. Emma likes her coffee weak, no sugar, no milk, poured into the large, white porcelain cup from Kyoto, with a thin handle and hand drawn purple lilies. Short, skinny, with short chestnut hair, delicate complexion, some freckles here and there, warm, olive eyes, dressed according to the latest fashion trends, one would think that she has nothing in common with her husband Milos. However, apart from the fact that she cares about her appearance and likes weak coffee instead of strong, the two of them are almost exactly alike. They met in a library in Cambridge, in 1968, where Emma studied medicine and Milos was working on his PhD thesis. They describe their love as a chain chemical reaction, which, thanks to the laws of physics, lasts to this day.

I give the white tea cup made of Chinese porcelain, with a large, gold-plated handle, to my father's younger sister, Amelia. She studied medicine in Berlin, and decided to finish her specialization in Belgrade, where she met her fiancé, Ivan Gorov, a Russian chemist, who invited Milos to Rügen in March, 1973, to give a lecture on "The Reaction of Molecules to Sunlight", as a part of a science conference of chemists and biochemists in Binz. Amelia's got thin, salt-and-pepper hair, round, sweet face, rosy cheeks and sad, round eyes and likes her coffee black and strong. Her cup is a part of the set she and Ivan bought three days before he was arrested in Budapest, under suspicion that he was a western spy, and where he died in 1976, in a remand prison, from pneumonia. Amelia could never make peace with the reason of his death, which is why she never remarried. When she visited us for the first time, she liked Old Skies so much, she soon joined us herself.

I finally serve Luka and Beyla and I sit down. As I'm drinking my strong, bitter coffee, I watch my little family over the rim of my cup and listen to them talking. I smile and nod, once again completely aware why everyone has always considered us freaks. At moments like this, you can hear three languages being spoken in our house. While Milos and Luka talk in Serbian, Amelia and Emma talk in German, and Beyla is singing a song in Czech. Although they are both German citizens, my parents come from mixed marriages. My mom's father was German, and her mother was Russian, while my dad's father was German and his mother was Czech. Although it seems strange to others, in our house, all three languages are used equally, along with Serbian, especially since Phillip moved in after Beyla was born. At first, Luka couldn't keep up with our constant switching from one language to the other, but after a few years, he learned how to speak Czech quite well, and he mastered German he once learned in high school.

- Moooooommm!- shouts Beyla in a shrill voice, drawing everyone's attention.

She frowns as she pulls out a large box, wrapped in mate silver paper, with a silver mesh bow.

- Will you open grandma and grandpa's present already! I have no idea what it is, but you'll really like it! - she raises her messy eyebrows and shrugs.

- I think I'll open yours first! - I say and approach the table, moving my finger across the parti-colored boxes. I choose one, the size of a shoebox, sloppily wrapped in Mickey Mouse paper.

Beyla quickly drops the box from her hands and snuggles next to me, smiling impatiently. In the box, there is a photo of the two of us, exchanging presents at Christmas. The picture is in a handmade purple plaster frame, embellished with every ornament Beyla could get her hands on. It looks so jumbled and tacky and gawky and absolutely perfect! I hug her tight, trying not to cry. I press my lips against her forehead, thinking she's the most wonderful gift I've ever got. Beyla hugs me with her little arms and then quickly places my aunt's present in my hands. I'm delighted to see that it's a

copy of Jamie Oliver's book, "Jamie at home", signed by the author himself. I smile broadly. My aunt always knows a guy who knows a guy... Luka's present makes everyone laugh their hearts out. Under the gentle wrapping with a baby pink bow is Festool LEX 2 125/7, an excenter grinder I have been eyeing online for a while. The gift from Milos and Emma leaves everyone breathless. Under the wide lid of the large box is a royal purple long cocktail dress, made of heavy frilled silk! Over the left side of the chest, across the right shoulder and down the back, in the shape of a long and wide cape, there's a piece of emerald silk, ending in thin cobweb train. Feminine and theatrical, it was inspired by the dresses of the ancient Rome princesses and is a part of the fall collection of Zuhair Murad. It's one of those dresses, that, once you see them, you can't stop thinking about them. I've always said that I'd have it one day, even if I had to wear it around the house. I can hardly cope with the pleasant shock. I give everyone a grateful kiss.

- Well, at least you'll have something to wear tonight! – says Luka. - Just try not to seduce Phillips colleagues – he says, shaking his head reproachfully.

- Then they'll be just as annoying as you are! – Beyla mocks him.

Luka approaches her and pinches her nose, saying that she's the most annoying creature he's ever seen. She kicks him in the shin and runs away.

– You'll never catch me! – She sticks her tongue out at him before she vanishes behind the dining room door. He runs after her.

- Shall we all have another piece of cake?! – I ask, placing the cups back on the tray.

- We all shall, except for you! – responds Emma with a sour smile. She notices the black look I'm giving her and adds, almost as if she's singing, that the dress is not made for those with a few extra pounds.

My mom, I think to myself as I'm entering the kitchen, is probably the only zoologist in the world who sees bad calories as the mortal enemies of the female body.

– Where youth ends, calories and gravity begin – she always says.

We spend the rest of the day in casual conversation, remembering my childhood mischiefs. We interrupt one another, correct and fill in the gaps. We laugh so hard, we cry. Then the hairdresser rings the doorbell and we all jump up, realizing that the day flew by, and that no one did what they planned to do. Before everyone goes about their own business, we agree that Milos and Emma will take me to Belgrade, because they're going to a premier at the National Theater anyway. Luka sighs theatrically:

-Oh, thank God I don't have to take her! I've already made some plans.

I roll my eyes, knowing exactly what kind of plans they are, and go into my room, where the hairdresser has been waiting for me, tapping her foot nervously because I haven't washed my hair yet.

It's seven twenty when I arrive at the entrance to the new Belgrade hotel, Continental Inn, which is itself a part of the *Arkona group*. On the way there, Phillip informed me that there is a massive crowd in the hotel, adding that he is neck-deep in important conversations, which is why he recommends that I go straight to the Crystal Hall, table seven, reserved for the management of *Arkona East*. After trying to persuade me for a while, my parents finally agree not to go in with me, as I convince them I felt great, which is far from the truth, so I take a deep breath and walk away. Clutching the top layer of my gown, I nod at the doorman and go inside.

Loud chatter, colorful gowns, and mixed scents fill the room as I walk into the grand marble hall, the mixture of it all making me a bit dizzy, which is why I move away from the center of the crowd in a few quick and short steps. Pressing my bare shoulder against the cold marble column, breathing heavily, I watch the bustle around the entrance to the Crystal Hall. If there's something I hate, it's what is now waiting for me behind the glass door. I have no problem with coming in alone. In fact, I'm relieved, because Phillip is already inside and I'll avoid most of the handshaking and emotionless smiling.

When I was little, I fantasized about situations like this. I dreamed about ballrooms, long dresses, looking so beautiful and weightless as I spin around in my strong prince's arms, with everyone watching us in awe. However, now, as I'm close to saying goodbye to being thirty-something, before I enter the ballroom, in a heavy dress that makes me feel even fatter, I spin my clutch purse and lurk from a distance, like a maniac, trying to choose the perfect moment to sneak in, and then, after getting through the formal part, meeting Liray, and faking a perfect marriage, hide in some lonely, hidden part of the hall, where I'm going to get drunk and text Luka about all the women he's missing out on.

I sigh, realizing that I'm late more than I expected. I pick up the layers of my dress, make sure I packed my self-confidence somewhere, and head towards the entrance that's still impossible to get through. I stand among the last ones who've joined the line and give them a warm smile, but get none in return. Tapping my foot nervously, I decide to kill time by texting, which will also make me feel less uncomfortable about standing alone among a bunch of people I don't know. To my amazement, the phone screen reads nine missed calls and four messages. All of them from Phillip. I start reading them in panic, expecting standard complaints about my incompetence, but he's actually informing me that I can take my time, since the program begins no earlier than an hour from now.

Although I was just about to enter, the great news serves as a good excuse to get out of the line.

- *I still have more than forty minutes all to myself – I think to myself – after all, who would want to spend their last birthday before turning forty, surrounded by plastic strangers?*

I shove my phone back into my purse, bend my arms at the elbows so I could pick up the cape and the train, and accidentally push a tanned black-haired girl in a tight red Armani-like dress.

- Oh, I'm so sorry! I'm having a misunderstanding with my dress. – I smile and shrug, expecting her to understand, being a woman, and seeing the amount of silk I'm holding in my hands. However, she just gives me a black look.

- God, who let these people in? – she makes a snotty comment, making her girlfriends cackle, checking me out with a sneer.

I feel my face turn red with rage and heat. I can't stand cheap and shallow people. I drop the ends of my dress and slowly slide my palms over the frills on my hips, as if I want to straighten them. I look at my dress.

- Oh, Zuhair, I'm so sorry! I failed to introduce you to the other dresses here tonight – I look at the surprised faces in front of me.

- So – I raise my hand theatrically up to my chest – Murad – I move my hand towards the black-haired girl – Mexican Armani. Mexican Armani, Murad. – I lower my hand onto my chest once again. - It's been a pleasure! –I smile as wide as I can at the shocked crowd. I wink at them and make my way out of the line.

Feeling proud of myself, I decide to treat myself to a glass of good wine at the hotel's *Piano Bar*.

Since this is, after all, a gala event, the bar is empty. Apart from the bartender, who is wiping the glasses indifferently, and the waiter leaning onto the bar, the only guest is a petite blonde, sitting at the table right next to the concert grand piano. At the piano, there is a pianist with honey blond hair, whose rendition of a lovely piano piece makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. I lean against the bar, travelling on the wings of the familiar song. It's one of my favorite tunes, *My Lonely Road*.

I order red wine. Warm sparks fill my body. I sit on a barstool and close my eyes, letting myself drift away, listening to the moving notes, completely ignoring the sound of the stool right next to me being moved. As the song is about to end, I raise my glass in order to toast to the pianist. Someone next to me starts clapping, which makes the pianist turn around, take a bow, and then passionately embrace the blonde who runs into his arms. He lifts her off the ground and gives her a long, gentle kiss. The girl in the light blue dress, petite, thin like a fairy, gives a shrill laugh.

I'm still standing at the bar, holding my glass, petrified, pale, as if someone has just sucked the life out of me. Although I can hear my heart pounding and pumping, I wait for my brain to get enough oxygen, so I can produce any kind of reaction. Rage, tears, a fit of madness, anything. And yet, I feel as if I have just got up from the stool. I hold my glass halfway up, and, instead of running away, I stand there, a blank expression of my face, the familiar tune still echoing in my mind. I start bobbing my head to the tune only I hear. I feel every single note, softly kissing my heart, and then piercing it savagely. Excruciating pain in my chest makes me look down, and it is only then that I notice the sleeve of the man standing near, obviously looking at the scene next to the piano.

- Beautiful! – I hear his hoarse, yet soft voice.

Actually, the softness of that voice stops my body from being torn apart, but just for one brief moment, because the pain soon returns and I continue staring at the part of my body where my heart should be, expecting, I guess, for something to appear there. A wound, blood, a void, something to confirm that what I'm feeling is in fact mere physical pain. Instead, I feel my chin quivering and tears flooding my eyes. I close my eyes by reflex and clench my glass. I try to gather my strength and walk away without crying.

- You can really see that they are in a wonderful relationship, or marriage. – Although he speaks in English, the softness of his voice touches me again and I am calm for a moment.

– They're not married! –I say, opening my eyes. I stand up straight and leave the glass on the oak countertop.

– How can you tell they're not married? Do you happen to know them? – I hear him say, almost mockingly.

- Well... - I sigh – I happen to know only him... He's my husband. – I give him a brief look from the corner of my eye and turn away because tears come to my eyes once again and I finally take a step towards the exit.

Unfortunately, I clumsily step on my cape that somehow got wrapped around me. It makes me slip and rip a piece of silk that's now lying on the floor. However, the strong grip of his hand clutching my right arm prevents me from falling. Then I felt his other arm around my waist. I hear suppressed laughter coming from the woman kissing my husband. Turning away from Phillip, I struggle to stand up straight, holding onto the stranger's shoulder. The terrible pain, made even worse by humiliation, breaks me apart and tears start rolling down my face. Regaining my balance, I try to smile and say a silent "thank you." I look into his warm eyes whose color I can't define, and the mildness reflected in them gives me chills. I feel weak again, and, as if that's not bad enough, my knees tremble and I fall right into his chest. I don't know if this lasts for a second or even shorter, but for me, it seems like everything around me freezes and goes silent.

Like under water, I can only hear myself breathing and I feel peaceful. The last time I felt so peaceful was when I was a baby and my mom was holding me in her arms. I can smell the extraordinary scent from his body, the scent that makes me relax completely and try to snuggle into his shirt, leaving a visible trace of smudged makeup on the white cotton. Sparkly, fresh, simple scent. The scent of my name. The scent of purple enters every my pore, making me open my eyes wide in disbelief and jump back, as if I touched fire.

I stare at him like a crazy person, inspecting every feature. Every millimeter of that gorgeous face. I suddenly turn around, once again aware of the feeling of betrayal, pain, humiliation, but also something new, and I run out of the bar. I rush towards the ladies' room and leave him shocked and convinced that I'm the craziest and also the saddest thing he's ever seen in his life. Fuck!

Holding my dress up high, almost up to my knees, I open the door with my elbow. I pass next to the cleaning lady without saying hello and run into the first free booth. I sit onto the toilet, crushed, and notice that I'm still clutching the silk in my hands, and I let it fall onto the floor.

I look at my destroyed, crumpled dress. At first, I try to slowly smooth the creases, but then I start to speed up more and more. The creases constantly reappear. I lick the tips of my fingers, trying to iron the crumpled silk with moist fingers. Nervously, I'm rubbing, but I'm not sure what anymore. I feel a sharp pain in the stomach, bent over my arms, I push my despair back inside. Hunched up on a toilet in a hotel restroom, wearing my several thousand euros worth dress, I sob quietly at first, and then I start crying my heart out. I let the tears wash away all the horror of the past hour.

- Miss! – I hear a woman's voice, followed by a light knock on the door.

I say nothing. I don't breathe. I don't move. - *Go away, I'm not here!* - I shout to myself. - *I shouldn't be here.*

- Miss, are you all right? – the woman's voice sounds concerned. She knocks and puts her hand on the knob.

– Darling, please! Do you need anything? Are you all right? – she repeats.

I'm still silent. - *You stupid cow!* - I begin to get mad. - *How do you think I'm feeling, sobbing for so long in a toilet booth?* Suddenly, I hate her. I hate her little world I don't even know, I hate it that she saw me, I hate it that she heard me sob in this fucking filthy toilet booth, as I wipe tears and buggers from my face, in my gown that costs more than she can earn in two years. I hate it that she's trying to take care of me. *What the fuck is she doing? Fucking old hag...* I'm still quiet.

– Ok, darling. If you need anything, just let me know – she says in a motherly manner and lets go of the knob.

I want to slap myself for feeling such rage and directing it towards a completely innocent being. I take some toilet paper, one square at the time, and start to wipe my eyes and blow my nose.

- Yes, yes, I'm fine - I say quietly - I just need a minute to pull myself together, and I'll come out.

- That's ok, darling. Take it easy. The gentleman has been at the door four times already, asking about you. I think he's still waiting outside. I'll tell him that you're fine.

- *Of course the gentleman is worried about me. Fucking jerk!* - I think to myself as I finally get up. - *He must be eating his heart out, waiting for his darling wife to join him in kissing Liray's ass. That bastard! It's true that our marriage is a sham and that it's completely logical that he's seeing other women, but was it so hard to keep it in his pants, at least tonight, on my birthday, when I came here, all dolled up for him, so he can show me off like a trophy! That cunt! Now he's coming four times to check on me, and just a moment ago...* - and then I realize.

Oh, dear God. Phillip doesn't even know I saw him, he doesn't know where I am. Wait... Then who's the gentlemen who's been asking about me? I crack the door open, and, hiding behind them, look towards the exit. The cleaning lady with short gray hair, in an old-fashioned beige women's suit and white Borosana shoes, is talking to someone through the cracked door. I can't hear anything because they're too far, so I tiptoe to the wall on the right, followed by the sound of rustling silk, and hide between the hand dryer and the paper towels. I slowly take out a towel and listen to them talk.

- All right, I'll tell her. - says the cleaning lady, and then moves to the side, letting a tall brunette in.

The woman, looking at her phone, pays no attention to me. She heads towards the booths in the back. The cleaning lady sees me as I try to get rid of the bunch of paper towels I'm holding.

- What did I tell you! You can see for yourself that she's fine - she opens the door for the man, pointing at me.

I feel my knees tremble again. Frightened, I lean against the cold tiles of the restroom wall.

- Oh, all right. Now I can see that she's fine - he says with a broad smile on his face, showing his perfect teeth. -I can go then, clean myself up a bit - his lips pursed to the side, he points to the stain on his shirt.

In an ink black Henry Poole tuxedo, he's still standing at the ladies' room door, looking so tame, as if what he sees in front of him is the sweetest thing there ever was, and, apparently, expecting some kind of feedback from me. However, I just stand, with a blank expression on my face, staring at him as if he was a miracle, a freak, a god, or the

first gorgeous man I've ever seen. Actually, scanning every wisp of his chestnut hair, his symmetrical face, flat nose, high, wrinkled forehead, his light, straight eyebrows, and dreamy, dark gray eyes with crow's feet at the outer corners, I realize he's not as gorgeous as I thought. Because he's definitely not Luka, the epitome of boyish beauty. Nor Phillip, the epitome of cold maturity. He's something completely different, something more important and incredible. Something, which makes me unable to move or speak. He's, actually, the incarnation of the man I've been seeing in my dreams all my life, and the one I had in mind when I was puzzling together the image of an ideal man, only older. It seems that the man at the door of the ladies' room at the *Continental Inn* in Belgrade has stepped out of my wildest fantasies. If that's true, he must have a big dick as well.

This last thought makes my heart pound and blood rush into my body, sending fire into my cheeks stained with bleeding mascara. For heaven's sake, Purple! I feel ashamed of my naughty thoughts and I scold myself, full aware that he must have concluded by now that I am completely insane.

- Thanks once again! – I say, bending my arm at the elbow and waving at him. I realize too late that I'm still holding a bunch of paper towels in my hand. – They'll come in handy. – he says, looking at the pile of papers in my hand, and then waves back at me. - Duty calls! I must go now. – he says, bows, and leaves.

The cleaning lady closes the door, puts her hands on her hips, and looks at me from head to toe, clicking her tongue.

– Let's see what we can do. – she says, approaching the shelf filled with hairpins and brushes.

Thoroughly surprised, I approach the woman. The brunette goes out of the booth, still typing something on her phone. Then she puts it down to wash her hands, looks at herself in the mirror, and sees me, my hair ruffled and my face stained with makeup.

– Oh, mein Gott! – she exclaims in German and opens her purse, showing its content. - I think you'll need my help as well. – she says in fluent English.

I nod gratefully.

In the next fifteen minutes, Mrs. Mira and Inga, an extremely nice German girl, manage to make me look decent. While Inga tried to fix my makeup, Mira improvised something with hairpins and fixed my cape using needle and thread, and then, realizing my hairstyle was ruined beyond repair, following the locks sticking out of the bun, she made a loose braid, letting it fall over my left shoulder. Inga finally applied a layer of powder foundation on my lipstick to make it last longer, and then, together with Mira, looked at my reflection in the mirror, feeling proud. I looked perfect, and apart from the blurry eyes that still showed the depth of my sadness, almost nothing showed how

distressed I was. I smiled gratefully at these two strangers, hugging first the beautiful German girl, and then Mrs. Mira.

- I really don't know how to thank you. – I shrug.

- Come on! Off you go, my beautiful Purple! – the woman takes my hands gently into hers. - I'm not saying that I didn't enjoy your fits of madness in the restroom, but please, you shouldn't keep the gentleman waiting any longer. He was so worried, I thought he was going to break in.

My attempt to explain that I know her better than I know him gets interrupted by the sound of my ringtone.

- For heaven's sake, darling, do you know what time it is? – Phillip asks me, as usual, in a monotonous and emotionless voice. – The formal part has already ended. If your plan was to make me look like a fool, you could have told me sooner, so I could prepare. This way I look ridiculous on possibly the most important night in my career.

- I'm coming. – I say bitterly.

– Where are you? –I blow another kiss to the lovely ladies and go out.

Before I step into the hall, I take another deep breath and go on, holding my head up high. I hold my right hand on the braid, so it doesn't move, and walk steadily towards table seven, reserved for the management of *Arkona East*. Five male and four female heads are looking towards the stage, hypnotized, so they don't even notice me. I slowly pull out the chair next to Phillip, and just as I'm about to sit down, there's a thunderous applause and everyone rises from their chairs in order to welcome the speaker. I start clapping and nodding my head approvingly, as if I know who we're welcoming so enthusiastically. Once jazz starts playing, the clapping stops and everyone sits down. Phillip's colleagues notice I arrived and greet me, one by one, and I smile prettily at all of them. For the first couple of minutes, Phillip doesn't even look at me, his eyes searching the crowd, as if he's looking for someone. Then he focuses his gaze on the group of men gathered around the balcony doors and gives me a cold look over the shoulder, asking me what kept me so long.

- Sorry, darling, I stayed a little longer at the piano concert at the hotel bar. – I say kittenishly, almost touching his ear with my lips.

– The pianist played our favorite, *My Lonely Road*. Imagine that!

My words burn him like fire, and he turns around, examining me with his ice blue eyes.

– Afterwards, I just went to the toilet to flush away my pride. There wasn't much of it left, but it took a while to send it among the pieces of shit like you. – I add coldly, and then start a conversation with Catherine, wife of the senior manager of *Arkona East*.

- You're so lucky you're married to Purple! – she winks at Phillip, who's still in a state of shock. He gives her a faint smile, gets up, grabs my hand, and pulls me up.

- Excuse us for a second. – he says to everyone at the table – We'll be right back. – he nods in the direction of the open balcony doors.

Clutching my arm so much it hurt, he leads me through the magnificent hall with massive crystal chandeliers. Round tables and chairs, just like the entire interior, are white as snow, decorated with silver powder and glass pearls, as well as extraordinary bouquets of white lilies with purple petal edges. Approaching a group of men in dark suits, half of which are outside smoking, Phillip lets go of my hand, warns me that I should be civil, and says that it will be for the best if I speak nothing. Mikhail, the skinny Russian with white hair and a neat goatee pops his head out of the crowd when he spots us.

- Oh, Phillip, right on time! I was just talking to Alec about your proposal for our business in Southeast Europe.

Phillip shakes his hand and clears his throat:

- Mister Liray, I don't think we've officially met.

- *Oh, fuck. Oh, shit.* – that's all I can think as one of the people Mikhail was talking to turns around. – *Ooooh, fuck, I think I'm going to faint.*

Liray shakes Phillip's hand. – It's nice to finally meet you. – he says coldly and then tilts his head, focusing on me.

His look gives me goose bumps, sliding from my head to my toes. He comes a step closer, close enough for me to feel his unique smell again. Looking at my cheeks as they turn red, he stares into my face, and then turns to Phillip and his colleagues who are astonished by the way he was looking at me.

- Oh, I'm sorry! This lady reminded me of a person I met a long time ago. I assume this is your wife?

-Yes, yes – Phillip stutters – this, I mean, she's my wife – he says, putting his arm around my waist.

His touch is a cold awakening. My face goes back to being pale as always, now that I know that Liray isn't going to mention our previous encounter, at least for now. I offer him my hand and he takes it softly into his.

- Purple–I say, God knows why, and bow my head, as if I'm being introduced to a king. I catch a glimpse of Phillip's mocking smile, telling me that I'm dumb.

- Purple...What an unusual name! – still holding my hand, Liray sounds surprised. The warmth of his hand makes my palm sweat.

- Unfortunately, I don't have such a beautiful and unorthodox name. I'm Alec. – he says, kissing my hand so softly I can feel my skin blossom under his lips.

- *For fuck's sake, Purple, breathe. Breathe normally; what the fuck is the matter with you?*
– I start scolding myself in my mind.

Liray, understanding how uncomfortable I feel, finally lets go of my hand and puts his into his pocket, as if he wants to hide the drops of my sweat that linger on his skin.

– I have to admit, you're a lucky guy. –he addresses Phillip.

- Tell me, Purple, you didn't like our program? I didn't see you by your husband's side during the formal segment.

– Oh, you know, women and their dresses! - Phillip answers the question for me.

- No, I don't know. – says Alec indifferently. – Please, enlighten me. – he gives him an inquiring, slightly cynical look.

– Well... you know, my sweetheart is more of a housewife. A simple woman. – Phillip stutters. – I mean, she, she's not used to wearing anything longer than a miniskirt, nor going anywhere other than shopping malls. So she stepped on her dress a bit...

– *What the fuck is he talking about?!* – I give Phillip a black look, as he waves around, telling his own hyperbolic version of things that happened to me, painting a picture of a completely incompetent, spoiled woman.

Everyone laughs as he talks about the time we were at the Indian Embassy in Doha, some four years ago, and I was, kind of, dancing during the reception. I listen to him, shocked by his ability to completely distort my witty remark that their national anthem is perfect for dancing. I start to boil with rage, and just as I'm about to yell – *Hey, dipshit, that same CEO just saw you making out with another woman!* – I notice the way Alec's looking at me. He pays no attention to Phillip's words. Instead, he's entertained by my reactions. Once again, I feel really uncomfortable. I become aware that this man here, after all that he could see and hear for the past three hours or so, must think I'm a complete loser. And, instead of picking a fight with Phillip, regardless of the consequences, I simply take a glass of champagne from the waiter who was standing there, take a big sip and start staring into the ceiling, trying to count the crystals on one of the chandeliers.

– Oh, well, you must find this gathering of ours extremely boring – the velvet voice lures me back from my thoughts.

– Oh, actually – I say, taking another sip – I could have wished for nothing better for my birthday than attending the celebration of the Arkona empire. –I answer ironically, finishing my drink.

– And now, if you’ll excuse me – I say, placing my empty glass in Phillip’s hands – I have to get back to a buyer, I’ve been having some problems with his order.

Theatrically, I bow my head to everyone:

– See ya later, Tiger – I wink at Phillip, leaving him with a bewildered look on his face.

Without looking back, slowly, my back straight, my head up high, walking like I have the world at my feet, strutting in my dress, the new Louboutins, and the massive tanzanite jewelry, I simply leave the hall.

I have no idea where I’m going and I find myself once again in front of the *Piano Bar*, which is still hauntingly empty. I look towards the concert piano and shiver with disgust, remembering the scene from before and how I felt. The bartender asks me if I’m all right. I nod and order some wine.

– Um... well, how long are you planning to stay? – he starts to stutter – you know, we’d like to close a bit early, since there are no guests tonight.

- Listen to me, boy! - I say, trying to sit on the barstool in my huge dress – please, get off my back, will you? You see, a moment ago, I caught my husband here, dry humping some blonde, which is why I cried my heart out on this CEO’s shirt, and considering the fact that it’s my birthday for two more hours, I’d like to ask you to leave a bottle of wine for me and play some music, and then you and your pall can go wherever you want.

I open my purse and leave a one hundred euro note in front of him.

- Enough? – I ask, raising my eyebrow.

He quickly takes the money, leaves an open bottle in front of me and plays some romantic music. He goes for the door, and then returns, leaving a pack of Marlboro Reds.

- I don’t know if you smoke, but you might need it...

On his way out, he stops and turns the sign from “open” to “closed”.

– That’s it, Purple. Well, happy birthday to you! – I toast to myself and finish my drink in one gulp. I feel alcohol entering my bloodstream. Now I feel better, much better. Pouring myself another glass, I notice that my purse is vibrating and look at the display that screams Phillip’s name. I reject the call. Just as I’m about to take a sip, I hear my phone again. Phillip! I sigh and answer.

-Purple? Purple, hello, where are you?! *–that’s interesting, his voice doesn’t sound monotonous anymore.*

- Yup –I answer, twirling a pack of cigarettes on the counter.

- Where the fuck did you go? You’re making me look like a fool!

- I'm in a shopping mall, dancing to the Indian national anthem. Why do you ask?
- For goodness sake, you crazy woman, I had to justify your behavior somehow – he says, back to his monotonous voice – tell me where are you?!
- Trying out some miniskirts. They match my IQ.
- Purple, there's no reason for you to be stubborn like this. What you saw is no big deal. We'll talk about it when we come home. Tell me, where are you? Alec has been asking about you. We can't let your stupid behavior ruin the fantastic impression we've made.
- Oh, WE have made a fantastic impression and are already on a first-name basis? – I say, taking a cigarette from the pack.
- Well, yes. After you messed up by hinting that you work and that it's your birthday, he got interested, so I managed to fix things a little bit by saying that your hobby is furniture restoration.
- Oh, well, everything is clear then! Aren't you swell! – I say, playing with my cigarette.
- Purple, I'm serious, stop messing around! We have a deal, and you'll have to respect that, unless you want to suffer the consequences! – again, a trace of emotion in his voice.

God, how could I do that to myself and Beyla? – I shiver with disgust and put a cigarette in my mouth.

- Listen, Phillip! There's no need for you to remind me about the consequences of my disobedience, but my current state could only tarnish your reputation. So, since you're such a great man and such a good manager, I'm sure you'll think of a decent story and explain why I left. As always, I'll give you an idea. Tell him I went home because Beyla was feeling ill. No one can have a problem with me being a good mom. That's one thing. And the other thing you should know is that I'm already on my way to Old Skies, and you can do whatever you want and sleep wherever you want.

With a cigarette in my mouth, I lean over the counter, looking for a lighter.

- And Phillip: stop calling me. My battery is empty.

I don't hear a word he says after that. I turn off my phone, take the cigarette out of my mouth, break it in half, and drink another glass of wine in one gulp.

- Honestly, I'm beginning to think you're following me – I murmur, keeping my eyes on the empty glass, suddenly overwhelmed by the familiar scent.
- Would you like me to follow you, Purple? – he whispers, taking the glass from my hands.

- Empty? Would you like another one? –he says softly, going to the other side of the bar.

I'm still silent, holding my head down. I just shrug. I've already had enough to feel dizzy and numb. Why can't I be indifferent to his scent, his voice, his presence?

-Let's see what we have here – he smiles, gently touching the bottles with his forefinger – *Kosta Browne, Fontodi, Barone Ricasoli, La Massa*, ahaaa! –he stops, carefully pulling out an elegant dark bottle, with a label the color of ancient parchment.

- Would you care for some 2005 *Barolo Marcenasco*? – he asks, showing me the bottle.

- Hmm... - I don't think the personnel will be happy in the morning when they find out someone's been opening the wines – finally, I give him a normal look. – *Fuck, he's gorgeous!*

- I think that the only reason the personnel won't be happy in the morning is because they're going to get fired – he says, carefully opening the wine.

- Fired?!

- I believe that leaving their workplace during business hours, without an explanation, is reason enough to get fired. Don't you agree with me, Purple? – he says my name so softly, caressing me with every sound.

- Weeell... - I purse my lips with childlike discontent – well, if we don't report them, no one will know. Actually, to be honest, it's my fault they left! –I lean against the counter.

- You know, I asked them to give me two hours of peace.

- Ok, so we won't fire them! – he concludes as he pours the wine.

- It was really nice of them to grant your request. Here you go – he says, offering me a glass.

- That's right, we won't fire them! – I concur, touching him on purpose. – Of course, it's your hotel. I forgot about that.

He gives me a broad smile.

- Forget about that now. Forget about everything. He raises his glass and looks into my eyes. I dive into the dark oceans of his eyes, stupefied. I swim in the warmth of those strange, clear eyes, so sparkly I can see my reflection in them. Slowly, I raise my glass, still staring at the center of his face. Light sound of crystal follows the touch of the two glasses.

- Happy birthday, Purple... - he says quietly, as if he wants no one but me to hear his words.

- My birthday? Yes... thank you... - I murmur.

We bring the glasses to our lips at the same time. And all I want is to be that glass in his hand. A new wave of alcohol flows through my veins, mixing with a whirlwind of emotions I felt during the day. And then, all of a sudden, out of that whirlwind, the long forgotten and abandoned feeling surfaces in my mind. Put out and buried under the ashes of love, the flame of passion that last burned in me seven years ago. Now, after all that time, deep inside me, I feel it flicker and I shiver.

- Are you cold? – he says, putting his glass down.

- No, no – I manage to untangle myself from the mess in my head.

- I'm fine. It's just that this day has been too...

- Too..? – pouring more wine, he looks at me inquiringly.

- Too strange – I say, accepting the new glass of wine. – Actually, this day has been unbelievable! – I say quickly and take a big sip.

The alcohol helps me regain my confidence. Finally, I feel comfortable around him. Holding my glass in front of my eyes, I spin it, watching a thin wreath of bubbles appear on the surface. I notice that Bryan Ferry's *Make you feel my love* is playing in the background, and ask him what his day was like.

– Did I make the Top Ten Stupidest People Alec's Ever Met? – I add, still looking at the glass.

– Hmm, top ten... – he raises his eyebrows – more like top five. – he says, joining me on my side of the bar.

– Yaaaaay!- I drink the rest and raise my arms victoriously.

– That's truly a great success. – his lips take the shape of a smile as he sits down next to me.

I can feel his scent again, but fake sense of self-confidence doesn't let me paralyze again.

- Tell me, Alec, what do I have to do to earn the first place? – I give him the puppy eyes look.

- You know, I've always wanted to be the best at something. This is the closest I've ever come to that.

- I'm not sure... depends on how you were planning to end the night – He says, holding his forearms on the counter.

- Dancing! – I reply promptly, regretting it immediately.

- Dancing? – he nods and looks at the glass in front of him. – Good answer – he sighs. - You know, I’m not much of a dancer. I haven’t danced in years.

- Neither have I, but... – I look at the clock – before I turn into a pumpkin and run away with the mice, maybe I should take advantage of my dress, and you of your tux?

He sits still for a couple of seconds. Then he gets up slowly and turns towards me. He bows and offers me his hand, asking me if I’d like to dance.

– Oh, it would be an honor! – I feign surprise.

Taking my hand, he pulls me in gently. He puts his arm around my waist, and I place my left hand on his shoulder. We move slowly, sluggishly, without a word, with a stiff posture, as if we’ve never danced before. It’s more of a sway than a dance. Awkward silence seems louder than Bryan’s hoarse voice; it bothers me, and makes me give Alec a coy look. He’s looking into the distance. Absentminded, with a blank expression on his face, he seems to feel uncomfortable. I bite my lip so I can hold in the sigh that would give away my disappointment and I look down, ashamed of myself. Our clumsy attempt to dance is interrupted by the firm grip of his hand on my back, which pulls me closer and makes me snuggle into his chest. I notice his heart is pounding like crazy, and the sound is so loud and irregular that I can’t hear anything else. And then, as if it’s trying to reflect the rhythm of my mine, our hearts start beating like one, slowly and peacefully. I like that. I close my eyes and smile as I sink deeper into his scent, into his chest, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world, as if I do it all the time. I feel as if I belong right there, on the left side of this man’s body, the man I hardly know.

- Purple – he says my name softer than anyone ever.

- Yes? – I answer quietly.

- I know that it’s none of my business – he starts slowly – but, please, tell me, why do you let Phillip treat you like that? – it feels like a slap in the face.

I look up at him.

- I mean, why are you married to that guy?

Another slap.

- Why did you stay here tonight, after everything that happened?

A kick in the guts.

I step out of his arms. I feel like I’m still swaying. Fuck, no wonder he thinks I’m a fool, I curse to myself.

We're standing there, looking at each other. He's still holding my hand. Watching me closely, expecting my answer.

I want to say something, but I change my mind. Instead of justifying myself, I give him a fake smile and pull my hand back. I take my purse from the counter and sigh as I'm turning towards him. He's still standing there, not moving an inch from the place where we've just danced. He's watching me, surprised by my reaction, his hands fisted.

- Yes, you're right. That's none of your business. Thanks for the dance! – I say as quickly as I can, pick up the layers of my dress and storm out.

I run out of the bar. I run out of the hotel. I try to run out of the goddamn day, hoping that I can run out of my body and soul. Bumping into people in the street, completely disoriented, stumbling all the while thanks to the high heels, I find myself outside our apartment. I take off my shoes, uncovering my blistered feet, and I'm trying to find the keys in my purse but I'm blinded by bright headlights. I see Phillip park his car. I move into the dark, under the eaves. Phillip and the petite blonde from the *Piano Bar* enter the building, hugging each other and laughing. I lean against the façade, slowly sliding down, followed by the sound of silk being ripped, and sit down on the ground.

- Because I can't! – I yell furiously, staring at the skies.

- Because... – I start sobbing – because I mustn't...–I whisper.

I'm cold. The effect of alcohol has worn off, and now I can feel the biting cold March air on my skin. The cold is biting my bones the way pain is tearing my soul into pieces. The awful noise in my mind makes me want to squeeze my head tight, but the stiffness and numbness of my arms prevent me from doing that. I realize I have to hide somewhere. I have to get up. I can't feel my legs. I pull my dress up and look at my dirty feet and the torn stockings. I move my toes, although I don't feel them anymore. I don't know how long it's been since I ran out of the hotel into the cold night. I hear someone's quick steps and joyful laughter. Although the cold is making me shake uncontrollably, I make myself get up, holding onto the wall. I look around trying to find my purse so I can get my phone. I try to take a step towards it, heel first, but my legs fail me. I fall facedown, like a log. Without even trying to resist it, I collapse in a heap. I howl with pain. Fuck, I can't believe this is happening to me! I get up slowly, leaning on my forearms, realizing that my face and mouth are filled with dirt. I try to rub them against my shoulder, but that turns out to be extremely painful. My attempt to get up is unsuccessful, because I manage to stumble again on my already ruined dress. Fuck. I could imagine my parents' faces if they saw me now, like this, wearing their expensive present. If they were here, they'd be convinced that I'd got wasted and Amelia would frown, clicking her tongue, blaming my parents and their careers for the fact that I still get drunk at this age. In the

end, everyone would completely ignore the fact that I'm rolling around in dirt, and start fighting about who's to blame for their only child's demise. I laugh. At first, it's just a short chuckle, but then I start laughing uncontrollably, louder and louder, managing to crawl under the eaves and lean against the wall. I'm still laughing like crazy as I struggle to get up. – *Fuck me! My life is a pitch black comedy!*

- Sorry, could you just look at me for a second, so I could recount this situation properly to your grandchildren? – I hear the familiar voice.

- For heaven's sake, Luka! How did you know? How did you find me? How the fuck did you...? – I stare at Luka, in a state of complete shock, and watch him take off his coat.

He stands right above me, covers me with it, and puts two fingers on my chin. He holds my head up and smiles.

- Your makeup is so... gothic! The hairstyle, too – he steps back and looks at me from head to toe. – Actually, zombie gothic! Hmm... does that even exist?

- Lukaaa! – I shriek – If you only knew, if you only fucking knew what I've been through...
- before I can finish the sentence, he picks me up and carries me like a baby.

- Whatever it is that happened, it's over now – he says, dropping me slowly onto the seat of his car. The engine is already running.

His warmth spreads across my body. He goes over to his door and sits down at the steering wheel.

– Whatever happened, it made some guy worried to death. He alarmed half of the residents of Old Skies, tracked down your parents, and they called me.

I settle comfortably in my seat, letting the hot air put me to sleep. I only ask who the guy was.

- I think he said his name was Alec. Alec Liray – that's the last thing I hear before I go to sleep.

I've got an awful headache. Actually, my whole body's aching, it's only that the pain around my temples is the worst. I struggle to open my eyes. My eyelids are heavy and swollen. I squint. I try to focus on the shadow of the night lamp. I watch it flicker in the dark. It looks like a dragon in flight, with a giant flame spreading from its jaws towards me. Actually, that shadow doesn't look like a dragon at all. It looks more like a lily blossom, although, to be honest, it's just a round shadow that doesn't look like anything, but I simply want it to look like a dragon or a lily, because images in my head always look much better than the real thing. That's why, in my mind, the memory of yesterday is

spectacular. For example, in my mind, my name is never Purple, but a nice, simple one, like Katya. In my head, even Phillip's idea to get married sounded like the best thing I'd ever do at the time. I sneeze, bouncing off the bed a little. I turn to the night table, take a couple of paper tissues, and look at the clock. It's ten a.m. I wipe my nose and sit up straight.

- I can't believe I only slept for a few hours. No wonder I feel like shit. – I think to myself.

I crawl out of the sheets and put my feet on the floor, and then I realize I'm wearing a warm sweat suit and my winter socks.

- Luka – I giggle – he even managed to change my clothes! – I stroke my favorite faded Gap sweat suit, realizing I feel a bit too comfortable.

– *Oh, no he didn't!* – I look inside my sweatpants – *he can't have...* - Oh, fuck! – I grumble. He took off my panties and put on a fresh pair of cotton underwear, image of cow's head on the front and all. I dive into the pile of pillows and whine – could my life get any worse?!

- Luka! Luka! I'm gonna kill you! – I shout at the top of my lungs.

- Come on, you act as if I've never seen a pussy before, what's the matter with you? – he grins, carrying a hot cup of tea.

- Well, it's not just anybody's... - I pause - pussy!

- Well that's why it's wearing a cow! I have to admit, it was fun, rummaging through your underwear. For a moment, I thought I opened Beyla's drawer – he says, putting the cup in front of me. I jump out of the pillows and punch him straight in the gut.

- You're such a jerk! – I sit up straight, frown, and cross my arms over my chest. I sigh.

- Do you have any idea what happened to me last night?! – just the thought of it makes me shiver.

–You mean the night before? –he slowly gives me the cup.

- What? – I give him a puzzled look.

– You slept through the day yesterday – he says, sitting down beside me. –And now, you'll drink this tea and tell me all about what happened. Ok?

I breathe in the steam rising from the cup, inhaling the hot smell of chamomile. I slowly try to take a sip, but I burn my tongue anyway. Carefully holding the cup on the bedcover, I lean against his shoulder and start talking.

It's been an hour since I started my story. I drank my tea; in the meantime, Luka brought me an aspirin, and now we're just sitting, completely silent.

-Well, say something! – I slap him on the shoulder.

- What do you want me to say, Purple? – he says angrily and gets up. – Do I even need to say anything, since the man who saw you for two minutes asked you the same question I've been asking you every day? What does Phillip have to do to make you come to your senses?

- That's not fair, Luka. You know I can't divorce him. – I sit up in the bed. – You very well know that's impossible.

- No, no, I don't know that! – his eyes are like blazing fire – I have no idea why you can't get a divorce. Every time you have a new excuse that's supposed to be a great obstacle!

-Luka, you know there's a serious reason for that.

- It's not a reason, Purple! It's your choice. – he approaches the windows and opens them.

Fresh air fills the room. The moment I feel the cold, I hide under the covers.

- That's not my choice! The marriage, I mean. – I say angrily.

- I did choose Beyla, but not this, this is not what I had imagined, not what I wanted. If I had only known, I would have never chosen a life like this. That much you can believe.

- Look, honey – he comes closer to me – I'm on your side and always will be. But you have to understand, I won't always be around to save you, listen to you, and comfort you. Your life is a fucking mess, but you have to admit that you haven't been trying too hard to clean that mess up. Instead, you just make it worse.

He throws the bedcover to the side.

- It's about time you get that big ass out of bed and start cleaning yourself up. You're thirty-nine! If we were Indians, you'd already be tied up in the mountains, waiting to die of old age! – he picks me up like a sack and heads towards the bathroom. I feel nauseous as he puts me in the bathtub.

– First, you need to clean yourself up, and then straight to the store! Beyla is still at preschool, your parents went to Istanbul last night, and today they're flying to Honolulu via Tokyo. I have classes this afternoon. I'll call you to make sure you're ok. Anyway, I'll see you tonight. Make sure your husband doesn't show up! I'm not sure I could stop myself from punching him in the face – he gives me a kiss and goes out.

I hear him running down the stairs, shouting, warning me not to procrastinate.

I'm sitting in my bathtub, fully clothed, my head on the edge. I'm not sure whether I want to get up and get back to bed, or take the man's advice and start cleaning myself up. I get up slowly. Bed it is, then. Luka can't begin to understand how complicated my

life is. Nor can my parents, Amelia, or anyone else, for that matter. Especially someone like Alec Liray! What the hell does he know about the lives of us, mere mortals? While his biggest problem is whether he'll go up or down a spot on the Forbes list, we have to struggle every day, trying to make ends meet. Ok, I'm pushing it a bit too far. I come from a relatively rich family, but the point is: a man like Liray is invulnerable.

I sit on the bed, angry like hell. While he's strutting around like a peacock, turning heads wherever he goes, I have to hide from myself, in the darkness of my mind. I can imagine how amused he was last night. That jackass! Who does he think he is? Showing up all... I remember his look, his voice. I close my eyes and try to remember the moment I heard his heart beat. I bite my lip, trying to find his scent somewhere in my mind. Anyway, I open my eyes. I have seen far better looking men than Alec! I get up, even angrier than I was when I sat down, and go to the bathroom. That prick! He must think I almost peed myself when he spoke to me. Alec Liray himself! Dancing with me. Who is that guy, anyway? I've never heard of him before. Ok, I have, several times, but I had no idea what he looked like, that's why I was confused when I saw him. Of course, that's it; I was just a bit confused, because he looked a bit like my ideal man. That's right! That's why I... I look at myself in the mirror and I'm shocked. The person looking back is tired, lost, I can barely recognize her. I'm scared, so I slowly come closer to the mirror. My eyelids are swollen, my eyes are bloodshot, and traces of bleeding mascara are still all over my face. Wrinkles between my eyebrows look like someone's engraved them with a knife, and my hair is messy and all over my forehead. This entire image of a martyr makes my face seem even less symmetrical. I try to quickly wash my face, but I make it even worse. I start rubbing my face with the makeup remover. The makeup's been there for too long and I have to work hard to take at least some of it off, so I grab one thing after another, trying to clean my face. After I almost succeed, I take my clothes off, throw everything on the floor, and get into the tub. I run myself a hot bath and press my hands against the tiles. I want to be clean as soon as possible, to wash away every trace of embarrassment and discomfort I've been feeling.

I don't get out of the house until late afternoon. The further I am from it, the further are the remains of my day. It's already dark in Old Skies when I unlock the store, which is on the ground floor of a three-story Viennese Secession building. Next to my store, there are only a pharmacy and a flower shop. The rest of the building is abandoned, due to a delayed probate proceeding, which works for us perfectly, since we can use the entire enormous basement, the size of the whole floor.

The moment I enter the store, I can smell the dry air, mixed with the scents of lavender, old wood, and oil. *I haven't been here for a while*, I think to myself and take off my coat. I go to the window and look outside. *The Bazaar* is one of my latest enterprises. Although I hold a master degree in economics, I never wanted to be an economist, so I wandered

from one job to another, trying to find my ideal profession. Find myself, in a way. After ten years of searching across North America, where I went with my fiancé, I came back home, pregnant with another man. Just like I expected, my parents only cared about the fact that their only child is going to give birth to their grandchild, which is why they saw my pregnancy as a blessing, and regarded Phillip as someone who comes with the package. Since they spend most of their time traveling, giving lectures and going to seminars, the three of us are usually alone in the house. When I say the three of us, I mean Beyla, Amelia, and I. The moment his daughter was born, Phillip went back to being focused on his career. First he moved to Belgrade, and visited us every weekend. Then he moved to London. At first, he used to come home once a month, and then once every six months. When he got his job at *Arkona*, he first worked at *Arkona Mining*, but a year ago, he accepted one of the management positions at *Arkona East* and moved back to Belgrade.

The street lights go on, one by one, lighting up millions of snowflakes carried by the wind, bumping into each other. I look at my watch. Beyla will be at preschool for another hour. I'll have to pick her up soon. I shouldn't have come here at all, I think to myself, sitting in a traditional English armchair I painted white and upholstered with leather and faded English flag print fabric. I slide my hand down the rough edges of the armrests, feeling up the bumps I made using too rough sandpaper.

I try to fit the entire store in one gaze. Decking boards in various shades of gray, painted that way so they would look more antique, but without ruining the structure, with nodes and grooves still visible. The right wall is made of old bricks painted ash gray, onto which I have placed white hardwood shelves filled with leather-bound books, photo albums and decoupaged wooden objects. The left side of *The Bazaar* is reserved for a glass showcase and a secretary desk, painted white, with crackle finish. The entire left wall is covered with white wallpapers with large olive lilies. There, I hung four rectangular mirrors in massive frames, and above and below each mirror there is a painting I bought two years ago in Kiev, because I felt sorry for the street salesman. In each of the eight paintings, purple is the dominant color, spreading across the blossoms and petals of ruyan flower. Actually, it was only after I brought the paintings into *The Bazaar* that I noticed the color and the motifs. The store is illuminated with nine lamps in different sizes, with shades in earth tone colors. Two large chandeliers made of wrought iron hang from the ceiling. Amelia got them for me in Morocco. Instead of light bulbs, there are thick candles, the color and scent of vanilla. At the far end of the store, between the bathroom door and the kitchen, there is a fireplace. On the mantelpiece, there are two large earth tone candles, and four lavender ones, half-burned, as well as two frames holding black-and-white photos of Milos and Emma's families, from the 1930s. In front of the fireplace, there is a small, dark goat-hair rug, made by Oman Bedouins, and on the rug, facing the fireplace, there is a massive leather "cabinet" armchair, which is the most purple armchair there is. In the shop window, however, stands a large standard brown leather armchair. The impression that someone has just got up from it is achieved by the use of a warm Welsh blanket, with a

traditional brightly-colored pattern, casually placed on the left armrest, and a copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Marquez on the right. In front of the armchair, I placed a French tabouret with French bakery motifs, on top of which is a turquoise porcelain teapot with cracked lid and a large ruby red cup. From the far corner, the entire scene is illuminated by a lamp with a wide shade, its edges decorated with ripe white grapes. The central part of *The Bazaar* is filled with various pieces of furniture I mostly bought online and restored in one part of the basement I turned into a storage slash workshop.

At first, the shop was doing great, but then, a small place like Old Skies got tired of a desperate housewife's handicraft. Six months went by, and I sold practically nothing. I notice that the lampshade in the shop window is a bit crooked. I step into the window, next to the armchair, so I could fix it, but then I hear the bells above the door, letting me know someone's in.

- I'm sorry, we're closed - I say, rubbing my dusty hands against my jeans, and step out of the window.

The man takes off his cap, runs his fingers through his hair, and then shakes off the snow from his cap and both shoulders. He steps forward, just enough to give me the courtesy of a look.

- You're soaking my floor, Mr. Liray! - I say in a loud voice, trying to sound as indifferent as possible. Actually, I'm more than confused. I try hard not to show how surprised I am to see him.

- Good evening to you, too, Purple - he starts unbuttoning his coat, completely ignoring my remark.

- It's rather pleasant here - he says as he looks around, and then throws his cap and coat onto the rocking chair.

- I know! -I say rudely.

I walk past him and lean against the fireplace, sinking my nails into my palms, trying to make the pain prevail over the exhilaration I feel because he's here, as gorgeous as ever. So simple, in his dark jeans, gray high-collar sweater, black boots, unshaven beard, smiling, with thin wrinkles around his eyes, the scent that seems to be made just for him filling the room. The scent that awakens my senses and intoxicates me. He comes closer and leans against the fireplace next to me. He puts his hands in his pockets and begins to look around *The Bazaar* more carefully. He's silent as he slowly examines piece by piece. I open my mouth to say something, but the only thing that can be heard is my loud breathing. The silence persists.

The feeling of exhilaration starts to overcome the feeling of uneasiness. Because, actually, I'm feeling uncomfortable. Uncomfortable, because of everything that happened two nights before, uncomfortable because of the way I reacted to him,

uncomfortable because of the silence I don't know how to break. Uncomfortable because of the feelings that burn inside my body.

- Wh... why are you here? – words finally come out of my mouth. – Wanted to add some drama to your life? – I sigh with relief. – *Yay, you're back!*

- Oh – he starts talking slowly, focused on the constellation of crystal stars hanging in the right corner. – Believe it or not, I've got enough drama of my own – he looks at me and raises his eyebrows.

– Actually, I came here because I wanted to hire you – he says softly. He cocks his head and squints, as if he wants to zoom in on my face.

Oh, fuck, I think to myself and feel my skin burn with some strange heat.

– You want to hire *me*?

- Yes, you... - he says slowly, and then goes over to the purple armchair and runs the tips of his fingers down the soft skin. He stops, rubs his fingers, purses his lips to the side and settles into the armchair. Stretching his legs, he crosses his arms over his chest and closes his eyes.

– It's comfortable. I think I want to buy it! – he sinks deeper into the armchair.

- Actually, I think I want to buy everything in the store! – he says haughtily with his eyes still closed.

- In fact, I think I want to buy *The Bazaar*. – He says with a cheeky grin.

- Why not buy the entire town? – I can't refrain myself from saying.

- Hmm... might as well. – he yawns, as if he's bored.

- Liray! – *God, I hate smug people.*

- Aha? –he mumbles.

- Get out of my store! – I'm furious. *In fact, I absolutely detest smug people!*

- Shhh, I haven't told you about my business proposal yet. Buying the entire store just crossed my mind right now. And buying the town was your idea. – he says, his eyes still shut.

- Well, I'm obviously not going to listen to what you have to say now. – I say, taking his stuff off the rocking chair.

- I have to pick up my daughter. I have no time to entertain you! – I throw his stuff in his face and turn around to take my own.

- That's too bad. Although I didn't want to believe that, it seems that Phillip was right... - he says, almost coldheartedly.

I feel like he just slapped me in the face, so I turn around and look at the armchair. He's no longer in it. I'm shocked to see that he's fully dressed, with the cap on his head, standing in front of the mirrors and looking at the paintings.

- H...how? – I whisper.

He looks intently at the painting above the third mirror.

– Ruyan—he says, more to himself, then catches my stiff reflection in the mirror and starts speaking to it in a most casual manner:

- You know...Phillip told me that you're too weak to accept my business offer – he takes a step towards the fourth mirror.

- Actually, to be specific, I quote: "Purple will never take the job, because she knows that she can't do it. Actually, she can, partially, but she never tries hard enough, which is why she never finishes anything."

- Phillip doesn't know what he's talking about! – I say through my teeth.

- I also think he said you have a nightmare, and you have it all the time, but only partially.

- What?! – I exclaim in disbelief.

- Well, I don't know. He said that you've been having this dream your whole life. Some nightmare, I guess, that you never seem to finish – he looked at me inquiringly.

What the fuck? I can't believe he talked about my nightmare! He's completely lost his mind since he came back to Serbia.

- Phillip is... - I stop.

- What? –He gives me a penetrating look.

- Phillip's full of shit! – I say, putting my coat on. – It's just that I've really got to run! Can this wait, or...

- Well... - he interrupts me. – Let me walk you to school and tell you about my proposal. – he opens the door and shows me out:

– After you...

I put my scarf around my head, nod, and step out. Straight into the snowstorm, straight in front of the black *Maybach*, out of which comes a driver as soon as he sees Alec walking behind me. I stop, surprised, and use all the talent I have to play it cool.

I lock the door and look down the street:

– The school is only two streets away from here. Do you think you can walk that far? – I say mockingly.

Liray frowns, looking confused.

– Vuk, we'll walk.

The driver silently goes back into the car.

- Nothing beats a walk through a dark and icy March storm – he says with a hint of anger in his voice.

- Yes, it's truly wonderful! – I say looking at the dark sky, letting cold flakes land on my face.

Alec looks up at the sky as well. He closes his eyes, but shivers soon after, wiping the tiny drops off his face.

- I hope you understand I was being ironic – he says through his teeth.

- I hope you understand I wasn't. – I put my hands in my pockets. – Shall we? – I give him a cheeky look. – We haven't got much time, and I'm burning with desire to find out what I can do for the Arkona Empire. Why was it necessary for Alec Liray himself to come to me with the proposal?

- Ok, now you're being ironic. – he puts his hands in his pockets.

- You see, I was rather interested when I found out that you restore furniture. And you're excellent at what you do, just like I thought you'd be. I've recently bought an old, ramshackle building. There's some furniture inside, it's old and shabby, but I like it very much. Of course, there are things and details that I don't like. What I would like is to hire you to restore that entire building... - his leg slips and he loses balance.

I quickly pull out my hand and catch his sleeve, but his weight pulls me down and a second later, I'm lying on top of him on the ground. My head is buried in his torso, and I'm breathing in his scent, mesmerized. I feel his right hand stroking my hair. I lift up my head. He tucks my tangled hair behind my ear.

– Are you all right? – he asks me quietly.

I'm bubbling over with anger.

Of course I'm not ok! How could I be? I'm lying on top of you in the middle of the street, I'm freezing to death with all this wind and cold, just because I didn't have the courage to get in that car with you, and now you're stroking my hair! Of course I'm not ok! I'm not sure if I'd rather sink deeper into your coat and fall asleep there, intoxicated with your fucking

scent, or rip your clothes off, so I could feel the touch of your skin on mine and feel you inside me!

- Mr. Liray! Sir, are you all right? – the driver's panicked voice brings me back from my thoughts and I realize he's hypnotizing me with those gray eyes, as if he's trying to read my mind.

- Yes, yes... I'm fine. – I mumble. – You?

- It seems that I've really forgotten how to walk. – he gives me a smile so warm it makes me smile as well.

I feel the driver's hand helping me up. Then he helped Alec. Shaking the snow off his clothes, Alec proposes:

- If you take me by the hand, maybe I'll make it to the school.

I purse my lips when he offers me his hand.

– Only because I feel that it's my duty to help the elderly. We wouldn't want you to break something at that age. – I say as I take his hand.

He smiles broadly.

- Weeell, I know that it's not polite to ask, but, how old are you, young lady?

- 39! – I say mockingly.

- Goodness gracious – he laughs – well, you really are as young as dawn compared to me!

- I know, old man – I casually rest my head on his shoulder – now, let's hear the rest of your proposition – I quickly move my head back, realizing what I did. He laughs heartily. Angry with both him and myself, I hit him with my shoulder. We lose balance again. He gives me the warmest look, one that could melt ice. Hand in hand, we walk towards the school.

I'm sitting at the dining table, finishing off the spaghetti Bolognese we had for dinner. Facing me across the table are Amelia and Luka with Beyla in his lap, all trying to look at the laptop screen at the same time.

- Oh, it's so beautiful! – says Beyla enthusiastically. – Look at all those houses right next to the beach! They look like dollhouses!

- It really looks nice – Luka mumbles - although it seems cold. I bet it's always windy there.

- Well, what did you expect? It's the Baltic Sea – says Amelia – next photo, please.

- Oh, God, it's more beautiful than I remember – she clicks her tongue, coming closer and closer to the screen.

- Oh, there's the beach house in Sanz! Zoom in, Luka, I can't see! Nothing has changed!

- For heaven's sake, Amelia! Move over, I can't see anything! – Luka's a bit annoyed.

- Wait till I type in the thing in the thing! Purple – he says, still looking at the screen – what did you say the town was?

- Putgarten, in the far north of the Wittow peninsula, in Rügen, that's Western Pomerania, Mecklenburg – I take a sip of wine, still playing with my food.

- Wooow! Fuck, here it is! Cape Arkona! – Luka's eyes glisten as he looks at me.

- Fuck, I'd do anything to go there instead of you. Do you even know that it was the last stronghold of the early Slavs? The religious and political center of the Slavic Rani. It was also known as Ruyan Island. There was an ancient fortress, a temple, and an Old Slavic shrine dedicated to the Slavic god Svantevit, but also the temples of Jerovit, then...

- Who said that I was going, professor? – I interrupt him.

Luka and Amelia stop looking at the screen, while Beyla continues to comment on the photos enthusiastically.

– Look, they have that choo choo train from the cartoon!

- What do you mean, you're not going? – Amelia peers at me over the tops of her glasses.

- I mean what I said. For all these years, I have never gone to Rügen. And I never will! – I say, twirling the fork. – I hate Rügen and everything about that stupid island! – I twirl a bunch of spaghetti on the fork and shove them into my mouth.

- Purple, stop being silly! – says Luka. – How much did he offer to pay?

- Ten grand in advance... and... I don't know, I guess... forty grand after I finish the job – I say with my mouth full. – Plus the tickets, accommodation, food, and pocket money. – I can barely chew. – The man is insane! – I finally swallow the bite.

- Puprure, you're going to turn down the chance to earn fifty thousand euros because, for some stupid reason, you don't like the island where you were, incidentally, born, and where you've actually spent only the first 48 hours of your life? – says Amelia reproachfully.

I take another sip of wine.

- Less than 48 hours was enough for me to be scarred for life by the strange events on that stupid island! Fuck, my hippie parents named me after a color! Instead of running away from there, they found it cute that their newborn woke up in the maternity ward covered in purple dust!

- It wasn't dust, it was pollen! - Amelia corrects me with a frown. - And there's nothing wrong with having an unorthodox name!

I twirl some more spaghetti.

- Whatever it was, it was awful! Imagine I found Beyla covered in, say, blue dust, and instead of asking someone what happened, or taking a sample and inspecting the dust, I get all warm and fuzzy inside and say: "Oh, she's so adorable! I'll call her Blue!" - I continue shoveling food down my mouth.

- You know very well, you've read it so many times, that there was some incredibly nasty weather that night! In the morning, they found the entire Cape Arkona covered in purple.

- Yes, yes, but I was in a hospital near Binz, how come I was the only one covered in it? Who knows what kind of mischievous fools were in the hospital that night! Enough with that story, ok?!

- Mom, are you going to visit the lighthouses? Aren't you afraid of heights? Do you think they still use those lighthouses? - Beyla asks me one question after another.

- No, I am, I don't know. Now get away from the laptop, go to the bathroom and get ready for bed. - I say in a strict voice.

- So, the reason you're not accepting the job that can change your entire life for the better is the fact that you're angry with the island because you were born there, and incidentally got a funny name? - Luka pours himself a glass of wine.

- Oh, no... It's not just that - I give him my glass to fill it up.

- We're listening - says Amelia, as Beyla snuggles into her arms, and then frowns at me:

- Mom, come on, tell us why I'm not going to visit the lighthouses - she pulls an angry face.

- Well, for example, because for half of my life, the GDR has been my country of birth!

Luka and Amelia look at each other and roll their eyes.

- You just keep rolling your eyes at me! I'm the one who had to prove over and over again that I'm not an immigrantess!

- Nonsense! There's no such thing as immigrantess! – says Beyla, proud of her knowledge.

- Wait, honey, let mommy make up another reason! – says Luka.

- Ok. I don't want to be away from Beyla for so long! That's the real reason. – I lean into the chair and wink at my daughter.

- How long is that? – asks Amelia.

- I don't know, I didn't see how much work there is. Liray says that it's three months, tops. Until June 21.

- Until my birthday, mommy?!

- Yes, my darling, until your birthday – I answer warmly.

- And do you know where you're going to be until your birthday? – my aunt asked her gently.

- Where?!- we both exclaim at the same time.

- With your grandma and grandpa in Hawaii! They called today to tell us that Milos had decided to accept a teaching position at the Chaminade University in Honolulu! So they invited us to visit them there, since grandma spends most of her time alone. It fits in perfectly, the two of us could go there, and your mommy can go to Arkona and work.

- Yeah... that's not going to happen! – I jump up angrily. – Beyla, honey, please go to the bathroom and get ready for bed, I'll be there soon to tuck you in.

- Ok, mommy–she blows me a kiss and runs out of the dining room.

- What the hell are you talking about, Amelia?! When did mom and dad call?

- Today, while you were sleeping – she starts clearing the table – Everything just fell into place. I have too many days off anyway, and an annual leave I didn't use.

- Don't bother, Amelia – says Luka. – Purple will do anything, she'll find a million excuses, just so she doesn't have to take the job. Actually, even if she took it, she would do it only partially.

„Partially!” the word rings in my head. Wasn't that what Phillip told Liray?

- Where do you get off, claiming something like that?! – I lash out at Luka. My reaction surprises him. – What the hell do you all want from me?! Deciding about my job, my ideas, my life! Separating me from my child, making me go God knows where, just to prove to the world that I'm capable of doing something. I have no idea who that Alec Liray is, and why he keeps messing with my life!

- Wait! You're wrong, Purple. – Amelia interrupts me.
- I'm what? – I respond angrily.
- For fuck's sake, Purple! You are wrong! We only want one thing – Luka starts again.
- Oh, really? Just one? Well, let's hear it, then!
- We just want you to take your life into your own hands – he says slowly.

I open my mouth to tell him that he's wrong, but the words don't come out. I shut up.

- Rarely does life give someone as many opportunities as you have had – Amelia says gently. – And you, my darling, although you are a woman of many talents, you simply cannot hear, feel, notice, and seize the opportunities when they present themselves. Even when you were a little girl, you'd always choose the wrong bucket. Every time, you reached for the one with the mud, although the one with the clean sand was closer. You are destined for greater things in life. However, the life you're living wasn't imposed on you by anyone. You chose it yourself.

I go back to my chair, feeling awful. Luka comes closer and puts his hands on my shoulders, giving me a gentle back rub.

- Honey, this is a unique opportunity for you to do something you really like. Besides, you'll be more than well paid, and Beyla will have an awesome time at Dolphin Bay before she goes to school. I'm sure you'll be able to see her whenever you want, and in the end, you'll show Phillip that you're capable of making something on your own and earning your own money. Maybe you'll dump him by then. And about the fact that you are given this opportunity by a man who can afford the best and the most prestigious architects in the world – well, obviously, the man is insane! – he laughs heartily.

- But, I'm really not that good at interior decoration. What he's asking me to do is far beyond my skills and knowledge. What if he doesn't like my work? What if I screw everything up?

- And what if you do everything perfectly?! – he kisses the back of my head. – You'll see. This will be a life-changing experience!

Luka smells like the woods again. I relax a little. I know they're right, I know I shouldn't make such a big deal out of it. But, deep down inside me, I truly am terrified. It's not just the challenge, it's also the fear of another defeat, of another massive failure. I play it safe, in this little town I never recognized as my own, which gives me no options, where I live in my own little cocoon. I enjoy the little things in life, the ones I don't have to work hard to get, the ones I have no fear of losing. Actually, Beyla's birth has been a perfect excuse for each and every one of my failures in the past seven years. Sometimes, just for a moment, I see the old Purple, the one that gives me strength to do something new, like opening up *The Bazaar*, or marrying Phillip before that, or breaking off the engagement

with Peter before that. I chose the wrong life and environment for myself, trying to protect myself from another fall, and turned into something I never wanted to be – a huge pile of self-pity.

- Well, ok, maybe it isn't such a bad idea to try. I mean, I have a few days to think about it
- I start slowly – I just need to check something first – I take the laptop.

Amelia smiles, her hands packed with dishes, and heads towards the kitchen:

- That's my Purple! – she shouts.

Luka pulls up a chair and laughs heartily. – Would you look at her! – he notices that there are 127 million results for my Google search: "Alec Liray".

- Fuck, where do I begin? – I scroll the page confusedly.

- From the number of billions he has in his pocket! – he grins and pours two glasses of wine.

Beyla and Amelia are fast asleep, and Luka and I are finishing off another bottle of wine. I'm already hammered.

- Forty-three! Can you imagine forty-three billion dollars, Purple?! – Luka is watching me from the armchair as I struggle to read something, now that everything is blurry, thanks to alcohol.

- I can't imagine forty-three thousand... – he says, more to himself.

- Shut up already and pour some more wine! – I offer him my shaking glass and turn off the laptop – Fuck, Luka, what are we gonna do now?

- Fuck? – he grins and empties the bottle.

- I'm serious! Do you really think that he's, you know, strange, insane, deranged?

- Yes, yes! One hundred percent! Any person who has forty-three billion dollars must be either insane or deranged! Otherwise he wouldn't have them! That faggot!

I slap him on the shoulder.

- I really don't understand why he came to me?! – I drink the rest of the wine, and then start thinking. I start remembering everything that happened these days and begin to feel uneasy and ashamed. I smack myself on the forehead.

- Oh, man! Have you got any idea how much I've embarrassed myself over the past three days?

- I know, baby! I told you, the guy is insane, and a fag! I'm gonna go to sleep now. At my own place, for a change. The past 72 hours with you have been a torture! I need to get some sleep, and, what's even more important, I need to get laid. As far as I can tell, those needs cannot be fulfilled here. – he says, pulling me up. – You could at least walk your friend home, or, if you want me to stay, you could at least offer me some oral consolation prize?!

- You jackass! - I slap him on the shoulder again, he hugs me, and we both lose balance for a second.

Standing at the door, he puts his face close to mine and smiles cheekily: I bet that Liray could get anything he wanted; he wouldn't have to move a finger!

- Right! After Jeannette Banque, Bella Marchello, Ellen Schloss, and who knows what other beauties, he'd come to me for some flabby ass – I say, feeling sorry for myself, remembering all the photos of the long-legged models and actresses he dated.

- *Shit!* – I think to myself as I watch Luka stumble across the street, and manages to walk inside the house after two failed attempts. – *Shit, shit!* – I climb the stairs.

I stop in front of Beyla's bedroom. I take a peek inside, see my daughter sleep, and feel touched and sad. For heaven's sake, how am I supposed be away from my angel for that long? So far, it would often happen that she goes somewhere with my parents, or stays in the Old Skies when I have to travel somewhere with Phillip, but we've never been apart for longer than 20 days. However, three months, half the world apart, that's really too much! I have some unpleasant feeling in my stomach, I imagine her alone in the beach, decorating her sand castle with seashells and pebbles, and then realizing that mom and dad aren't there to see it. My ability to imagine dramatic events that will never happen brings tears to my eyes. I go to my room. Her father is never there. And yet, she's the only reason I put up with him.

I have to be honest, when Phillip's home, he spends all his time with her, but those are really rare occasions. She's already stopped asking me if he's coming or whether he called. When he didn't make it to her play at the *Mermaid* Children's Theater in Belgrade, which is just a few streets away from *Arkona East* offices, as soon as we came home, she put their photo in the drawer. She was sad for days. Although she tried to hide it, I could see sadness and disappointment in her large olive eyes. I couldn't affect Phillip's behavior, and it was killing me. We were all trying really hard to lift her spirits. In the end, we packed and went to see my parents, who were in Puerto Rico at the time. The new and strange world engaged her attention, and when we came back to Serbia, thanks to the wonderful time we had there, she was back to being her old, happy self. Although Phillip waited for us at the airport, brought us home and spent three days with her, Beyla never took the picture out of the drawer.

Somehow I manage to take off my clothes and jump into bed. I think I went to sleep as soon as I touched the pillow.

I have no idea how long I've been sleeping before somebody's steps wake me up. Lying on the left side of the bed, I keep my eyes closed, not moving an inch, almost trying not to breathe. I listen to the heavy steps. I feel fear sending shivers down my spine, making my heart pound like crazy. The steps stop at my side of bed. I feel the smell of tobacco and intense men's perfume.

– Honey, I'm home! – he says, grinning, puts his hand next to my stomach, and kisses me on the cheek.

Drops of whiskey burn my skin. I frown and slowly open my eyes. In the faint light of the lamp, I see blurry, bloodshot eyes. His face is distorted and he's trying really hard not to fall.

–Hey – I murmur, suppressing the feeling of horror and nausea caused by his presence in my room, in that state. – How come you're here?

Once again he kisses me on the cheek and I can hear a pounding sound in my ears.

– Oh, well, can't a man miss his wife? – he says, taking off his clothes.

I sink deeper under the covers.

- I also heard today that the boss of all bosses came to see my little wife... that's truly a great honor! The almighty Liray at your feet! – he giggles mockingly, lies next to me, mumbles something I cannot understand, and falls asleep.

I feel my heart move from my throat to the place where it belongs. I lie all curled up. Phillip tries to find the most comfortable position and turns to the opposite side. I sigh with relief. My eyes feel heavy. I smile to myself when I see Liray sitting in the armchair next to the window. I can even smell that familiar scent of his. I close my eyes, and then open them again, but he's still there, five feet away from me, so still, watching me intently, wearing a plain black long-sleeve shirt. He looks younger. I can't believe my psychiatrist Lorenzo says I can't visualize things. I laugh to myself, surprised by my vivid imagination. I turn off the lamp, close my eyes, and lie there breathing in the pupure fragrance. I start to breathe evenly and quickly fall asleep.

For some reason, I'm awake again, although it's four a.m. I know the exact time, because I hear the old grandfather's clock in the hallway strike four times. I know that I'm awake because everything is dark and quiet, and Alec's silhouette and scent are gone. I lie on my back, motionless, my eyes wide open. I try to remember my dream, but it escapes me, there's only the feeling it left behind. I shiver and turn over, waiting to fall asleep, but I can't stop thinking about Liray. I think about the situation I got myself into. I'm

telling myself that whatever this is, it will be fine in the morning, but deep inside, I know that it's never going to end.

Phillip moves closer and puts his arm around me. Suddenly, he pulls me in. *If he needs to go to work in the morning, he'll have to get up at five.* He kisses my hair and neck. His awful breath hurts my senses, which reveled in Alec's warm shadow just a moment ago. I look towards the armchair where I pictured him, only now the entire room is filled with darkness and Phillip's heavy breathing. He is so rough. His hands sting. I want him to stop. He's moving his hands down. I press my thighs together and move away.

- I'm sleeping, let me go! – I say, moving all the way to the edge. He ignores me. He doesn't care what I think. What I want. He continues to leave sticky trails of saliva on my skin and his touch makes me sick. I don't want him, I want Liray! I start convincing myself that it's just a bad dream.

- *Yes, that's it. It's just a bad dream* – I try to comfort myself as he makes me lie on my back.

I keep my eyes shut. *Just a bad dream.* He's on top of me, spreading the stench of alcohol and cigarettes all around. I'm quiet. In my dreams, the smells are always so dominant. I turn my head to the side and frown with my eyes closed.

-Just a bad dream... - I whisper, when the sudden feeling of a brutal thrust makes me open my eyes wide.

I'm paralyzed. Pain in the lower part of my stomach, caused by his savage thrust, brings me back to reality. It's not a dream! I'm awake, too awake! Why isn't it a dream? I scream in my body and in my head. He continues to enter me, and I can feel the full weight of his body on mine. He puts his head next to my neck. He makes me sick. He sullies me with his heavy breathing and hasty thrusting. My fear of saying "no" makes me even sicker.

– And I'm gonna fuck you whenever I want to! Got it? – I hear his words run through my head.

I lie on my back, my eyes wide open. Without a sound, I listen to him call me names, breathing heavily all the while and clutching my arms above my head. Without a move, I let him stick his sweaty head into my bosom and bite my breasts and nipples uncontrollably. Without any expression on my face, I let him stick his thing in me, let him cum inside me. I don't move when he stops, not even when he lies on top of me. I don't move when he gets up and goes to the bathroom, stumbling. The clock in the hallway strikes five when he flushes the toilet. I hear him whistle. A ray of light comes through the half-open door of the bathroom. I'm still lying on my back. Naked, looking at the ceiling. I try to give the shadows up there some form. I can't. Everything's blurry as tears flood my eyes. I give a painful sigh and clutch the bed sheets. I finally move and turn over on my side. Alec's face, distorted with pain, stiff, and sad, watches me from the

armchair. He looks old, scared, helpless. Small. I don't know why, but I'm terribly mad at him. I sob quietly, letting a river of tears flood my face.

- Poor Purple – I think to myself – she belongs in the loony bin...

The sound of water and whistling in the bathroom can no longer be heard. Before I fall asleep, I decide to call Liray in the morning and take the job.

Thin rays of sun shine through the thick glass, banishing the darkness. I'm already awake when pale March morning fills the room. Barefoot and naked, wearing a heavy bathrobe and still feeling Phillip's hands on my skin, I sneak out of the room, leaving him buried among the pillows. Although I'm sleepy and jaded, I actually feel calm and peaceful. I walk past Beyla's and Amelia's rooms, go down to the foyer, and start searching my coat for Liray's business card. I smile when I find the little white piece of paper. I slide my fingers across the embossed letters and go to Milos's study. I go inside, quickly lock the door and sit in the armchair. I'm holding the phone in one hand and the card in the other. I look at the time – ten past seven. My heart starts pounding as I enter the number. Before I finish entering, I look at the watch again – eleven past seven. I dive into the armchair.

- It's too early – I think to myself, turning to the window. I let my robe untie a bit, exposing my naked skin to the daylight and morning cold. I look at the goose bumps on my body, noticing bite marks and bruises as well. I shiver. It's fourteen past seven when I actually call him. The phone rings twice before he answers and I'm surprised.

- Liray – he sounds exhausted.

I say nothing. I'm trying to get a grip on myself.

- Hello? – he sounds impatient, but still tired.

- Umm, good morning, Mr. Liray – I start clumsily.

- Yes? –his voice becomes softer.

- Um, this is Purple, if you still remember me? Purple Devan. – I bite my lip, aware that I sound silly.

He laughs.

- Oh, Mrs. Devan! It's not easy to forget someone like you that quickly – suddenly, after he says that, his voice becomes dead serious. – Is everything all right?

- Yes, yes... - I stutter – I mean... - I look at the nasty bruises on my body. – I am, I mean... it is.

- Are you certain? You sure don't sound like it!

I finally get a grip and pull the bathrobe over my bare skin.

I turn to the table again.

- I really am fine, Liray. – I say calmly. – I’m sorry to bother you this early, but I have a busy day ahead of me – I lie. – I just wanted to inform you that I have decided to take the job – I say it all in one breath.

- That’s great! What wonderful news to start the day with – he says cheerfully.

- I leave Serbia today, I’ll tell my assistant to prepare the contract right away and give you all the details.

- Ok – I say with disappointment in my voice. For some reason, I hoped that I would have to see him in person.

I reproach myself for having too great expectations. *Why the fuck would he waste his time with me? Of course he’ll send someone else!*

- When? –I stutter again – When do you believe your assistant will call me?

- I expect it to be later today. Would that be all? – he asks calmly.

- Yes, that would be all. I apologize once again for calling you this early – I say grimly.

- That’s all right. I didn’t sleep well anyway. To tell you the truth, I barely made it through the night.

Oh, if you only knew what kind of night I had! – I think to myself.

- Well, it was nice talking to you and I hope you will be satisfied with me – I smack myself on the forehead, realizing how stupid that sounded.

He laughs again.

- I’m sure I’ll be satisfied with you! Now, if that’s all, you’ll have to excuse me, I have a lot of work to do.

- Yes, yes, that’s all. Goodbye, Mr. Liray – I say quickly, wanting this conversation to be over as soon as possible.

- Goodbye, Mrs. Devan. Have a nice day – he says and hangs up.

Well, that wasn’t too bad. I look at the photo on my dad’s desk. In the photo, there are two messy pigtails sticking out of a large wildflower bouquet. I smile, noticing the knee highs around my ankles and fresh band-aids on knees and elbows. I remember that day, the Schwarzwald was bathing in sunlight, so I decided to make the world’s biggest wildflower bouquet for my mom, and I clearly remember the unpleasant feeling in my stomach on the way home when they decided to explain to me, over a bowl of ice cream,

that we were going to move to a country called Yugoslavia. The melted ice cream was dripping on my butterfly print dress as I was trying to understand what they were talking about. When I turned around to look at the Schwarzwald for the last time, it was already dark, and two tears rolled down my face, straight onto the vanilla scoop. The sound of my SMS ringtone makes me stop thinking about the smiling nine-year-old girl in the photo and brings me back to reality. Reading the message, I get up and stumble into the desk, shocked by the content. I read every word over and over. First quickly, and then slowly, memorizing each letter, smiling like a fool. I give a joyful squeak, pressing the phone onto my chest and get out of the room, all smiles. The content of the message, like a song, lingers in my mind:

“Dear Purple, I cannot begin to explain how happy I am that you have decided to take the job. I hope that the contract terms will suit you and that you will be in Rügen as soon as possible. I am terribly sorry that I will not be able to welcome you myself, but I will do my best to join you there soon. In the meantime, in case you need anything, feel free to contact my assistant, Inga, or me, if that is what you prefer. Yours truly, Alec Liray”

I meet Amelia on the stairs. She yawns and gives me an inquiring look. I hug her and give her a big kiss.

- Could you make your special Belgian waffles for breakfast? - I wink at her and move on.

- Stop! – she pulls me by the hand, and I struggle to stop my bathrobe from slipping.

- Phillip came home last night – I say casually.

She frowns. – And that’s why you’re so happy?!

- Huh, no. – I whisper into her ear – I just spoke to Liray. I took the job – I give her another big kiss and waltz into the room, holding my phone tight.

We finished breakfast at nine. Although I’m not sure how long I’ve been awake, I feel fine. Actually, I feel great. I sit on the sofa with Beyla in my arms. I tell her about my plans for her birthday, and Amelia sips her tea in the armchair and nods approvingly. Beyla’s overjoyed ones she hears that she’ll have an inflatable castle in the backyard, a magician, a piñata, balloons, lanterns, and all her friends from preschool will be invited. The doorbell interrupts me. Aunty leaves her cup and gets up.

- Mommy, what if I miss you too much? – she gives me a sad look, her curls falling over her eyes. I gently tuck them behind her ear.

– If you miss me a lot, mommy will come and kiss you a lot, first here – I kiss her on the head – then here – a kiss on the cheek –then here – I lift her shirt and tickle her stomach. She giggles, waving her arms.

-Inga?! –I sit up, shocked to see the tall brunette from the hotel restroom in my home.

- Purpuurrr! –She purrs my name and opens her arms.

She's wearing a tight *Marc Jacobs* designer suit, with a pencil skirt above the knees. She's wearing her hair in a high ponytail, which brings out her soft features, slightly slanted eyes, flat nose, and bright lipstick.

- I thought it could be you! It would be too much of a coincidence, if there were more women with such an unusual name in Serbia.

I shake my head in disbelief and hug her.

-Unbelievable! How come you're here?

- What do you mean? I brought the contract for you to sign. – she says as she looks around and sits on the white sofa, waving to ruffle-haired Beyla who smiles back.

She pushes away the cups to make room for the briefcase and the papers.

- The contract? – I'm still shocked. She raises her eyebrow.

– Didn't Mr. Liray tell you I'm bringing the contract?! – she pats the sofa beside her. – Come on, sit down, and let's begin. – she continues looking through the papers.

- You're Liray's assistant?! – I sit down slowly next to her.

-Ahaaa! Here it is! –she pulls out a white folder with *Arkona* logo and "Purple Devan" written in black marker in the top right hand corner. She smiles at me, her shiny white teeth surrounded by full, vibrantly colored lips.

– Oh, well, yes! I'm his personal assistant, and if I understood correctly, yours as well, if needed – she gives me a gentle nudge and winks, handing me the folder.

- Here you go!

I open it carefully and see ten full pages. I skim them all confusedly. I frown. I'm really bad with contracts. Maybe it would be good if Milos or Phillip looked at it. I shiver, remembering he's still here. Fortunately, he's asleep. I close the folder. Then I see Beyla and Amelia looking at me, silent and interested. Inga, with her perfect posture, reading my mind, asks me whether I have someone to advise me.

– Yes, yes, I do. – I say, getting up and looking at my watch.

– I'll call my dad on Skype. I think he'll give me the best advice.

– Do you want me to come with you, clarify something if needed? – she gets up.

I nod affirmatively and head towards my dad's study. It takes me half an hour to explain why and where I'm going, how I met Liray, why he chose me, where Beyla's going to be, what Phillip thinks about that, and only then do I start carefully reading the contract.

Mom joins him at certain point. Milos is confused at first, because it sounds too good to be true, so I have to repeat some parts of it. In the end, he just says it's been a while since he saw an employer make such a bad deal, which makes Emma give him a nudge.

– Don't be silly! – she shouts and pushes him. – Sweetheart, when do you leave, then?

I look at Inga. She comes closer to the screen.

– As far as we're concerned, tomorrow would be great, although, I believe, too soon. Does Friday work for everyone? – She raises her eyebrow and looks at me.

– Tomorrow?! Friday?! Ok, Friday's fine, I guess. Let's just check when Beyla and Amelia can fly to Hawaii.

My parents exchange looks.

– It's going to be tough! –they say in unison, shaking their heads. – You'll have a tough time finding a good connecting flight.

– Oh, I wouldn't worry about that – says Inga – I'm sure *Arkona* will find a quick and safe way for them to travel to your parents. If that's all – she looks at her little *Cartier* watch – I would have to go now. I have a few other errands to run while I'm in Belgrade.

– Oh, certainly. I'm sorry to have kept you this long. – I wave my parents goodbye and say I'll call them later. I turn off the computer and take my pen.

Ok, Purple, you're off on another adventure! Do it right this time.

– Oh, wonderful, wonderful, I'm so glad you signed! – Inga's exhilarated.

She gives me my copy of the contract and we head towards the living room.

– I am in a rush, but I think a little toast is in order – she winks at me. – But first, I have to make a private call and go to the bathroom.

I show her the way and go to my room, where I hear Beyla laughing.

Dressed for school, she giggles, trying to knock down Phillip who's holding her pencil case.

– Mom, mom, daddy's here! – she shouts, still wrestling with him.

– I know – I say, nailed to the door.

Phillip easily handles her and throws her pencil case into her backpack.

– Of course mommy knows I'm here – he kisses her hair and gives me a menacing look. – She was so happy to see me, I couldn't get her off me – he grins.

- She jumped on you? – she asks naively, hugging him. – Mom, daddy says he’s going to take care of me while you’re away, and I want us to go swimming with the dolphins – she looks at me with a smile.

Amelia is now behind me, telling me they need to get going.

- Beyla, honey, you need to go to preschool. Aunty will take you, ok? Mommy will pick you up and we’ll go shopping – I say gently, leaving the contract on the table as I come in.

She kisses Phillip, then me, and walks joyfully out of the room with Amelia.

- So you took the job? – he lights a cigarette, lounging on the sofa. – You really surprised me this time, Purple – he looks at me, blowing smoke to the side.

- First, you dared to accept such a serious job, and second, perhaps more important, I didn’t expect you’d sign anything without talking to me first and getting my permission.

- I don’t need your permission. Not when it comes to my job, not when it comes to anything concerning my life! Our agreement is related to one thing only – I say sternly.

- Oh, really? Just one thing? – he mocks me, getting up slowly with his cigarette in his mouth.

His eyes are still bloodshot. His hair is ruffled, his skin pale, beard unkempt. Although he showered, the distinct *Clive Christian* fragrance mixed with the smell of tobacco irritates my nostrils. I look down. He grabs my cheeks, getting in my face.

-Darling. Our agreement is such that you need my permission for everything in your miserable life. Especially when it comes to serious things, things you know nothing about, such as working for Liray. Got it?! How much will you earn? – he asks me, letting go of my face.

- Fifty thousand... euros.

His eyes grow wide with surprise and he laughs.

- You and your work together are worth less than 50 euros!

Finishing the cigarette, he squints, obviously thinking hard, and picks up the contract.

- Hmm... –he lights another cigarette and skims the contract – this isn’t going to work, you have to break off the contract.

My face is red with rage.

- If Liray’s that interested in you, he’ll have to pay much more!

I shout angrily. - There's no way I'm going to break it off! – I steal the folder from his hands. – I've had enough of you and your blackmailing. You got everything you wanted! I want you out of my house, out of my life, and out of my daughter's life!

He's still and quiet and looks completely insane. He's breathing intensely. So am I. I can't believe what I just said. I clutch the contract on my chest. I want to say a whole lot more, but I have to control myself, because I'm afraid. Afraid of what he can do and what he can say. He jumps up and pulls my arm. He's bending it and it hurts so much I drop the contract and fall next to him. A moment later, he's holding the papers and ripping them in half. I try to stop him from destroying them any further, but a hard slap on the face stops me. My ears are buzzing and I feel warm fluid dripping from my nose. I grab my head and curl up on the sofa. He pulls my hair.

– Listen carefully, next time I'm going straight to your bastard child! I'll tell her what kind of slut her precious mommy is!

He pushes me away and hits me on the hands I hold over my head.

- Purple! What's going on in here?! – I hear Inga's voice. I look up at her. She's standing at the door, petrified.

Phillip jumps up and starts fixing his hair and tucking in his shirt.

- Oh, nothing, Miss Klemen! Really nothing! You know how kids can be restless – he quickly picks up the ripped papers around him and shoves them into the folder.

I'm shocked by his reaction to Inga. She approaches him. Her back straight like an arrow, four inches taller than Phillip, she gives him a steely look.

- Mr. Millintzov, as far as I remember, you're supposed to be at the board meeting, receiving information about improving your sector's management. Perhaps I missed something?

– Oh, yes, I was... but I had to talk to my wife, you know, about that business in Germany. She called me last night, so I came right over – he turns around and points at me – we talked until late at night, and I...

Inga lifts her hand and he shuts up. She approaches me and gives me a warm smile of compassion. Although I appreciate the warmth and understanding, I feel ashamed. She's so much younger than me, and yet so strong, successful, and this is the second time she sees me humiliated and crying. She swings her hair and picks up the ripped up pieces of the contract. She literally shoves them into Phillip's nose.

– Was something wrong?!

- No, no, the contract is perfect – terrified, he starts flicking his Zippo lighter so he could light another cigarette.

- Beyla was trying to take those papers from her mom, and they accidentally ripped them. And Purple banged her head on the table – third time's the charm and he nervously inhales the smoke.

- Right, on the table... Luckily, I have three signed copies. Purple, I'll leave one for you, again, and take these two with me. So, I should book you a ticket for Friday? – She looks at me, her eyebrow raised high, waiting for a response. I'm silent. I don't know what to say. I'm still frightened, with all that Phillip has said and done. He's never hit me before, what if he fulfills his threats?

- You know – Phillip starts slowly. – Our biggest problem is Purple being away from Beyla for so long. Also, in order for her to leave the country, both parents' consent is needed, so...

- You have my undivided attention – Inga turns to him with a smug look on her face.

- As you already know, my current working position requires too much work and devotion, which is why I can't spend enough time with my loved ones. – he gives her a sleazy smile.

I roll my eyes.

- That's why it is very important for me that my daughter spends her time with at least one parent. The offer you presented to Purple is extremely tempting, however, our daughter spending three months without her mother – you can't put a price on that.

He stops, sits next to me, and takes my hand in his, caressing it and kissing my palm, making me sick.

- Believe me, it's not that I don't want my wife to work for Mr. Liray. I mean, I'm the one who told him what she does – he's still holding my hand – however, although I'll be in Serbia, I won't be able to spend as much time with Beyla as I'd like to, so I advised my wife to give up on the trip.

I try to get my hand out of his, but he squeezes it real tight, not changing his expression one bit, and my fingers go numb. Looking at Inga, he kisses my pale fingers and stops squeezing them. Inga, with her frozen expression, still stands in one place, completely indifferent, as if she couldn't care less about what she just heard.

- However?

Phillip smiles. He nods, lets go of my hand, and takes in some smoke.

- However, if I would, for example, be out of country, at some higher position, that would change some things.

- Which? – I finally say a word.

The hypocrite strokes my hair and blows smoke into it.

- Well, for example, I wouldn't feel guilty for not staying with Beyla. A different country, a different position, a different paycheck, a different situation. Although it would be hard for me, I would let her be with her grandma and grandpa. If neither of us is in Serbia, there's no point in Beyla being here either.

- That's interesting. I thought you were satisfied with your position here – says Inga, taking her phone from her purse.

- I am, but honestly, I wouldn't mind getting a promotion. Especially if it comes with a bigger paycheck.

- What about greater responsibility?

- I wouldn't have gotten this far if I was afraid of responsibility.

- Ok, let me go to the other room and see what I can do about that. - Phillip winks at her as he shows her out.

- Please, take your time.

She goes out, and Phillip stretches his arms, lounges into the sofa again and puts his feet on the table. He's obviously so proud of himself.

- You see, darling, that's how real managers do it! – he grins.

- Actually, you just blackmailed your boss. He can fire you!

- Fire me? Weeell, he could – he clears his throat – but, if he offered you that kind of conditions and that much money, although he already knows, I'm sure, how incompetent you are, that means that, for some reason I cannot see, he really wants you to do that job.

- Fuck you! – I say and get up.

However, he quickly grabs me around the waist and makes me sit in his lap. He presses me against his chest with his left arm and puts his right hand under my sweatshirt.

- Let me go! – I try to get up.

He starts to laugh. He pulls my hair and puts his face against my neck.

- If he's so kinky that he wants to get in your pants, I'll have to charge it well.

I somehow manage to get out of his hands.

- I'll never understand why you hate me so much – I say as I wipe his saliva off my neck.

- Hate? Nonsense. That would mean I actually feel something for you. I don't give a fuck about you or anyone else around you. But, since I got into this game of yours, I'm not getting out until I take everything I want. Get it?

Inga storms into the room, still talking on the phone.

- Certainly, I understand. Consider it done. – she stops and looks at me.

- Ok. I will. – she says with a smile. - Don't worry, Mr. Liray.

Goodbye. She finishes the conversation and sighs.

- Congratulations, Mr. Millintzov! You have just been promoted into senior manager of *Arkona Energy* in charge of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. They are expecting you in Astana tomorrow evening.

Phillip whistles. – Now that's something!

- I'll email you your contract so you can read it. Then I'll wait for you at the airport, where you will sign the original and the consent for Beyla's travel. You are familiar with the amount paid to senior managers in *Arkona Group*?

He answers affirmatively.

- At your disposal will be a mansion with a pool, company car, a chauffeur, and unlimited number of plane tickets for you and your family. Other details concerning insurance, annual leave, sick leave, and other matters you can find in your contract. Does that suit you?

Phillip gives a satisfied nod.

- Excellent. What time is my flight to Kazakhstan?

- I will inform you later today. I am not familiar with the exact time at the moment. – she sighs with relief. – If that's all, I will have to leave for Belgrade now. I stayed here longer than I had planned.

On her way out she says to Phillip:

- You should clean yourself up. Don't forget that your colleagues will think that you actually earned this position. Purple, we'll be in touch, please, don't hesitate to call me at any time.

She kisses me three times on both cheeks before she gets into the car. She looks at Luka with great interest as he runs across the street toward us. She gives me a devilish look and waves once more.

My spare time until Friday, while Beyla was at preschool, I spent alone at *The Bazaar*. Although the plan was to binge study everything I've missed in the past few months, I just sat in my purple armchair, searching the net for information on Liray, Arkona, and Rügen.

Although I got several million hits on Google for "Alec Liray," all the information I got was about his business life. He became the official owner of the conglomerate at the age of thirty-two, as the only legal heir to the *Arkona* empire, founded in 1890 in Kimberley. Although he's a member of one of the richest families in the world, he's sort of a recluse, surrounded only by his closest family. In September 2005, after a violent trespass to his property by a group of mercenaries, who tortured and killed his grandmother Isabel, he transfers the *Arkona Group* headquarters from the South African Republic to London, England, where he develops the IT sector and logistics. Apart from being on top of The Forbes World's Billionaires list, he's also one of the most eligible bachelors. He's 45 and speaks 7 languages, fluently. He's a philanthropist, he loves animals, especially horses, and he's a passionate collector of artifacts related to the early Slavs. The number of real estate properties in his ownership, as well as their locations, are unknown, however, it is certain that about six months ago he purchased multiple buildings on the largest German island – Rügen. I yawn disappointedly because after three days of searching, I failed to find anything interesting. Of course, I realized that the entire conglomerate is named after Cape Arkona, that Rügen is the place where the Nazis constructed the longest hotel in the world, built in the period from 1936 to 1939 and never actually used, that summers there are too cold for my taste, too windy, and that I'm not taking this whole thing seriously enough.

Nailed to my seat in a Cessna airplane, I clutch the leather underneath me and push invisible brakes. Sitting in a small plane while it's landing on a short runway in Binz is a life experience you can freely skip. The exhilaration I feel when I first see the island through the window is soon replaced by a terrible fear when I realize how small the airport is. Sitting peacefully on my right is Vuk, in a dark gray suit, gray shirt, and a dark gray tie, with his massive shoulders, thin lips, and short hair, his eyes behind Ray-Ban glasses reading daily press, completely ignoring the fact that I'm frowning with my eyes shut. On my way to Belgrade, I received a call from Inga who informed me that, unfortunately, she won't be able to join me, but that I can have full confidence in Vuk who waited for me at the airport. As soon as I saw him I realized I got a nanny, and I didn't like that at all.

Although I'm aware that we've landed and have been on the ground for a while, I still keep my eyes shut. Only after the third time Vuk calls my name he manages to make me open my eyes.

– After you - he says, pointing his hand at the exit, where the pilot and the copilot stand.

I can barely get up from my seat. I slowly pull my shirt away from my sweaty back, put on the jacket, say goodbye to the crew, and finally go out. Stepping out of the plane, I feel sharp, cold wind against my face. It lifts my hair and jacket, and I slowly go down the stairs, trying to hold my hand firmly on the handrail and keep the hair off my face at the same time. The moment I touch the ground, a cloud of sand from the shore fills my nose and mouth. I instinctively hide my head in my jacket. Vuk gently puts his hand on my upper arm and takes me to the black car, some thirty feet away from the runway. While the wind literally pushes my body back, Vuk walks as if it's completely calm. He lets go of my arm so he could open the car door, but that's enough for me to go a few steps back, lose ground beneath my feet, and let the wind knock me down. I'm suddenly lying on the ground, touching its cold surface. I feel intense scent fill my nostrils and ignore the pain in the back of my head. Fresh, sparkly, sensual scent, the scent of purple, and more importantly, the scent of Alec Liray, thrills my senses with its simplicity and freshness. I open my eyes and squint through my ruffled hair, noticing a thick cloud above me, made up of tiny particles the color of my name. I move my hair to the side, letting the sparkly powder, soft as velvet, cover my skin with a thin layer of warmth. Before Vuk helps me up, I breathe in the now familiar scent and put my hand on my face, expecting to find traces of powder on my palm. I realize disappointedly that my hand is clean. Holding on to Vuk, I slowly get into the car. He asks me if I'm ok and I give him a broad smile. I sit comfortably in my seat and look through the window, noticing that everything is calm and the skies are bright. The *Maybach* races between the blossomed trees, down the winding road, past the fields, and toward Binz. In the clear sky, for a moment I see two clouds, like foggy eyes, but we quickly leave them behind us. I turn around so I can catch their reflection through the rear window.

– I'm sorry I've been away for so long – I say quietly, God knows why.

I turn my head back and realize that, for the first time since he took off his glasses, Vuk's face has a worried expression.

I put my hand on the back of my head.

– If you hit your head this hard, you'd be talking to the stars, let alone clouds!

He gives me a discrete, barely visible smile:

– Probably – he mumbles and puts the glasses back on, then cocks his head, looks through the windshield with interest and says: We'll be there in five minutes, Mrs. Devan.

I look towards the little town myself, tucked in between the hills covered with tall forest trees. – *I'll be home in five minutes...* - I say, this time in my mind, letting my heart pump adrenalin, making me feel excited and nervous, as if I'm about to jump off a cliff.

We stop in front of the *Charrme Kurhaus* hotel, owned by the *Arkona Group* for the past six months. Right on the beach, the hotel was built in the traditional 1920s style, with simple beige and white façade, a dome, square towers, and hip roof whose bright-red tiles give the impression of luxury and elegance. The driveway is wide, paved with pastel setts, surrounded by tidy rectangular lawns and tall candelabra. At the entrance to the lobby, I hear the sound of a piano spreading from one part quietly into another. Above the central part of the building there is a glass dome, letting the blue sky in, which perfectly highlights the interior colors. With only a few exceptions, the inside of the hotel is royal blue and sand. The manager of the hotel waits for me at the center of the hall, next to a large, tall indigo vase filled with white lilies. After a brief formal conversation, they show me the way to my residence, which is truly majestic, with three rooms, two bathrooms, wide windows along the entire east side. On the other side of the windows, there is a large terrace that seems to be stretching on forever, into the Baltic Sea. Soft yellow walls with white wallpapers ornate with gray flowers perfectly match the white oak furniture covered with royal blue fabric, the color scheme perpetuated in many other pieces of decoration. Next to the bedroom is the main bathroom with a round tub right next to the window and a large shower with rain effects on the glass. I step out on the terrace and stand mesmerized by the glorious reflection of the day on the surface of the sea speckled with seagulls in flight. Some three hundred feet away from the hotel and into the sea, there is a wooden bridge made of gray boards, with a small pier at the end. Along the entire bridge there are old candelabra, and between each two, a wooden bench. In the fine white sand beach there are a couple of tourists enjoying the wintry sun, the smell of the sea, and the silence interrupted only by the sound of wind and waves.

- It's perfect here – I whisper and reach for the phone to photograph everything I see, and then notice the messages from my parents and Luka.

– It's too perfect – I smile when I see a welcome message from Liray.

Although I planned to take a shower first, then get some rest and eat something, instead of going to the bathroom, I'm soon roaming downtown with my hands in my pockets. I slowly walk down the main street, the promenade, watching perfect white houses and buildings through the treetops of the avenue. Honoring the tradition of the pre-war architecture, the white facades with small terraces, verandas, tall windows, and accentuated corners, together with the pastel awnings of the cafes, restaurants, antique shops, and small stores, give the impression that the time stood still in this town. I feel tired only after walking for two straight hours, so I decide to have late lunch in a small bistro at the end of the promenade. Before going back to the hotel, I take a stroll down the windy beach, and then, after saying hello to a group of elderly people, I head

towards the wooden bridge. I lean against its rough, cracked fence and look at the setting sun. The sky in front of me burns in all shades of purple, as a prelude to the disappearance of the sun behind the edge of the horizon, which makes the surface of the sea take the extraordinary bright reflection of the sky that spreads across its restless surface. The cold wind brings the strong smell of salt into my face. I breathe in deeply, filling my body with sea freshness, which makes me shiver with cold and walk back to the hotel, as the lights on the bridge gradually begin to burn.

I fall asleep early. Right after a long shower that helps me banish the cold from my bones, I slide under the soft bedcovers and peacefully go to sleep. I ignore my phone display's soft light – *Whoever it is, they'll call back later.* As I fall into slumber, I think I hear a tap on the door.

The night is here, the dark sky diving into the peaceful Baltic Sea. Tiny waves touch the shore, eating up microscopic grains of sand. Tucked into the peace and serenity that surround me, I resent the idea of getting up, and it seems to me that I could stay there forever, between the fluffy pillows and the soft covers, touching his warm skin, our legs intertwined, so safe in his arms as I listen to him breathe.

I slowly raise my head and rest it on my hand, smiling softly at the ruffle-haired head with the peaceful expression of a sleeping boy. I watch his chest go up and down, slowly, and I carefully pull down the covers a bit, letting the sight of his smooth skin give me butterflies. Alec moves a bit and I hold my breath for a moment, but then, certain that he's still asleep, I continue pulling down the covers. Excited, like a child opening a long awaited present, I bite my lip at the sight of his perfect naked body. I wish, more than anything else, to touch every inch of his tight skin with my hand or the tip of my tongue, but then I get distracted by his half-awakened manhood. The racing of my heart and slight pressure between my feet makes me moan. I know I'm not supposed to do that, I don't even know how and why I ended up naked in bed with Liray. Still, driven by some irresistible force, I start touching him, slowly, gently, I run my fingers up and down his cock. The moment I first touch it, I feel it growing in my hand, and I look at his face with satisfaction. His eyes still shut, his lips take the shape of a content smile.

– Hey... You're awake?!...

I smile and, instead of a response, I slide my hand down his glans. He quivers with satisfaction.

– Mmm, haven't had enough?–he whispers.

Enough?! Of you? Never! – I think to myself, and then slowly go down and kissed the skin above his pubic bone. Following an invisible line, I kiss him all the way up to the chest with my wet lips, and then softly touch his nipples with the tip of my tongue.

He breathes heavily and pulls me in, so that we're now lying face to face. I lie on top of him, feeling his skin on mine and his throbbing cock underneath me. All I want is to get up a

little and slide on top of it. However, Alec just bathes me in his warm gaze and gently caresses my face.

- Purple... Purple – he whispers with his lips almost touching mine. I keep my mouth just a bit open, feeling the closeness of his breath sending shivers through my body, and I close my eyes, ready for him.

- Purple – he whispers softly...

My eyes are still closed. I love the way he says my name.

- Mrs. Devan! – his words sound like a distant echo. I don't react, focused only on his lips and my body yearning for his touch.

- Purple! – I hear my name said loudly, and I quickly open my eyes, and stare for a moment at the white ceiling.

- Mrs. Devan! – I hear my name again and jump off the bed, still confused.

- Alec?! – I look around the room and see that broad daylight has touched every corner of the place.

I hear a loud knock on the door. Clumsily, rolled up in a bed sheet, I waddle to the door and almost faint when I see Liray standing there, his back straight, in a black leather motorcycle jacket, black jeans, and ankle high combat boots. I'm a living mess clumsily wrapped in a cloth, staring at him, unable to understand the situation I'm in. Just a minute ago, he was in my bed, ready to make love to me, and now he's standing there, Mr. Rebel Without a Cause, watching me with a mocking smile.

- A... Alec – I stutter, getting my ruffled hair out of my face. – I mean... Mr. Liray – I move yet another annoying wisp of hair.

- Good morning, Purple. You seem to have forgotten about my message.

I shrug, still trapped between the disappointment with the fact that previous events were just a dream and the reality that brings him straight to my door. Realizing I have no idea what he's talking about, he adds that he sent me a message last night, telling me that he'd pick me up at eight, so we could have breakfast together and visit Putgarten and Vitt.

- I'm sorry, I didn't see it, I fell asleep early last night. – I say, squeezing the bed sheet distractedly and go back to my room, trying to find my phone.

- Oh, God! - I say to myself when I see that I have three unread messages, from Amelia, Luka, and Alec. And then, noticing that it's already 9:30, I smack myself on the forehead.

- Ohhh, I'm so, so sorry – I shout, turning to him.

Still standing at the door, he spreads his arms like he doesn't know what to say, but then says, with a smile, that it's not a problem. We'll just have breakfast in Vitt, I should get ready quickly, because he has planned to do so much with me today, and, if I can, I should wear something warm, because we're going...

- *He has planned to do so much with me today* – that's all I hear. - He has planned to do so much with me today – it's ringing in my ears and between my legs – I hope he plans to do more than in my dreams! – I close my eyes and go back to anticipation. I feel my cheeks blush. I nod and say I'll be back in twenty, and then slam the door in front of him. I take off the bed sheet.

- Fuck, what should I wear?! – I yell in panic, taking the clothes out of the suitcase.

Once it hits me that, although I've thrown everything I have on the bed, I still have nothing to wear, I decide to wear dark *Levi's* jeans, my extra large petroleum green sweater, *Timberland* boots and double buttoned jacket. As far as my caramel hair is concerned, I decide to make a messy bun using a barrette. I take a checkered scarf and look at myself in the mirror.

- Good God, I'm a mess – I say, rolling my eyes.

I take my brown cat-eye *Burberry* sunglasses out of my bag. *Fortunately, these cover half of my face.* I run out of the room, still looking for a chap stick in my *Brit* bag. I finally find the small lip balm and try to put it on as I go. However, going out and seeing Alec waiting for me on a motorcycle makes me freeze. The terrified look on my face wiped the wide smile off his.

- Is everything all right? – he says kindly.

- That... that's a...? – I say, pointing at the huge motorcycle.

- That?! –he turns around confusedly. – Oh, well, that's a motorcycle!

- A motorcycle?! – I repeat, waving my hands at the two-wheeled work of the Devil.

- That's right, Mrs. Devan. It's a motorcycle – he murmurs, taking two helmets off the seat. - The 2003 Triumph Bonneville T100, to be exact – he puts on the black helmet – and that's the vehicle we'll use to get to Vitt. Just like I told you before.

He puts the other helmet on my head, and then gives it a gentle tap.

- Ready?

- No, I'm not ready! – I shout. Then I lower my voice:

- I, I don't do motorcycles. – I say, paralyzed. – I don't like them. I'm afraid of them.

- You've had a bad experience? – he asks.

- No, I haven't –I say quickly.

- Someone close to you has had a bad experience with a motorcycle?

- No, no, it's not that. It's just that I don't like... I don't know. They're not safe, they're not stable enough, I have a feeling that...

And then, from the dark depths of my subconsciousness, packed with vague memories and unrealistic desires, surfaces the sight of blazing silver metal on the massive motorcycle, as it stops next to me. The sound of his boot hitting the dust, his back in a leather jacket I hug as I sit on the bike. My joyful laughter resonating as I hug his back and his words, louder than the noise of the engine, running through my body: - Trust me...

Sudden flinch brings me back to reality. Alec fixes my helmet and says something. I'm confused. – *Is it possible that he didn't notice anything? How long did this daydream last?* - I'm even more confused because I had a déjà vu again. – *That's not good. I have to call doctor Lorenzo as soon as I come back. That's definitely not a good thing.*

- Ok? – he says as he steps back.

- Is what ok? – I finally go back to Alec.

- I asked you to trust me. Mrs. Devan! You're not listening to a word I'm saying. – he says with a soft smile. – Trust me, nothing bad is going to happen to you. This is the easiest way to get to Vitt.

- Trust me –I whisper his words and walk slowly towards the motorcycle. Although I don't want to, for some reason I stand speechless next to the bike, waiting for him to sit down and start the engine, and then sit behind him.

- Hold on tight – he says loudly. – Relax and try to follow my movement.

- I understand – that's all I say. I hold on tight and rest my head on his back. I close my eyes.

We hit the road and I feel my heart in my throat. I hold on even tighter, practically burying my nails into his chest.

As we speed up, the cold wind blows into my face even harder.

- Trust me – he says one more time, over the shoulder, outvoicing the noise.

I open my eyes, still leaning onto his back. Suddenly, I'm peaceful; the wind is lighter, filled with Alec's sparkly scent. I wiggle with content. My knees are no longer shaking. I feel him lean right, and I follow his movement. I laugh, remembering my initial fear. I don't know how, but fear banished it completely. My heart speeds up again, this time with joy. – I trust you – I whisper and enjoy the wonderful landscapes around us.

The winding road from Binz to Putgarten is surrounded by vast wheat fields, behind the bare trees with shy sprouts. The infinite clear sky, without a single cloud, bathes in the sunlight, letting the jets leave foamy trails behind them. I think that I've never seen such a clear and bright day. We're on the road for a bit less than an hour. From time to time, he tells me something, but I... I hear nothing. I don't understand. To be completely honest, I don't really listen. Although I try to concentrate on the fairytale landscapes and his words, clouds of distant memories and dreams mix with reality. I try to put the pieces together. To draw a parallel. So I frown and try to get back into my mind something that I have misplaced long ago. However, it's all in vain. Just my vivid imagination crossing over the boundaries of reality, as doctor Lorenzo would say. Yet, for a change, I don't feel any fear, nor guilt, this time I enjoy the ride, leaning onto his broad back, my pale face on his dark leather jacket, and I never want this ride to end. We lean a bit to the left and enter a small village. The smell of salt, cold sea and humidity in the air fill my nostrils. Like waking up after being half asleep, I let the sound of the waves, wind, and the engine clear my mind. I feel him slowing down and I straight up my back, heavy-hearted. We move slowly down the country road, fields on each side. Suddenly, we stop. He takes off the helmet and tells me I can get off. I slide off the leather and take off the glasses so I could see everything the way it is. In front of us, there are a dozen small gothic houses with dark thatch roofs. Tucked between the bare treetops and conifers, hidden among the green bushes, they make up a fairytale village, the one from a long forgotten story. Liray gently takes my hand:

- Come on. We're in Vitt.

- It's beautiful! – I follow his lead.

- It's even more beautiful up close – he says, taking me into an alley paved with yellow stone.

- I, I can't believe it! This is surreal! – I say as I walk past an old white octagonal church. Sharp lines of the windows, dark jalousies, and thatch roof, it is some ten feet away from the houses.

- Aren't the Germans something! – I laugh. – They've built it all to look so genuine, like it was really made some three or four hundred years ago.

We leave the little village very soon and reach the shore, wild and romantic at the same time, with a small wooden pier with two old boats. The waves carry them, making them bump against each other. I step on the first board, but Liray pulls me back, and points at the landscape before us.

- Actually, all thirteen houses in the fishermen village were built in the ninth century—he says, looking at the village.

- You're trying to say that these houses have been here for eleven centuries? – I ask, trying to suspend disbelief.

- Yes – he says and points – all thirteen houses, this tiny pier – then he points at the two lighthouses on the cape – the towers, the temple, the fortress, and the bridge, it's all been here for a lot longer than eleven centuries. – he looks at me – Only the chapel was built in the nineteenth century, in 1816.

- Wait – I interrupt him, looking at the empty space around the village – I don't understand, what do you mean, the fortress, the towers, the temple?

- Look a bit harder – he says calmly and directs my gaze again towards the most prominent part of the island. Towards the steep cliff with wild vines and tall waves splashing against the rocks. – Look towards Arkona – he whispers.

- No... I really can't see anything there – I shrug – Is there supposed to be some... some kind of mark that something was once there? I think a friend of mine told me that there was some kind of temple here... I normally wear glasses, you know... - I want to turn around, but he comes to me from the back and hugs me holding my hands in his.

His unusual reaction, although pleasant, surprises me, to say the least. Before I can say anything, he takes my left hand and places it on the left side of my chest. There, where my heart is beating uncontrollably. He takes my right hand and points it to the tall cliffs on the cape.

- Feel Arkona, Purple – he whispers softly, his warm breath caressing my neck – Feel it inside and you'll see everything clearly.

I watch for a couple of seconds. I enjoy being this close to him. But, I'm aware that this very evening I'll pack my things and run back home. Because, no matter how crazy I believe I am, Liray is a hundred times crazier.

- *Dear God, what have I gotten myself into?!*

All possible scenarios of kidnapping and murder start coming to mind, when I feel his closeness on my neck again. He utters a long shhhh, as if he wants to hush my thought. And he really does. My mind becomes clear; I close my eyes, take a deep breath and slowly open my eyes again.

Where I once saw two lighthouses, I now see a stone fortress with four round towers. Within the fortress, to the east, facing the sea, there is a magnificent ancient temple with carvings on the walls. From the center of the temple, reaching for the skies, rises a mighty wooden totem with four male heads. Extending along three sides of the fortress, there are double walls. The fourth side is surrounded by the steep limestone cliffs. Right there on the edge of the cliff, stretching to the top of the fortress, there are massive oak doors with an extraordinary symbol in the shape of a sun. It awfully reminds me of a *swastika*. However, this one has eight rays. Extending from the doors there is a narrow wooden hanging bridge which, cutting through the sky, ends at the beginning of a cliff at the top of a mountain protruding from the dark clouds.

This sight is so familiar to me, I am frozen still. Paralyzed by fear, I lose every sense of reality and soberness, and the terrible chill makes me give a desperate, unhuman cry, after which I find myself lying unconscious on the wet ground.

- Jesus! Purple! Purple! –words resonate in my mind.

I break into cold sweat. I know I'm not under water, but I'm all wet. Cold. Lifeless. I try to open my eyes, but the buzzing in my head, followed by a lightshow made up of a million tiny dots keeps my eyes shut. I frown. I'm cold. I try to say that. I can't.

-Purple! Please, can you hear me? For heaven's sake, look at me?! – I hear him command me.

My eyes feel heavy. I manage to open them a bit.

Squinting, I see Alec's worried face.

-I... I'm cold – I stutter.

He takes off his jacket. He kneels next to me, holding my head in his lap. He tries to keep me warm. Behind his back, I see the contours of the two lighthouses. The fortress, the towers, the temple... the bridge... they're all gone, there's just vast emptiness, two lighthouses and the roofs of the scattered houses.

- The fortress... –I say.

- What about the fortress? – he asks me, still terribly worried.

- Well, it's not there.

He looks surprised. – Where?

- Arkona – I look at the cliff again. He notices the direction of my gaze and laughs.

– Well, Mrs. Devan, you're absolutely right! Actually, it's been gone for over ten centuries!

- No, no – I object – I've just seen it! The fortress, the temple, the totem, the walls, the towers, and the bridge! The wooden hanging bridge!

He starts laughing. He takes me in his arms and lifts me off the ground.

- I believe that motorcycle ride did you more harm than good. And you must be hungry – he says calmly, carrying me towards the village.

- Liray, I'm not crazy! – I say angrily. – You showed it to me! You told me to see it. And how to see it. You stood behind me!

He stops and looks into my face.

- I did stand behind you – he sighs – but only to show you which of the two lighthouses you need to reconstruct. And only because you were constantly looking the other way.

I'm confused again. I look at his face in disbelief.

– But, but, I saw it... I saw the bridge... the wooden hanging bridge, extending from the door, through the clouds, to the top of some mountain, the cliffs... Look, I'm not crazy! – I bite my lip, but a part of me is more than sure that it's true.

He moves his arms closer around me so he could hold me tighter.

- I'm not saying that you're crazy, just a bit too exhausted from travelling, the cold, hunger, and too much excitement. Let's first find some place warm, get you something to eat, and then talk about how much we're going to take off your paycheck for making me worry so much, fainting like that. And, to be honest, I can't wait to stop carrying you. Madam, you're much heavier than you seem!

Although considerably shaken, I can't help but laugh. I hit him on the shoulder. He frowns and holds me even tighter. I rest my head on his chest. I think he's probably right. As we're entering the village, the desolate cliff disappears behind us, and he lowers his chin onto my head for a second. –*No wonder I've been seeing things from my nightmares, when he himself stepped out of my most intimate dreams.* I shiver all over. He notices that and gives me a soft smile. – *Oh, nooo* – I whine to myself – *God, why can't I stop embarrassing myself in front of this man?!* – I feel ashamed and tiny in his arms. – *Good God, what's happening to me?*

He doesn't put me down for a second until we get to a gothic village inn. He puts me down on a wooden bench covered with sheep leather, in the far corner of the inn, right next to the stone fireplace. He sits next to me, orders me to take off my shoes and put my feet up, and then wrap myself in a flower-patterned blanket the innkeeper brought me. Tucked in, enjoying the warmth of the blanket, as well as the pleasant, intimate atmosphere, I watch him order the food. He looks so... normal. He talks to the chubby waitress with rosy cheeks, dressed in traditional German attire, so casually, as if he's known her forever. He looks like an ordinary, simple man, asking about whatever they're hunting these days and saying something about the unusually nice weather.

When Helga, who introduced herself as the hostess, asks us if I'm feeling better and leaves, he puts his hand under the blanket and takes my feet into his hands. Noticing how cold they are, he shakes his head and starts rubbing them. I'm speechless. I say nothing. I'm completely quiet. Although it feels good, I feel a bit uncomfortable. I start wiggling, trying to pull my feet away.

– Don't you even think about it, Mrs. Devan! – he sounds strict. – I'm letting them go only after I breathe some life into them!

The doors of the inn open and an old man walks in, his gray hair and beard sticking out of the creased dark blue beret. He's wearing a yellow raincoat with blue and white stripes around the sleeves and knee high green rubber boots. Around his neck is a clumsily tied red scarf with tiny embroidered wild flowers. He's holding a fishing rod in one hand and a metal bucket in the other, spilling some water as he puts it down next to the door.

- Any luck? – Alec asks kindly.

The old man gives him a broad smile, and says unbuttoning his raincoat that good bait always catches something good. He hangs his coat on the wall and is now wearing only a blue shirt with thick lining and pants with suspenders. He walks towards us and I can see there's something wrong with his left leg.

– Bernard – he says, shaking first my hand, and then Liray's. His hand, although wrinkled, seemed so gentle, making the handshake so pleasant and soft.

- Purple – I nod.

- Alec – says Liray friendly.

The old man shakes his hand politely and looks at him with his bright eyes.

- Tourists? – he asks, still holding his hand.

- Well... not both of us – says Liray – and can I have my hand back now? The old man flinches and looks at his hand, putting it down quickly.

He clears his throat.

- I'm sorry, you reminded me of someone for a second.

Quickly, as if his hand is wet, he wipes it with his left sleeve, and then takes a pack of tobacco from the front pocket of his shirt.

– You don't mind if I smoke? – he says, putting a hand-wrapped cigarette between his lips.

– Go ahead – Alec is still watching him curiously.

- I hope I reminded you of someone dear to you?

The old man, although smiling, looks so sad.

– Yes, yes. You remind me of a good friend of mine, from back when I was a young man.

- You haven't seen him for a while? Is he from around here? – I ask him curiously.

He slowly takes the cigarette out of his mouth and blows some smoke.

He clears his throat again.

– Well, no, I haven't. The last time I saw him was some forty years ago – he turns around and slowly approaches the window. He looks outside distractedly.

- Actually, thirty-nine years ago, to be exact. It was this time of the year when he sailed away. Just like today, it was an unusually nice day. He sailed away alone... unfortunately, he never came back. He was swallowed by the sea – his voice is trembling. – You know, that day, although everything was calm and it seemed that it was going to stay that way, there was a terrible storm in Rügen. His freshly purchased boat was found a couple of days later, floating near Binz. It was severely damaged, and my friend was nowhere to be found... The boat itself was filled with... with some kind of purple dust.

He suddenly turns away from the window and focuses on me.

- You know, in dawn, on March 20, 1973, half of the east coast was covered in purple.

My eyes wide open, a shocked expression on my face, I try to tell him that I was born on that very day, in Binz. I open my mouth a bit but nothing comes out.

The man coughs badly, puts his cigarette back into his mouth, and tries to say something, but Helga interrupts him, bringing us some food.

– Bernard! – she screams when she sees him. – You know you shouldn't be out of bed!

She quickly puts the food on the table, then takes him by the hand and slowly leads him into the kitchen, but before they leave, she shrugs and says quietly:

– I'm sorry. Grandpa wanders off sometimes.

The doors close. Silence. My heart is racing again. A million thoughts are rushing through my head. –*That's impossible!*–I say to myself. I look at Liray. He's peacefully arranging fish and potato salad on our plates. – *That's impossible!* – I repeat. Those are all coincidences. It's all just stress. I look in front of me. We're still quiet. I watch Alec cut and separate meat from the thin fishbones for me, as if I were a child.

- Ok, Purple – he finally speaks. – Now you'll eat, and then you'll tell me everything about what is going on with you – he slowly transfers the fishbones on a separate plate.

Without making eye contact, he proceeds:

– Don't take this the wrong way, but you look like you've seen a ghost, and today you fainted. You've been seeing fortresses, towers, bridges...

I stare in front of me. He lifts my head and turns it towards him.

– I really need to know that... that you, I mean... that you are... how do I put this? Emotionally and mentally prepared to work for me.

I don't blink. I look at him calmly, while my body and soul fill with sorrow. I don't know what to say. Fuck. Phillip's right. I'm useless, incompetent. Obsessed with my own madness that keeps holding me back. I feel my chin quiver, but I try hard not to cry. He notices that I'm having an inner fight. He puts his hands around my face and I feel their incredible warmth.

- No. That's not what I mean, Purple – he says so softly, as if he's been reading my mind.
- I really want you to do this job. Only you – he smiles kindly. – I just don't want this job to hurt or disturb you in any way, or make you sick... That's why I need to know what's troubling you, so I could plan our next step. So I could know if I can influence it, change it in some way. We don't have to go to the lighthouse and the house today, but you have to tell me, I have to know how to arrange things in the future. I was supposed to go to Berlin tomorrow and then back to London, but I'll postpone that. However, I really need to know what's going on with you.

- Why do you even care?! – I surprise myself with the question. – Why me of all the people? Why? I mean...

- Here comes the wine! – Helga interrupts us.

We both give her a funny look.

- Oh, you two lovebirds obviously haven't noticed what's happening outside. Right? Nevermind. It's just about to culminate! The wine will help you kill time while you wait, but I wouldn't be surprised if you spend the night here – she winks devilishly with her dark blue eyes. – You're lucky. Our only room is vacant.

We exchange puzzled looks and both head towards the windows. The sight is nothing like the one we left behind some half an hour ago when we went inside. There is a violent storm outside. Strong wind is breaking the waves, high over the wooden pier, crashing them against the thin fence, which from time to time disappears in gray foam. The dark, ominous sky scarred by lightning, angrily pours heavy rain, while the water devours rough rocks and the coast.

- It's... It's going to flood the village! – I yell in panic.

- Don't you worry about a thing, my dear! – Helga gives me a look underneath the curly blond hair resting on her forehead. – Never in its long history has the village of Vitt been flooded. And believe me, there must have been greater storms in the past thousand years. Now, back to your dinner! For heaven's sake, who in the world likes their fish and potato salad cold?!

We obediently return to the table, I wrap myself in the blanket again, but leave the boots on. Alec sits across the table from me this time.

- This way it will be easier for me to listen to you – he takes his plate and silverware – unfortunately, the bad weather leaves us no other choice but to eat and talk.

He pours two glasses of wine and puts a piece of potato in his mouth.

- Bon appétit – he says, chewing slowly. He takes a sip from his glass.

- Whenever you're ready – he puts down his drink and bites a piece of fish. Crackling sound of the thunder announces the lightning that illuminates the room like a flash. I feel no fear for a change. I take a sip of wine and a piece of fish. It is delicious, although it is already tepid. Avoiding eye contact, I start talking between the bites.

First I talk about how I actually got my name. And then, carefully choosing words, I introduce him to my nightmare. The story about a baby covered in purple dust makes him smile and say that he now understands my reaction to Bernard's story, as well as that, no matter what I think about it, my parents couldn't choose a better name for me. However, when I start talking about my dream, he fully concentrates on every word. Sitting with his back straight, his arms crossed over his chest, he listens carefully. I am confused by his full attention, so I start skipping some details and mixing up the order of events. Very soon he notices that I got all tangled up, so he asks me if I can slowly go bit by bit, year by year.

- But – I say impatiently – every year, it's all the same!

- Are you sure? – he asks me calmly.

- Of course I am! Only the last dream was different. I'll tell you about it now.

- No, no. Take it slow. Year by year, and then the last dream.

- But that's thirty-four identical stories! You'll get bored.

- Don't worry, I won't. If I by any chance get bored, I'll tell you. I'd really like to hear them all one by one.

I shrug. – Ok, Mr. Liray. Just don't complain about me telling you one and the same story over and over again.

He laughs. We reach for our glasses at the same time. Taking a sip, I start, bit by bit, recounting each of my dreams. Just like I said, every time the same. Liray sits calmly and listens carefully. Although the stories are all the same, he seems rather interested. He nods from time to time, takes a sip of wine and then crosses his arms over his chest again.

- There, you see, all the same except for the last one. – I say after talking for more than two hours straight.

- I disagree – he says putting his hands on the table. – The dream on your thirty-second birthday.

- What about it?

- You said that the child stood one step away from the old man.

- I said what?! – I frown.

He sighs: - Purple, you said that you woke up when the child reached out for the old man, standing right in front of him.

I lean into the bench. Frowning, I rewind all the dreams in my head. – My God, he's right. I go back to my thirty-second birthday. That's exactly what happened.

- I... I don't know why I didn't pay attention to that. Somehow, that dream was the shortest one, and that year was so confusing, that's when I... - I stop. I almost told him. I bite my tongue.

- That's when you? – his voice is flat and inquiring.

- Well, I don't know... that's when I got pregnant with Beyla. Oh, it's nothing much. That... the event when I got pregnant.

I give a hearty laugh.

I can't believe this just came out of my mouth! – I'd love to slap myself right now, at least in my mind.

- It's not that I wouldn't like to hear all the details of that event – he sounds saucy – but first tell me about the last dream.

He's serious again, putting his hands back on the table. He keeps his palms parallel to the surface. I notice that he has big hands. Now that I look at them, they don't seem to suit him. Although he seems strong and masculine, I would rather say these hands belong to a warrior. Someone who works and builds his life with those very hands, not some successful businessman. His hands look like they could crush the table underneath them in one single blow.

- And? – he asks.

The freshness of the memories stuck in my bones makes me shiver. I reach out to pour more wine, but he suddenly grabs my hand.

- The bottle is empty – he says, although I was convinced there was more wine in it.

I put it down, and he calls for Helga, handing her the bottle and asking her to bring another one.

- Take it easy, Purple, take it easy. I wouldn't want you to skip any single detail.

- Ok. But, just so you know, I'm confused by your interest in this. I'd like to tell you just about what's unusual about that last dream, I mean, the things that are different... I mean, it's not pleasant for me to go through every single detail again.

- No! – he says loudly. - I need to know everything. Do you understand?!

He looks at me reproachfully. I look deep into his eyes. – *Fuck, no matter how many times I've seen them lately, I can't resist the impression that I've already seen them before.*

The hostess comes back with another bottle of wine. She asks us joyfully whether we have decided to take the room, since the weather isn't getting any better. I quickly take a sip. Although I like it that she thinks that we're together, I'm a bit uncomfortable.

- We'll take the room – says Alec calmly.

I choke and the wine goes through my nose. – *God, I wish I could just disappear!*

I reach out for the napkin to wipe my face.

- Are you all right? – he raises his right eyebrow.

- Mhm, mhm – I mumble through the napkin and nod affirmatively.

He turns back to Helga.

- But first we're going to sit here for a bit longer. If it's not a problem, we'd like some more wine, I have a feeling that this will be one long day, and night.

Helga nods and leaves. He takes his glass and drinks some wine himself while I finish mine. I sigh.

- So the child is standing on the...*Oh, fuck, what am I wearing? What kind of underwear do I have on? What does he mean by that, we'll take the room? - ...the child is standing on that bridge – is this the same wine like before? Oh, shit! I haven't waxed! Dear God, this wine is strong! Why is he looking at me like that? Is he waiting for something?! Oh, yes, the dream. The last one. Bah, I hate talking about it... Perhaps they have a disposable razor in the bathroom. Oh, come on, Purple! You're not having sex with Alec Liray... This is definitely some good wine, why wouldn't he be with me? I'm not that bad, compared to others... Why is he looking at me like that?!*

- Well - I start talking - I have to think about all the details!

And how silly he actually is, insisting so hard on me telling him about my insanity. And those gray eyes of his... Look at him, looking at me reproachfully! Hehe.

- Ok, like I said, the child is standing...

But I should still turn off the lights as soon as I take my clothes off. Actually, before that! God, does he look grim. I clear my throat and raise my forefinger, trying to signal that I need time to pull myself together. Geez, Purple, for the last ten days you've been doing nothing but saying stupid things. You almost told him about Beyla. Oh, fuck, this wine is good. I open my eyes wide and blink repeatedly. – Am I getting sleepy?!

- Purple! – he yells in a strict voice.

I'm back from my thoughts. I sit up straight. I put my hands down the same way he did and collect my thoughts. Words just flow out of my mouth. Every part of the dream goes through my mind. I feel the same shiver down my spine. I try to close my eyes and take a deep breath. I feel the scents around me. I talk about the color, the scent of purple, and I unwittingly say he smells the same way. I open my eyes. I stop. His face is pale.

- Go on – he says quietly.

I close my eyes again. I'm silent for a moment. I feel every second again. The running, the falling, the struggle to get the child. I tell him everything, out of breath. I feel tears build up in my eyes as I talk about the little hand sliding from mine. I cry. I want to open my eyes and stop, but I'm captured in my memory and I go on. I shiver as I talk about jumping into the abyss, and the way I felt the smell of spring and saw those eyes before I died... gray, reproachful, sad... gray eyes... I repeat to myself. Reproachful and sad at the same time... like... I suddenly open my eyes:

- You're eyes! –I yell, terrified.

Liray is sitting across the table from me. Pale. Somehow old and expressionless. He doesn't blink. He breathes heavily.

- You... – I stutter and wipe the tears.

He keeps his eyes nailed to me. I notice that he's clenching his fists. His lips are pressed together, as if he's trying not to say something.

- You... you – I keep repeating.

He suddenly gets up without a word and heads towards the exit. He stops, a couple of steps from the door, and comes back. He looks at me, silent. He's still breathing heavily. He comes back to the table. I look at him, unable to comprehend what's going on. He's still clutching his fists.

- I'll be right back – his voice is hoarse – Wait for me, right there! – he says and quickly turns around.

- I have to... You know, business. I have to take care of something... I forgot... Trust me – he says clumsily before he disappears from the room, slamming the door behind him.

I quickly jump up to go after him, but then I realize that the alcohol's made me really dizzy. Although my legs feel heavy, I somehow get to the door. I open them, but the heavy rain and the wind practically throw me back in. A lightning scars the sky and lights up the landscape. However, Liray's nowhere to be seen. I try to get out, but the storm just pushes me back in. I stand at the door for a while, completely lost, because,

no matter how strange my life normally is, this situation with him is absolutely ridiculous. I go in, disappointed, closing the doors and leaning against them.

- *Maybe this is just a dream as well* – I decide to walk back to the table, but on my way I trip over the gray bucket Bernard left at the door. I bend down so I could move it.

- What?! – I shout when I realize that the bucket is filled with purple sand. Wet. I want to put my hand inside, but the doors open and push me to the side, and at the same time, Helga and Bernard show up.

- Grandpa! You can't just leave stuff lying around in the middle of the inn! Someone could get hurt! – the woman takes the bucket and passes it to the old man loudly and quickly.

He just shrugs.

- Well, that's because you won't let me fish like a normal person! – he says and takes the bucket to the kitchen.

I want to ask where he got the sand, but Helga interrupts me, speaking to someone behind me. The two of them distract me and I forget about the door. I hope it's Liray.

I turn around and see a tall, thin woman. She is hanging her raincoat when our eyes meet. She's very attractive, her long straight hair, dark like the night, perfectly matches her porcelain skin, blood red thin lips, and black eyebrows. She's wearing leather pants and a black shirt, unbuttoned just enough to get a glimpse of her ample breasts, and a thin necklace with a strange platinum pendant.

- Oh, what horrible weather! – she says, looking at me with her piercing charcoal eyes.

I just nod affirmatively, her icy stare leaving me speechless.

- A bottle of white wine and two glasses for the corner table – she orders Helga, who immediately disappears behind the kitchen doors.

I give her an artificial smile and walk past her. I try to walk as steadily as possible to my seat. I grab my bag and look for my phone. I try to ignore the unpleasant fact that I'm alone with her in the room. Although there are logs burning in the fireplace, I shiver with cold. I drink the wine and look at my phone.

- Oh, it can't be! – she yells suddenly, making me look in her direction.

She sits facing me, holding a glass in one hand, and a cigarette in the other. – You've got reception here?! – she stands up, still holding everything in her hands, and approaches me. – May I? – she points at the empty space across the table from me.

I want to say it's taken, but instead I just nod.

- Thank you. – she says as she sits down. She takes a smoke and distorts her thin lips into what should probably be a kind smile.

- You see, I have no cell reception, and I have to make an urgent call to a friend. Would you be so kind as to let me use your phone?

- Nicht sprechen Deutsch – I tell an outright lie, God knows why.

- Oh! – she's surprised. – Ok, ok – she says kindly. - English?! – she continues to smoke.

-Sorry, not English! – I shrug and finish my drink.

- *Purple, you are hammered!* - I scold myself. I give her one of my funny looks. *Damn, sister! If I were to imagine an über-bitch, she'd look exactly like you!*

- Oh... – she's confused, and starts looking around, as if searching for someone who might be the reason I'm sitting here drunk all by myself.

Shit! Can't she see that the table is set for two?

-Srbija! – I shout, like a complete ass, waving three fingers, praying that she doesn't start speaking in any of the Yugoslavian languages.

- Serbia?! – She gives me another smile. – So you're a Slav! Nice, nice.

Now you've screwed up big time, Purple - I start swearing to myself - *this chick obviously knows everything. Why would you lie to her in the first place?!* – I scold myself.

- No... no Slovenia – I start waving my arms and trying to explain.

- I Seerrrrrrbiaaan! – I almost purr. – You know?! – I start spelling it out for her: - S R B I J A! Slovenia not!

She giggles and flips her long hair.

- Aren't you adorable! I know full well what Serbia is, my dear – she continues in English – the South Slavs – she look as if she's reminiscing – a charming tribe. Stubborn, brave, pugnacious, and honorable, but quarrelsome and frivolous. Such bullheaded people! – she laughs. – And yet, truly charming. Yes.

She's a cuckoo! Thank God I lied to her, I think to myself. Then I nod affirmatively and shrug at the same time, letting her know once again that I have no idea what she's talking about. I look at my phone again. *Would you look at that, there's really no reception. Huh!* I throw it into my purse, get up and start putting on my jacket.

- Sorry – I slowly start walking. – I go – I start waving with my flapping sleeves, trying to mime that I want to sleep.

- I drunk! - I say, once I finally have my jacket on.

Unlike everything else I said, this one is actually true. I feel terribly dizzy; I can't speak properly, nor walk, for that matter. She politely gets up when I try to take Liray's jacket. What a fool he is! Going out dressed like that! I stumble as I finally manage to pull it out. I call for Helga, who appears right away, looking at me funny. – Room, room! –I say, pointing at myself. - Must go, understand?! Bang–bang, me and my man, have sex! Gooood sex! – I say feeling proud of myself.

Helga gives me a coy smile and goes out to fetch the key, while I turn to the über–bitch. She's looking at me mockingly.

– Yes, sure, dear! Bang, bang, if you even manage to get to the bed. I feel sorry for your boyfriend – she grins.

Stupid cow! Just because she's convinced I don't understand what she's saying, she thinks she can insult me! Why would you feel sorry for my boyfriend? Ok, so he's not my boyfriend, and I don't have tits like you, but at least I don't have the eyes of a murderer. Pfff, and unlike you, I speak five languages, not just two! You dumb bitch!

My inner argument with her is interrupted by Helga who carries an umbrella for me and points toward the door.

- I'm Morana, by the way – she says, offering me her hand. I barely touch it.

- Amelia – I nod and walk out into the rain.

No more than twenty steps away from the inn, Helga opens the old oak door. She lets me in first, and then switches on the light. Two night lamps illuminate the small room. The sight in front of me makes me smile. Everything in the room looks like it was brought from *The Bazaar*! The centerpiece of the room is a white wrought metal bed with tall headboard, a thick mattress and a snow white bed cover. The small lamps on the nightstands have shades with purple lavender flowers. Old-fashioned white closet is placed against the right wall, next to a slightly crooked standing mirror. Next to the bathroom door is a country style dressing table with a wicker chair. The room smells of freshly cut grass.

Helga shows me how to turn up the heat and where the extra bed covers and towels are and leaves. I peek into the bathroom and I am disappointed to see that there are no disposable razors, but now it really doesn't matter anyway. Alec is definitely insane. Frankly, so am I, and now I'm also hammered and dead tired.

- Ah, fuck! – I say, taking of my clothes and getting into the shower.

I let the water warm me up and wash away the day. I massage my body with lavender soap. I enjoy its luscious fragrance and the hot bath. I finally feel relaxed. Only after my fingers wrinkle in water I make myself get out. I wrap my hair in a towel and put on a bathrobe. I wipe the condensed steam off the mirror. I look at my pale skin and almond eyes and thin wrinkles in their outer corners. I frown at my reflection, and two more

deep lines between the eyebrows appear, which makes me relax my face right away and clean it with cotton pads. When I finish cleaning myself up, I tiptoe to the room and avoid stepping on the cold hardwood floor. I open the door and scream at the sight in front of me.

Liray is standing in the middle of the room, soaking wet. His hair is all over his face, his shirt clinging to his torso. Rain drips from his body, making puddles on the floor. Although the soft light falls on only one side of his face, I can easily see how gorgeous he is. Gorgeous and crazy. I guess that's the way it goes. Oh, yes, and gay. That's what Luka would say.

- Amelia? – he says in his hoarse voice.

His arms hang down and he's clutching his fists.

He always seems prepared, if not for a fight, then most certainly defense, I think as I approach him.

- Sir, have you been swimming in the ocean? –I purse my lips, alluding to his appearance.

- Amelia, I told you to wait for me where I left you! –he frowns.

- Oh yeah? I should have waited, after the way you left me, without a word?! – I snap.

- I told you that I'd come back and that you should wait for me! – he comes closer.

-Oh, and while I'm waiting, I should chat with an s&m loving witch?! – I get in his face angrily.

We stand so close to each other, I can feel the cold water dripping from his clothes onto my feet. His face looks grim.

- Why did you tell Morana that your name was Amelia, that you can speak neither German nor English, and that we were going to have sex? – he frowns.

Oh, God! Make me disappear! He knows the bitch! What kind of mess have I just made? I completely forgot about the last thing! I purse my lips again. I am aware that I have no idea why I lied to that woman. She just seemed so cold and obnoxious.

– Well... well... - I look down. At first I want to think of an excuse, but instead, I stand up on my toes so I could get closer to his face.

– Listen to me! You left me sitting there half-drunk all by myself. You ran away without any kind of explanation, after digging through the most intimate details of my life for hours! And then that... that Morana woman, or whatever her name is, shows up. I just didn't like her, and why should I even care? Why should I have to talk to your girlfriend?

- the towel on my head seems loose, and I take it off angrily, letting my hair down. I go

back to standing on my heels and nervously fix my tangled hair. However, he quickly takes my hand and moves it from my face.

God, is this man ever cold? – I wonder, feeling the warmth of his hand. He comes closer and carefully moves wet hair out of my face.

- Purple, honestly... that was the smartest thing to do... – he smiles broadly.

I'm surprised by his response. He gives me a look that could melt ice.

- I'm sorry I stormed out like that. I remembered that I had left some important documents in the motorcycle compartment box, and that I was supposed to send them to Inga as soon as we arrived – he stops and moves another wisp of hair out of my face, slowly tucking it behind my ear.

My heart leaps up and starts pounding.

- It had crossed my mind before, but I didn't want to interrupt you while you were talking. You looked so sad and shaken. I didn't want you to think that those papers are more important than your dream, more important than you. – I feel weak at the knees. He comes so close I can feel his breath on my skin and I yearn for his kiss.

– When it comes to Morana – he frowns – She could never be my girlfriend. I don't have one.

I tingle all over with excitement. I raise my head, instinctively searching for his lips. He watches me. He watches my lips. He caresses my body with his gaze, inch by inch. He moves the last wisp out of my face and tucks it behind my ear. I bite my lip, trying not to sigh loudly. He gives me a barely visible smile. I feel embarrassed and look down, but the tips of his fingers on my chin make me raise my head again. I close my eyes. He kisses the corner of my lips, ever so gently. The warmth and softness of his touch slowly make me open my mouth and let our hot breaths mix. He pulls me in gently. I run my fingers through his wet hair, letting his tongue play with mine. I melt in his arms. He gently caresses my neck, the tips of his fingers barely touching my skin. His hand falls on the soft terry robe, moves it carefully, and then, as if he wants to see my reaction, he runs the tip of his tongue between my neck and my shoulder. Overwhelmed with excitement, I sigh and tilt my head back. I bite my lower lip again, trying to silence the heavy breathing and sighs caused by his kisses. I burn with desire. I put my hands under his wet shirt; explore his smooth skin with my fingers. He slowly stops kissing me. He takes his shirt off, and I stare at his naked torso, broad shoulders, strong, muscular arms, his perfect abs, and a strange tattoo on his left shoulder. I feel a bit uncomfortable, staring at him like that, but I can't resist the temptation. I want those arms to take me. I want to dive into them. I want to die in those arms. As if he's reading my mind, he takes me in his arms without a word, looking deep into my eyes. I've never seen such bright eyes. Despite the twilight, I can see myself in them. I'm beautiful in his eyes. I'm beautiful in his arms, as he carries me to the bed and gently puts me down on the soft

covers. My bathrobe falls to the sides and I'm suddenly completely naked in front of him. His eyes glisten. He says my name quietly and starts kissing every inch of my skin. The weight of his body, the closeness of his scent, his face in my bosom, and the hard cock underneath his jeans make me start unbuttoning him. The moment I take off his leather belt, he suddenly stops. He freezes. His hot body is now unpleasantly cold and indifferent to my touch.

- Alec – I whisper feeling confused. – Is everything all right?

Short of breath, his mind in a haze, he starts turning away from me. – I'm sorry... I'm sorry – he stutters, trying to avoid looking me in the eyes. He gets up from the bed, burying his head in his hands, and starts pacing up and down the room.

I quickly put the robe back on and lean against the headboard, still breathless and wet. I feel my heart in my throat and try to cope with the shock. I feel ashamed and humiliated as I watch him hate himself for trying to sleep with me, completely ignoring my presence. I feel pathetic when he turns back to me. His eyes misty, his voice low, he comes over to the bed and starts apologizing.

– Please, Purple, I'm sorry... - he stutters. – I... it's my fault. I shouldn't have let it get this far. I'm sorry, I... - he runs his fingers through his hair and sighs loudly. – I have a problem. I... it's me. It has nothing to do with you – he comes to the edge of the bed and shakes his head, as if he's trying to banish a thought. – This shouldn't have happened. – he gives me a sad look. – I... you see... I...

He stops. He holds his breath, as if he's trying to hear something. He looks around the room, squinting, and a second later he's in front of the door. He stands still and yells angrily:

- Nothing happened! Don't worry! Go!!

There is no response on the other side. He flings the door open.

– Why are you here?! – he continues angrily. – I told you I don't need you, I told you I can control myself! – he shouts at the person in a raincoat standing at the door.

He moves aside and points at me. Underneath the black hood is Liray's grim-faced assistant. My eyes wide open, completely lost, on the verge of tears and a nervous breakdown, I begin to weep.

– What the hell is going on here? Who are you, people? What do you want from me?! – I struggle to get out of the covers I got tangled into witnessing Alec's madness.

Inga looks at Alec reproachfully, who raises his hands as if he's surrendering, and then she looks at me.

– Fuck all this shit! – I yell. – I don't know what you want from me, and honestly, I think I don't want to know. – I climb out of the bed. – I'm heading back, and you... you... - I fail to finish my thought. I yawn, guided by the trail of warmth that consumes my body and opens up my pores for Alec's scent that lulls me to sleep. I fall on the bed. Trying to stay awake, I catch a glimpse of Alec arguing with Inga. She bows before him and leaves. I feel his warm lips kiss my cheek, and I'm happy again. The sound of water in the bathroom is the last thing I hear before I'm fast asleep.

I frown and keep my head under the pillow, hiding from the daylight. I nervously conclude that I'm too hot and can't breathe under the bunch of feathers. I toss and turn, trying to find the most comfortable position, the one where the sunlight can't touch me and wake me up. Although I've had enough sleep and feel rested, I don't want to get up yet. Keeping my eyes shut, I try out every possible position, and finally throw the covers over my head. *Thaaaat's it* – I'm finally happy, relaxing under my improvised sunshade. *Now back to my dreams...*

- Hey, sleepyhead! – I hear through the covers. I curl up and listen.

- Alec?!

- Sorry, Purple, but it's time for you to get up! – he pulls one side of the cover and sits beside me.

I carefully peek.

– Alec – I flutter my lashes – is there a special reason you're naked? – I get up a little, keeping my eyes on his body, covered only with a pair of dark blue boxers.

He gives me a broad smile and simply kisses me on the forehead.

- That's what I thought when I saw you! – he smiles and gets up, putting his pants on. – I don't know if Helga spiked our drinks, but I haven't had this kind of headache for a long time – he complains and uncovers me, eyeing me from head to toe. He gives a satisfied nod. – Nice, nice.

I am shocked to realize that I have nothing but a bathrobe on, which is stuck somewhere behind my back. *Fuuuck! I'm naked! In front of him! In broad daylight! Awful, awful, awful!* I quickly cover myself up with the bathrobe. *Oh God, we didn't sleep together, did we?* A panic attack mixed with embarrassment threatens to suffocate me.

- I... I remember nothing. – I feel ashamed. – How? – I stutter. – I mean, I remember taking a shower and seeing you here all wet. – I sit up. All ruffled, I look at my feet in

shame. – And then... then... - I remember him kissing me, but I skip that part. – I... Inga showed up?

Memory of his assistant surprises me, because actually, apart from some vague image of her, I'm not even sure she was there. Putting on a shirt, he stands in front of me. I instinctively direct my gaze toward him. He gently strokes my hair.

- Yes, she showed up, and she was pretty mad! – he whistles. – I had to go out with her, because everything got complicated after I failed to deliver those documents on time. – he shrugs. – Unfortunately, I was unable to think about business, so she made me come back to you – he gives me a kind look. – On the other hand, I was useless here as well, since you were already fast asleep. In the end, I snuck in and fell asleep next to you.

He kneels beside me and takes my hands in his. He looks at them and then gives them a gentle kiss.

- Don't worry. I'm naked because I was soaking wet, and you are wearing that because you'd just gone out of the bathroom. Come on! I'll order some breakfast and coffee, and you get ready. Later, we're going to Putgarten. Yesterday didn't go as I planned. - He looks at me once again before he goes out and winks at me:

– It was much better than I planned!

It takes me a couple of minutes to collect my thoughts after he leaves. In silence, watching my ruffled self in the mirror, thinking about all sorts of details and emotions attached to them, I try to sum up everything that's happened since I arrived here. Soon, I just sigh and start getting ready. The feeling that something is wrong follows me everywhere. In the shower, while I'm putting my clothes on, on my way the inn. Going in, I see Alec chatting with Helga as she sets the table. His face lights up when he sees me. He joyfully asks me to hurry up. I say hello to the hostess and sit across the table from him. I take a cup and he pours me some coffee, and then, as if I was a child, he puts a bun on my plate and cuts it in half. He spreads butter on the hot bread, and laughs as he comments on how we got drunk last night. Sipping my coffee, I look at him over the cup. He catches my gaze and winks again. I shiver.

Of course something's wrong. Fuck, I'm completely and utterly in love with him!

It's ten o'clock when we head out. It's a bright day, bathing in sunlight, without a trace of the yesterday's storm. Although the wind is mild, it is cold enough to make me button up and wrap a scarf around my neck. Alec is on the phone when we get to the motorcycle. I remember I haven't called my family since yesterday and I feel guilty. I send a circular SMS to my parents and Luka: *"Everything's great! I slept in this morning. I'll call you on Skype tonight. Love you! Kisses!"* I send the message and grumpily put on the helmet. I hate wearing that thing! *I must look like an idiot*, I think to myself, pouting.

- You think you'll need a helmet while we walk? – he says when he finishes his conversation. – Only if you consider it a nice accessory. – he mocks the dumb look on my face.

-Oh, I didn't know, we came over to the bike, so I thought that's how we're travelling.

- We came here just so I could take this – he takes a leather folder from the compartment.

- You didn't give it to Inga?

- Not this one. She took her part, and this – he waves his helmet theatrically – this is your job, Mrs. Devan!

He points towards the country road: - After you!

We walk in silence, listening to the sound of the sea carried by the soft wind. The air is fresh and cold. Although the wintry sun is shining, the cold bites my skin. I snuggle in my jacket and push my hands deeper in my pockets.

- You're cold?! – he asks.

- Brrrr! The sun is not what it used to be! – I whine.

- I told you to wear something warm! – he says reproachfully. He takes my hands and they disappear in his. – God, you're freezing!

- Are you ever cold?! – I ask him, feeling his warmth. – Yesterday was a beautiful day. It really felt like spring. I thought I was wearing too warm clothes.

He leads me down the road, still holding my hand.

– Really, yesterday was one of the warmest March days since they started measuring and recording temperature in this part of Germany. And for the past two weeks, actually, since March 20, it's been a real spring. That's quite unusual. - He continues talking without looking at me:

- You know, sometimes there's snow here until April. And then, in April, May even, there's fog, rain, storm. It's particularly cold on the cape.

- Yes, I've read that somewhere – I jump in.

- What have you read? About what? – he looks at me with interest.

- Well, that... about Rügen, Arkona, Putgarten, I did my homework before I took the job.

- Ahaa – he says and pulls me closer, so I bump my shoulder against his upper arm.

I'm surprised by his reaction.

- Wanna fight? – I ask ironically.

- Ha-ha! I don't think I stand a chance. – he laughs, guiding me to the edge of the road. – I pulled you closer for this.

He turns me around and I notice a little train going our way.

- Didn't you want a ride?

- I didn't hear it coming – I say as the little locomotive whistles cheerfully, passing by with its three half-empty passenger cars.

- Want a ride? – he asks again.

- No, thank you. I'm enjoying the walk. – I say softly.

Happy to hear that, he takes my hand again and we continue walking. He asks me about the things I read and found out about the place where we are now. He makes a slightly cynical remark, saying that he thought I knew more about the island, considering the fact I was born here. I frown. I try to explain that, as soon as I found out about the origin of my strange name, I struggled to keep the island out of my life forever. I also mention that I believe that the purple storm has something to do with all the strange and crazy things that happen to me.

- Like what?! – he looks at me inquiringly.

- Well... – I pause. – my dreams and reality are so mixed up I have no idea what's real anymore. The nightmare that occurs each year. The flashbacks of events I'm sure never happened, and I know for a fact that I don't suffer from amnesia. My family is insane. Beyla doesn't remind of anyone in our families. Simply – I shrug helplessly – so many unimaginable situations, which bring into my life people who don't belong in my world.

- Like, for example, Alec Liray? - he asks saucily.

- Exactly. Like him. – I sigh. – Especially since my life got turned upside down after I've met him... how long ago? – I squint, as if trying to remember – Two weeks?

- Maybe it didn't get turned upside down. Maybe you're finally on the right track.

- Yeah, yeah... - I smile. – How can I know if it's the right way, when I have no idea where I am or where I'm going?

- Well – he shrugs – If your heart can't tell you if you're on the right track, you should listen to your job.

- Hey, we're already here? – I am surprised to notice that we're in a little town.

Just like everything else I've seen here, Putgarten is a peaceful, romantic place where time stands still. Contemporary and traditional country houses, side by side in perfect

harmony, are surrounded by tall deciduous trees and evergreen shrubs. The yards are flat, tidy, with open driveways. In the very center of the town is Rugenhof, a typical North German estate, made up of several different houses with adobe walls. There's also a mansion, two stables, a barn, and a small lake within a pasture where horses graze. Just like I assumed, the estate has recently been purchased by the *Arkona Group*. Luckily, it doesn't require renovation. After a short tour around the estate, we move on, across the square surrounded by craft shops, towards the isolate lighthouses. The first lighthouse, which is older, lower, square-shaped, and somehow stubby, seems warm and approachable, unlike the other, newer one, which is much taller and shaped like a tube. Both towers are in the middle of otherwise empty space immediately before the steep cliff in the most prominent part of the Wittow peninsula, on Cape Arkona. Although Alec is still holding my hand as he shows me around, I feel colder and colder with every step towards the lighthouses. I begin to shiver and the pain in my temples gets worse. I feel uneasy and nauseous, so I let go of Alec's hand and stop for a second. Struggling with hazy vision, I look at the new lighthouse, right on the edge of the cliff, and hear Alec's voice calling my name and asking me if I'm ok. I feel my heart pounding in my throat and my breath is short. I break out in cold sweat, my mind is in a haze, and no matter how hard I try, I can't stand properly and I feel I'm losing ground beneath my feet. My knees are weak and I fall into his arms once again. I'm unconscious for a couple of seconds. Complete blank. No sound, color, or smell. Fighting the darkness that surrounds me, I barely manage to hear the sound of my name somewhere in the distance. I give in, hoping that his voice can guide me from my current state. Soon, I feel as if I rise from water. The day is still bright, it's just that now there are fluffy white clouds all over the sky.

- Purple, are you all right now? – moving my head, I see his tired gray eyes with dark circles underneath, and he looks as if he hasn't slept in ages.

- Yes, yes – I mumble, slowly moving away from him. – I feel much better now. Sorry, just a panic attack, I guess.

- But why? – he shakes his head and looks around – there's nothing here that could frighten you.

- I don't know – I look up at the lighthouse. – I think it's my fear of heights. This tower, the closeness of that steep cliff, it's not my cup of tea, really. – I shrug and give him a sad look: - Was it a lighthouse you wanted me to restore?

- Yes, you're supposed to work on the ground floor of the new one – he frowns, looking at the tall tower. – It seems that we'll have to do that some other time. If you're ok now, we can finally go to the house you need to refurbish.

- Ok – I say dejectedly. I feel incompetent again. He puts his arm around my waist, trying to comfort me, and adds that he often had panic attacks as a young boy. He takes me down a narrow road leading back to Putgarten, between the frozen fields. I'm aware

that he's talking just so he could distract me from this awful feeling, so I decide to contribute to the conversation. I start asking him about Arkona and the relationship between his conglomerate and the cape.

- Arkona was the last stronghold of the early Slavs. How much do you know about the Slavs, Purple?

- The Slavs? – I'm surprised by his question.

- Yes. The Slavs. The early Slavs.

- Oh, you know, I'm a thoroughbred Slav! – I say joyfully, feeling proud, and I shudder remembering Morana's expression when I told her I was Serbian.

- Actually, until some thirty years ago, the Devan family believed they were Western Slavs. I'm part Eastern Slav, thanks to my grandma Malena, who's Russian. However, in 1979, my father went to Czechoslovakia and visited the castle of Moravský Krumlov. That's the first time he got his hands on the Slav Epic by Alfons Mucha. He was so fascinated by the giant photos and the subject, he immediately started looking into our origin and he discovered that we're actually South Slavs. That's why he bought some land in Old Skies, because, unfortunately, he discovered that we are the descendants of Devana, who was a Slav queen.

- Goddess! – he corrects me harshly.

- Yes, something like that. Goddess, empress, Ravijojla the fairy! Prince Marko and his horse, and all that jazz – I grin, and then immediately put on a serious face, noticing Alec's grim expression caused by my comments.

- Anyway, Milos explored our bloodline and made this amazing discovery. He brought us to what was then the Socialist Republic of Serbia, so we could live in the land of our ancestors, respecting our tradition and customs. Of course, he soon realized he had made a big mistake, since Yugoslavia was a land that worshiped Tito, communism, socialism, Marxism, and other isms, disregarding both Christian and Slavic customs. And then the country fell apart and nationalism took over. All everyone cared about was if you are a Serb or a Croat, whose god was greater – the orthodox, the catholic, or the Islamic god, who came there first, whose legacy was greater. We no longer had the same ancestors and no one bothered to do any further research. We don't learn much about Slavs at school. As far as I'm concerned, there are the Eastern, the Western and the South Slavs. The South Slavs created Yugoslavia, they came somewhere from the Carpathians, and the supreme Slav god is Perun, the five letter word from the crosswords. I'm sorry – I shrug. – But that's all I know about the Slavs. After a while, Milos stopped talking about our royal origin. Emma and he spend most of their time abroad, and I stayed with Amelia, but that's a whole 'nother story...

- You want to say that Milos taught you nothing, although you moved that far just because of your Slavic origin?

- Oh, well, I was only seven then and I didn't want to live in Yugoslavia. They convinced me by telling me a story about my great-grandmother who was a queen, so for a while, I thought I was going to live in her castle. Like I said, my father soon realized that, regardless of our origin, he picked the wrong country to live in. That's probably the reason why he rarely talked about that, and believe me, I was interested in everything but my bloodline... Wait! – I suddenly realize. – You are a Western Slav, too. Actually, you're like Milos. Part German, part Czech!

He clears his throat:

– Yes. I'm a Slav, too. But I'm a Baltic Slav. – His face lights up.

I raise my eyebrows, trying to remember to which group they belong. – You mean, the Baltic Slavs as a subgroup of the Western Slavs?

- No—he smiles. – I mean the Baltic Slavs as in the ones from Arkona.

- Ahaaa, yes, yes—I nod, pretending I've just remembered that.

- It's not a big deal if you haven't heard of them. Just like the others, the Baltic Slavs are the descendants of the Proto-Slavs.

- The Proto-Slavs?! –the confused expression on my face clearly shows I need more information.

- The Proto-Slavs lived in our proto-fatherland, in the Northern Carpathians. Over time, this area became exposed to frequent and strange epidemics of various deadly diseases. This whole situation made a part of the people decide to leave the proto-fatherland. The Slavs began to migrate and mix with other peoples. Often attacked by others, they learned how to fight, defend themselves, and later conquer. They were a hermetic tribe, but, as they respected and cherished their own beliefs and customs, while respecting others', they became a well-known and highly-esteemed people. They were fearless warriors, prosperous merchants, good farmers, and amiable hosts. The cult of nature that they worshiped was passed on from one generation to the other, completely ignoring the appearance of Christianity. As time went on, based on where they lived and what they did, they made certain gods more prominent, building temples to celebrate them, but they still didn't neglect others. They fought hard against Christianization. This, for them painful process lasted for centuries. It began when they had left the proto-fatherland and finished when Arkona was conquered and the temple of Svanevit destroyed, in 1168.

- Oh, well, you really know a lot about your origins! – I conclude joyfully – Milos could learn so much from you!

He nods affirmatively.

- Our Slavic origin was respected in my family for generations. Arkona isn't just the name of the company owned by the Liray family. Arkona isn't just a cape, a part of peninsula and white limestone that's skinking. Arkona is where my blood comes from. The blood of my ancestors. For a Liray, Arkona means life! Unfortunately, Rügen had been conquered, abandoned, cut off from the people whose homeland it once was. My family found ways to come to Rügen, Putgarten, and reach the center of Arkona. Maybe it was right here where we now stand that they filled their bodies with the energy of their ancestors! Of course, they had to pay good money for that, and the money never ended up in the right hands. Fortunately, the Germans saved what could be saved. They kept the spirit of the island alive for as long as they could. – He gives me a broad smile. – However, recently I purchased many buildings and estates here. That also includes several houses in Putgarten. Your job, my dear Purple, is to make this one shine! – He points at something behind my back.

I turn around. In front of me was a one-story house with thatch roof, hidden behind the bare oak trees and huge pines. A fairytale house, lovely and somehow desolate, it stood behind the shy blossoms of rose shrubs and green boxwoods, inviting the passengers, to walk down its stone path and knock on the massive walnut doors.

- Oh, God! –I scream in surprise–I can't believe it! – my eyes wide open, I am mesmerized by the color of the house. Tyrian purple – the darkest shade of my name sparkled on the walls, absorbing the dark jalousie windows.

- Oh, my God – I whisper. – This must be some kind of a joke! A purple house!–I give Alec a puzzled look.

- A purple house.–he nods.–There's a red one as well. They're both mine. It's just that, unlike the red one, this one is pretty much run-down. I think you'll like the story of this house –he says mysteriously. He takes me down the bumpy lane towards the entrance.

Before we step in, he comes closer to me and whispers in my ear:

- Legend says that this house was once white. It mysteriously changed color after a strange storm that left Rügen covered in purple dust on March 20, 1973. Since then, no one's been able to repaint it, let alone recover its original whiteness.

I frown. My mouth is dry. Frozen, I try to tell him this is more than I can handle. From the corner of my eye, I see his shoulders shake, after which he smiles broadly.

– I wish you could see your face! – he laughs heartily. – I'm kidding, I'm kidding! – he can't stop laughing. – They repainted it so they could trick tourists into believing its color had something to do with the storm.

-Aaaleeec! –I yell angrily, hitting him hard on the shoulder. – You're such a jerk!

He's still laughing as he rubs his shoulder.

- I'm sorry, I couldn't help myself! Ha-ha-ha!

I punch him again. He's still laughing. – Ouch, that was a good punch, but it was worth it just to see your face. Aha-ha-ha!

- Liray, that's not funny at all! – I start yelling at him. – I don't find it funny! That's not something to joke about! You're mean! – I say angrily and turn around. – Fuck, I pour my heart out to you, and you make stupid jokes! Go fuck yourself and find another geisha to keep you entertained. This one's had more than enough of this shit! –I head down the path, boiling with rage.

- Wait, wait – he runs to me. – I was just kidding! – he grabs my arm. The gentle grasp of his hand makes me stop. I roll my eyes–*I'm so pathetic* – I think to myself.

- Sorry, I didn't mean to make you angry. I'm really sorry. I just wanted to make a joke and make you loosen up a little. Ok?!–He leans down so he could come closer to me.

His gray eyes, wide open, glisten happily. They look like the eyes of a twenty-year-old. *God, he's adorable, I could forgive him far worse things than this.* I smile.

- You forgive me? – he's happy to see me smile in response. – Oh, good. I won't do it again! I promise! – he says, like some little boy, and draws a cross across the left side of his chest with his forefinger. – You have my Slavic word!–he winks and takes me back to the house.

- By the way, I don't know if you're aware that you curse like a sailor when you're nervous.–he says playfully.

I punch him on the shoulder again.

– No, no, I'm not trying to say anything bad, it's adorable to me, but also surprising, since it seems so unlike you.

- Oh, really? And what do you believe seems like me? – I make a sour expression.

- Well... I don't know... As far as I can tell, you're gentle, fragile, shy – he carefully tucks a wisp of my hair behind my ear. – Vulgarly seems too rough for you.

-Oh, Liray, you don't know me at all! And please, would you finally open the door. – I order him coldly.

Inside, the house is silent and half-empty, with thin layers of dust on the covered furniture. Warm, stale air tickled my nostrils with its smell of wet wood and withered flowers. Beams of sunlight coming through the jalousie windows played with specks of dust. I look around, memorizing every corner of the large room. Frayed floral wallpapers, damaged old wooden floor, cracked carpentry, and a fireplace filled with old

paper and concrete dust. Wires sticking out of the ceiling. One door leads to a small kitchen with a sink without a tap and a green fridge filled with shoeboxes. The window is covered with a gray blanket. Dark linoleum is missing from the larger part of the floor. On the other side, there is a small bathroom. No toilet seat, toilet tank on the floor, a sink with a rusty tap. This window is covered with a piece of gray blanket as well.

When Alec asks me what I think of the place so far, I say nothing. I go back to the first room. I lift the white sheet in the middle of the room and a cloud of dust tickles my nostrils, so I sneeze in my sleeve.

– Bless you!- I hear Liray behind me.

– Thank you–I answer with watery eyes. I rub my nose again, and approach the dining table amazed by its massive dark structure underneath the cloth. I feel its surface with the tips of my fingers, touching the cracked polish. I give a content smile and quickly climb the stairs next to the entrance. I find myself in a narrow hallway where the only source of light is a small crack in the blinds. I try to open the window, but a splinter gets stuck in my forefinger. I swear and put my finger in my mouth. Alec grabs my arm.

– Did you hurt yourself?

I shake my head. – It happens all the time. No big deal. – I try again.

When the light finally gets in, I notice a rectangular painting between two room doors, covered in dust. Underneath the dust were painted purple flowers. I come closer.

-A coincidence, is it?! –I think out loud. I take a handkerchief out of my bag and wipe the dust off the painting.

Although it's still covered in gray dust, I could clearly see the leaves and the purple petals of the flower.

– Ruyan! Alec, I have one just like this! A coincidence, right?!–I say a bit louder.

He approaches the painting, looks at it for a while, and then shrugs.

- Fuck, Purple, I guess it's a coincidence. Ruyan actually originates from this area. All families here, apart from growing it in their gardens, have it as a motif on various pieces of furniture, textile, and paintings as well.

-Hmm... all right – I say softly. I slowly crack the room door open. Unlike the ground floor, which is a mess, everything here seems fine. Sunlight flows in through the open shades, illuminating a spacious empty room with white walls and dark oak hardwood floor. The other room is much smaller. It's empty just like the first one, with vintage rose pattern wallpapers. The bathroom, the size of the first room, bathes in sunlight coming from the window which takes up an entire wall. Some three feet away from the window, almost in the middle of the room, stands an antique bathtub with wrought iron

elements. The toilet is separated by a stone wall, on the other side of which is an antique sink in wrought iron. The floor, like in the other room, is made of dark oak. I walk around the bathtub and come to the window. Through stained glass divided into squares by white slats I can see the bare treetops of the forest and the old lighthouse in the background. Even now, in late March afternoon, here and there I can see the green color of the sleeping nature, and the view is breathtaking.

I feel Alec come closer and stand behind me. Slowly putting his right arm around my waist, he pulls me in. Every part of my body, even my gaze and breathing go still. The tips of his fingers slide across my neck as he moves my hair to the side. I lean on his chest, stretching my neck.

– I have a feeling that you like the house—he says quietly, with his lips almost touching my ear. I nod affirmatively and close my eyes, feeling his warm breath, before he softly touches my skin with his lips for a split second. I shiver with delight when he gently kisses my shoulder. He slides the tip of his tongue along the line of my neck and gently bites my ear. The heat flowing through my body makes me sigh. I nestle in his arms and sink my nails into his thigh. He puts his hand under my sweater. I feel pressure on my stomach as he pulls me in even closer. His kisses grow more intense as he puts his right hand on my breasts and the left one on my pelvis. Still leaning onto him with my back, I raise my arm and run my fingers through his hair. I direct his head to the places where I want to feel his lips. I notice that he has a hard on, and I slowly rub my ass against it in circular movements. He starts breathing heavily. He turns me around so we're face to face. He caresses my tongue with his, kissing me passionately. His grasp becomes more intense. He presses his body against mine and sensually touches the bare skin on my back. I want him. I want him just for the way he smells, just for the way he looks at me. I want him just for the way he kisses me. But instead of fulfilling my desires, he suddenly stops and literally pushes me away. I lose my balance for a second. My hair falls in my face. I fix my jacket and try to pull myself together, catching my breath, and move my bangs out of my face. He breathes heavily, clenching his fists. His face is red, his eyes blurry, and he looks as if he's in pain.

- I can't, Purple! I shouldn't... - he says before he comes closer to me again. He puts his hands on my face and slowly makes me look up at him. – Please, you have to understand that I just can't! I can't be close to you... No matter how much I wanted that, it's... it's really impossible – he looks at me, and for the first time, there's nothing in his eyes. Just oceans of gray emptiness.

– Why? – I ask him, taking his hands off my face. – May I ask why? What's with all the games?

- No... um... I can't explain. Believe me, I'd love to, but I can't...

- Oh, really? –I feel rage building up inside me. – And why is that?!

- Purple, even if I could, you wouldn't understand... at least for now. – he says calmly.

- Well, try, Liray! Try to explain! – anger makes me talk loudly. – It can't be that difficult for someone like you to explain why he's jerking around someone like me! What the fuck does that mean, taking me and then rejecting me? You enjoy seeing how much I want you, is that it?

- No, no! It's not that, Purple! – he says slowly, trying to put his arms around me again. – You have no idea how much I want you! Truly, with all my heart and soul and body, I want to be with you, but... - he gets into my face – there is a good reason why I can't... Unfortunately...

- Tell me, I want to know the reason. – I say more calmly.

- I can't – he looks down.

- Tell me something... give me a hint – I start begging.

Alec is silent for a while, his eyes nailed to the ground.

– You have to understand, I just can't...

– Is it perhaps that you are just a rich jerk?! – I push him away. – You know, you've got the money, you've got the power, why wouldn't you fuck up someone's life a bit! And Purple would be perfect! She's such a mess, she won't even notice I'm messing around with her the whole time.

- Purple, you know that's not true! – he says loudly.

- No, I don't know! – I feel tears build up in my eyes. – Fuck you! – I punch him in the shoulder and storm out.

He catches me just as I open the front door. Suddenly, a million flashes make me go blind. I raise my hand to protect myself from the light coming from numerous cameras. I turn around and see Alec staring angrily at a bunch of reporters in front of the doorstep. He hugs me without a word and pulls me back inside.

- Wh... what the fuck was that?! – I'm on the verge of screaming.

- I'm sorry. Fucking reporters! They must have heard I was here... I'll take care of it right away. – he takes his phone and calls Inga, pacing up and down angrily.

I pull the white cover off an old leather armchair and sit down, trying not to make a cloud of dust. I watch him explain nervously what happened. From time to time, he gives me a warm smile, trying to convince me that everything's ok. *Everything's not ok, Alec, it's all wrong!* I nod in discontent. *Who knows what you've gotten yourself into, Purple!* I say to myself and lean back in the armchair.

- Shall we? – he asks when he finishes his conversation.

- Sure! - I reply grumpily.

– Ok. Let me do the talking. You just smile and look sweet. All right?–he offers me his hands to pull me up. I slowly put mine into his.

– As if I have a choice –I mumble.

We reach the door. He gently caresses my cheek. – Now, let's see that smile!

I give him a sour grin.

– Ok, that will do. That's fine!

I roll my eyes.

Alec steps out first, and then I step out behind his back. Cameras begin flashing again. They start shouting questions.

– Good afternoon! – Alec sounds completely calm. –How are you? – he smiles as he puts on his sunglasses. – It really wasn't nice of you to startle my associate like that! Can I help you in any way? – he asks kindly.

Everyone starts asking who I am. Why is he alone with me in the house? Am I his new girlfriend? Does that mean he's broken up with Ellen Schloss? Where am I from and is it true that we're staying in Vitt together? Are we planning to move to Putgarten once we finish the house? How old am I? Alec raises his hand and calmly explains that I'm from Serbia. That I have my own restoration company in Serbia and that the *Arkona Group* has hired me to restore several buildings in Rügen now owned by his company. That I'm staying in Vitt while I work on the house in Putgarten, and that they've wasted their time travelling so far, since he's going back to London tonight.

- But we have the information that you looked pretty close while you were in the village. We have a photo of you holding hands! – an Asian girl with her shiny black hair in a low bun interrupts him, showing him on her tablet a photo of the two of us, the moment he pulled me in so the little train wouldn't run me over.

- Oh, so if I grabbed your hand now, for example, to prevent you from falling, would that mean that we're dating?! That would be all. For any other information, please contact Miss Klemen, as always. –He turns to me and offers me his hand and I give him mine. He leads me down the three steps in front of the entrance. Holding my hand, he helps me walk through the crowd and takes me to the black car. Already standing in front of the car, as soon as he sees us, Vuk opens the doors and walks towards us, trying somehow to protect us from the cameras with his broad shoulders. He easily places me on the back seat and Alec sits right next to me. We are just about to go when Alec's phone rings

and he quickly picks it up. He's silent, carefully listening to the person on the other side, and in the end just says:

– Ok—he looks at me – I'll call you! – he hangs up and leans forward, telling the driver to take us to Vitt. Then he sits back comfortably. He searches for my hand and covers it with his large palm. Not even looking at me, he squeezes it, as if he wants to tell me that everything's fine.

- Purple—he sighs sadly, nodding his head. Then he stops and focuses his gaze on the road. I try to move my hand, but he just clutches it even more tightly, still looking at the outside. His touch and squeeze make me tingle. I feel that familiar sweet chill and it makes me angry. I start scolding myself. *God, is it possible that I'm such an airhead?! Can it be that I'm just an idiot who's completely unable to react or think properly when around him, or simply leave this unhealthy environment?! I've been out of my mind for two weeks, each part of each day holding a new unpleasant surprise, a new proof that Alec Liray is just a twisted lunatic. And yet, in the end, I can't stay away from him. My body won't stop yearning for him, and my mind can't focus on anything else but him.* I stare through the window. I try to teach myself how to give him a piece of my mind without sounding like a pathetic fool who can't make peace with the fact that he turned her down. *I'll tell him I miss Beyla! I'll tell him I want to swim with the dolphins. Oh, I'll tell him I'm in love with him, and that my feelings are distracting me from work! Ha! That's a great excuse! Maybe he'll say he's in love with me, too!* I grin mischievously, but a moment later I go back to scolding myself. Someone like him can't possibly have feelings for me, no matter how twisted we both may be... The car stops.

– I can't go any further, sir – Vuk brings us both back to reality.

– Yes, yes, certainly – he says – We'll walk to the inn. Please, take Mrs. Devan's things. - he gets out and offers me a hand. – What things? – I ask confusedly.

- From the hotel – he answers slowly.

I open my eyes wide – What? What do you mean, from the hotel?! – I raise my eyebrow angrily.

- Allow me to explain as we walk. – he almost whispers. – I wouldn't be surprised if the reporters showed up here soon. That's why it would be for the best if we get to the inn as soon as possible.

I have to admit to myself that this time he's right.

We slowly get on our way.

– Inga believes, and I agree with her on this one, that it would be best if you stayed in Vitt for the moment. You can go back to Binz whenever you like. Just wait for things to cool down, because, once they see I'm gone and you're doing your job, they'll leave you alone. They've already dug out all the information about you anyway. I wouldn't want

your family, especially Phillip, to think that there's something going on here apart from work.

His words feel like a kick in the guts. I avoid looking at him and start walking quickly so he doesn't see how disappointed and hurt I am.

– I'm sorry about your things—he continues. –You could've picked them up tomorrow, but I thought you might need something tonight. Don't worry about Inga going through your stuff, believe me, she's the last person in the world who would do that.

I pretend that I'm listening. I only hear certain words and syllables, because my brain doesn't react to whole sentences. I'm still trying to banish the echo of his previous sentence from my head. *I don't want them to think that there's something going on here apart from work*, the words keep ringing in my mind.

We arrive at the inn and Helga's already waiting for us outside. I greet her with a simple nod. I sit down next to the fireplace. Liray tells Vuk to take my things to the room and orders lunch. He sits across the table from me and puts the leather folder with my duties on the table. I take it and start looking through the complex plans.

– Do you want to have something to drink before lunch? Brandy, or some other aperitif?
– he asks me as he takes off his jacket. I'm quiet and pretend to look at the furniture arrangement with interest.

– Or some tea, perhaps? There's a nice homemade blend, with rum.

I'm still ignoring him. I flip through the pages, thinking about how the moment I step into the room I'm going to look at the contract, see if there's something I could complain about and quit the job.

– Purple – he sounds as if he's begging. – Please, look at me!

Helga interrupts him, bringing a pitcher of homemade juice.

– Here, a refreshing drink! Aronia, from our garden – she smiles and leaves.

He pours me a glass and I start drinking right away. Only after I taste the refreshing sweet nectar in my mouth do I realize how thirsty I am. I drink it all in one sip. Putting my glass down, I notice he looks shocked.

– Wow, good thing she didn't bring the beer first – he says and takes a sip.

I laugh heartily.

–Imagine she brought some brandy first! - I pour myself another glass, but now I take only a couple of sips. – With everything that's going on these days, I forget to eat and drink. Is it possible that you're not as thirsty as I am?! – I quickly take another sip.

- Oh, I am... I am – he sounds confused. – It's just that I wanted you to come back to me first, I mean, I wanted you to listen to me and arrange and clarify everything concerning your job. I think we should start over. Ok? – He offers me his hand.

If you think I'll forget your kisses and your touch, you can forget about it, I think to myself.
– Let's give it a shot – I say friendly. – No surprises? – I accept his hand and squeeze it gently.

– No surprises – he confirms warmly.

Helga interrupts us, bringing a large plate filled with food. Sauerkraut, cutlets, sausages, cabbage salad, baked potato, cheese, and hot bread she put on the table, make my mouth water. – Now I feel hungry, too – he says as he takes his knife and fork.

We eat in peace. Slowly. Enjoying every bite of the delicious food, we talk about the plans for the house. I tell him that the first thing I'm going to do is repaint it, which makes him laugh. About the lighthouse, I promise I'll visit it as soon as possible, but that I won't actively participate in the restoration, because of my fear of heights. Although he mentions again that in two or three days I can go back to the hotel in Binz, I tell him I've decided I'm not coming back. I loved the room we slept in last night. My cheeks begin to burn when the memory of last night and his naked skin comes rushing back. I look down.

– I had a wonderful time last night as well. Don't feel uncomfortable. – he says casually. – Just, unfortunately, we'll have to put it all behind us.

-Yes, we'll have to! – I cock my head to the side. *Fuck, if I only knew why*, I tell him with a cold look.

- I want to take a shower and take these clothes and your smell off me – I say as I get up. I pretend that I actually wanted to say that out loud and that I couldn't care less if he never takes me in his arms again, or covers me in kisses.

–Ok, ok, I understand. – he says and quickly gets up. – So, we agreed on everything? I'm leaving today. Inga's staying in Berlin. Vuk will be at your disposal 24 hours a day. Whatever you need, you can call Miss Klemen, or any of my assistants, or me, for that matter. I hope you'll have time to enjoy yourself. Believe me, regardless of the season, Arkona is always beautiful.

He walks me out of the inn and to my room in silence. He stops. – All right. That would be it. – He clenches his fists again and gives me a long, sad look. He opens his mouth, wanting to say something, but his words remain lost in the air. Awkward silence ensues, making the situation even more difficult. I offer him my hand.

– Well, goodbye, Mr. Liray – I say formally. – Everything will be all right. Don't worry. You'll be so pleased with my work, you'll hire me again in the future, I'm sure.

He gives me a warm smile. – Goodbye, Mrs. Devan. I'm sure I'll be satisfied, actually, I have to be, considering that my future is in your hands. He takes a bow and walks to the motorcycle where Vuk is waiting for him. He puts his helmet on, waves, gives me a smile, and races down the road between the houses.

I stand on the doorstep listening to the sound of the engine mixing with the sound of the sea before it simply vanishes. I take a few steps towards the coast. I feel a breath of cold air on my face and hands, which makes me stop and give up on the idea of going down to the pier. As the sun sets, the sky above Arkona turns dark gray. The air smells like snow. *Did he just say that his future is in my hands*, I smile. *What an ass!* I go into my room and look at the bed. It is made neatly, covered with new floral cover, on top of which are my suitcase and my travel bag. I start taking my clothes off, but then stop for a second. Taking deep breaths, I try to find traces of his smell on me. Unfortunately, the sparkly smell that caressed my senses only a couple of hours ago is now gone. I disappointedly throw my clothes on the armchair, ignoring the fact that most of them ended up on the floor. Hot bath relaxes me and clears my mind. I decide who I'm going to call first, and how I want my day to begin tomorrow. When I finish my bath, I wrap a towel around me and tiptoeing slowly, leaving drops of water on the massive floor, I go to my room. Its silent emptiness makes me sad and summons the memory of the night before. Alec waiting for me, soaking wet, breathing heavily, in all his beauty and weirdness, longing for my kiss, longing for me. A knock on the door brings me back from my thoughts. I carefully crack them open, and then give a warm smile to my hostess, letting her come in with a pitcher of fresh juice and a basket filled with homemade cookies. However, Vuk comes in as well, leaving me an iPhone with phone numbers and email addresses Liray thought I might need.

- In case you need anything, I'll be staying at the hostess's home. – he says briefly. He wishes me good night and leaves. Helga also kindly says "sweet dreams" and leaves, carefully shutting the door. I turn the key in the lock twice, put on the safety chain, and check whether it's locked. I take the suitcase and the bag off the bed and pull out my iPad. As I wait for it to connect to the network, I put on my soft gray pajamas, nestle comfortably in the armchair and feel so incredibly happy when I see Beyla's ginger locks on the screen.

-Mooooommy! –I hear her scream joyfully. – Aunty, grandma, come quickly! Mommy's on Skype! – she calls the others to join her. She clumsily moves the tablet to the side and I see crystal blue sky with green palm trees. – Mom, it's so wonderful here! – she sounds happy. I bite on a cookie and smile. I forget about all the crap that's happened, listening to her tell me about everything she's seen and done in Hawaii.

- Oh, come on, you should've told him he's a jerk! I mean, honestly, darling, you're not his type. You're more my type. – he grins cheekily. – But he's a real ass, leading you on like that – Luka spoke angrily. – A true rich fag!

- Can you keep it down a little?!–I get into the screen.

– Why?! As if there's anyone there except for you! And even if there was, they wouldn't understand Serbian!

- Luka! –I put my forefinger on my lips to signal him that he should stop talking, since Vuk is now here. I transfer quickly from front to back camera. Luka just whistles when he sees him. – What, your nanny's here?! Just don't get lost in that village! I can't believe where he's keeping you. I'm surprised he doesn't hide you in one of the lighthouses. – He's bad-mouthing Liray as if he's his greatest enemy.

- Luka, hush! –I say briefly.

He pouts his lips. – Ok, ok. – he speaks more quietly. He nods, then gives me a naughty look, and comes so close to the camera I can only see his full lips and white teeth. – And you! You'd better have fucked me, than let him leave you wanting! You should wise up and keep your pants up as well. Rich people are all insane – he yells as loud as he can. Vuk approaches me and I quickly end the video call.

- Is everything all right, Mrs. Devan? – he asks me with a blank expression.

- Yes, yes, a friend and I are just joking around a bit. We'll leave in fifteen minutes, that is, as soon as I finish my coffee, ok? – He nods affirmatively and sits by the door, flipping through newspapers. I look at my cell and laugh when I see the message I received:

Luka: You cow, why did you hang up on me? ☺ ☺ I didn't finish the sentence. I wanted to add that all the girls in Old Skies and its broader environment are crazy about me, only you play hard to get! You stupid woman :P

I reply: Hey, redneck, go do something useful instead of chasing skirts. Thank you for the company, water my flowers, don't fuck in my bed, love you and miss you so much XXX

Another message: You silly, I miss you, too, I'm angry because I can't defend you from that Liray guy, or him from you☺Anyway, the smartest thing to do is to keep him at arm's length, there's obviously something seriously wrong with him. I fuck everywhere except in the kid's room. The flowers withered, I'll buy you new ones. ILU Talk to you in the morning.

I turn off the phone and put it away. I take a sip of my now tepid coffee and look at the watch. I got up at eight. I told Vuk we're going to leave around nine. I feel rested. In fact, I'm in a really good mood. Although I was afraid that I won't be able to fall asleep, considering my need to overanalyze everything that's happened with Alec, but I realized how tired I was as soon as I finished my conversation with my family. I somehow managed to send Luka a message and invite him to an early morning cyber hangout, and

fell asleep in a second. I didn't move at all, I just closed my eyes. My arms lying peacefully next to my body, I sank into serenity and darkness and a dreamless sleep. I woke up only once, to drink some water, and before I fell asleep, turning to the side from the corner of my eye I saw the light from the bathroom fall on Liray who was sitting up straight in the armchair, his arms on the armrests. He was wearing a gray hoodie. I made a mental note to imagine him naked next time. I go back to sleep with a broad smile on my face. Somewhere, before I completely relax in the weightless dark, I heard his muffled soft laughter.

Although I've thought about going to Putgarten alone by foot, Vuk says that's out of the question. He says we're going by car or he'll walk with me. I didn't like the other option. His formal demeanor would stand in the way of my casual sightseeing. Unlike previous two days, today the sky is dark gray, with heavy rain clouds above the sea. It seems like it's going to rain any second. Wind is blowing from all directions, finding its way through my sleeves, making me feel unpleasantly cold. *How horrible*, I think to myself before I get into the back seat of the car.

We stop in front of the path leading to the purple house. Dark morning with its gloomy light made it even uglier. Although tyrian is my favorite shade of purple, both for its dark elegance and its royal origin, this amount of the color under the grayness of the roof and dark windows and doors made it unappealing to the eye. I put my wool hat on and go out checking if I wrapped the scarf tight enough. I tell Vuk that, as far as I'm concerned, he's free and that I want to look at the house and get a feeling of its interior once again, on my own. Yesterday, Liray made sure I remember only his hands on my skin. The scenes from the bathroom flood my mind and I feel heat spread through my body, filling me once again with burning desire for him. I curse and go in with a frown on my face and my laptop bag and folders in my hands. I gently push the doors, letting them open wide on their own, and step in. The silence and the smells that welcomed me yesterday awaken my senses again. *It's incredible how silent it is in here*, I think to myself as I put my things down on a half-covered table. Although the house is gloomy, it fills me with serenity. The darkness, the dampness, the bare rooms, they make me feel nothing but joy. I open the shades and let the pale sunshine in, relating my tranquility to yesterday's event. As soon as I take the dusty blankets off the kitchen and bathroom windows, I realize that I'm just stalling with desire to be upstairs. Next to this big window, where Alec's fiery kisses thrilled me and made me want him more than anyone before. Tingling all over, as if I expect to at least find him there, I go to the bathroom. The doors squeak as I open them. I open my eyes wide and look around. I put my hand on my lips, hoping that I'll silence my surprise and make my heart stop throbbing. Right next to the window where my whole body burned with desire, I find a white chest with a white bow. I slowly pull out the envelope under the ribbon and skim the short text looking for his name. Gracious signature – Alec Liray, makes my heart jump with joy. For a moment I'm overwhelmed with emotion of pure happiness, which makes me lightheaded and fogs my eyes. Before I absorb his handwritten letters on fine paper with

Arkona logo, I realize that excitement I feel banished the disappointment I felt for not hearing from him since our parting.

"Dearest Purple, I promise it will be worth everything you've been through and everything that's to come. Please be patient and trust me. Trust yourself. Please, believe in wonders. Kisses, Alec."

Sheer joy, too strong emotion written in black ink, rushes into my heart and fills me with happiness I didn't expect to feel. One short sentence and one short request with all their simplicity and beauty, suddenly make me sad. I don't even try to stop tears from falling when I press the paper against my chest. I sit on the edge of the case and look into the late morning sky. It's no longer gray. It's no longer cold. I'm no longer scared by the reasons I came to Rügen. It's not fifty thousand euros that brought me here, nor the desire to defy Phillip. My heart brought me to Arkona. No matter what happens, it will happen after I've finished this house. Be it good or bad, it will close a chapter of my life. I will finally stop searching for my place in the world I'm not even sure is mine. I lean against the cold glass. Lost in thought, sitting between two window panes, I notice thin stripes of frost. Like everything in my life, they had a shape. It is the shape of ruyan petals. When I squint and focus, I can even notice the purple color of shining crystals. For a change, I care that my mind tells me that frost isn't purple, because, for a change, the only thing I believe this moment is wonder. All kinds of wonders that make up my life and wonders I don't try to interpret or ask for.

For a while, I just sit on the chest, my back against the glass, firmly holding the piece of paper in my hands. Completely out of touch with reality, this morning, this island, maybe even the world. When I realize that this uncomfortable position is giving me a cramp in the leg and makes my neck sore, I get up and finally open the chest. Its content makes me laugh out loud. I nod and take the things outside. A worker jumpsuit, a gray and white plaid shirt, a tool belt, a purple safety helmet, two pairs of gloves, and a violet safety mask. Left on the bottom is a white rectangle gift box, some 8 inches long. I slowly pick it up. I rub my palms against my pants and peek under the lid. Then I finally open the box and find a silver *Ladybug* speaker and an iPod. Although everything so far will leave me smiling for days, the moment I turn on the white gadget, I remain speechless. I look through the lists and give a joyful smile, seeing the songs that marked important moments in my life. Those are hit songs from previous decades, special lists assorted by genre and mood. Although I would first like to listen to the *Love* playlist, I decide to go with the eighties. I quickly change my clothes and plug in the speaker. It's incredible how powerful this little thing is, I think to myself when I hear the first words and beats of Bowie's *Absolute Beginners*. Suddenly, music fills every corner of the purple house. My body starts moving to the beat. Dancing and smiling broadly, carrying *Ladybug* in my hand, I start dancing around the house. Going down the stairs, as if they were a stage, I shake my hips, feeling awesome. Prancing around, I go down to the living room and only then do I notice Vuk looking at me blankly and three other men in yellow vests giving me a contented smile under the brightly colored helmets. I feel my

cheeks turn red. I clumsily try to turn down the volume. In the end, I simply unplug the speaker and the music stops.

– Um, good afternoon! – I’m sorry, I wasn’t expecting you. – I say as I come over to Vuk. I expect him to read the expression on my face that says I have no idea why they’re here.

- No problem, it was a pleasure to watch you – says the eldest. He’s a gray-haired man in his late sixties, with long gray moustache. Offering me a hand, he takes off his helmet, revealing the almost bald crown of his head:

– Mrs. Devan, I’m Otto Kalt from *Kalt&Hoff*, hired by the *Arkona Group* to do the necessary construction work on their buildings here, including this house. This – he points to a chubby man with rosy cheeks, dark freckles and ginger curls – is my deputy, Christian Blatt.

Christian, showing thin wrinkles around his mouth, gives me a warm smile – It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Devan – he says showing his small even yellowish teeth underneath the full lips. He bows courteously.

- And finally – Tobias Hoff, our architect – Klat finishes with the introductions.

In front of me is a man in his early thirties, no taller than five foot ten, with an athletic build. Locks of black hair fall on his forehead, above his incredibly green eyes. He takes off his helmet, showing his ruffled hair. He quickly fixes it with his hands. – You can call me Toby. – he gives me a smile, and as I shake his hand, he adds – you really have a sense of rhythm! – I give him a cheerful smile: - That’s the thing with a sense of rhythm: you either have it, or you don’t. And if you do, then it’s all over the place. – I answer flirting a bit.

The architect gives me a broad smile: – Elvis Presley?!

I give a surprised nod: – Yes, Elvis! – I look into his face. The depth of his green eyes first distracted me from his pale symmetrical face and the beard that’s just started growing.

– Hoff, as in the other owner of your company? – I ask.

- Tobias’s father, Helmut Hoff is the co-owner. But Toby is our best architect, that’s why he’s here – says Otto.

I raise my eyebrow: - Ok, I’ll take your word for it.

I ask them to excuse me for a moment and look at Vuk:

- Could we talk outside, if you don’t mind?

He nods affirmatively and we go to the door.

- I thought I was going to finish the house on my own – I start explaining – I would certainly hire construction workers at some point, but I don't think I need an architect or a structural engineer.

- Mr. Liray insisted that all the work in, on or around the house is done by the workers at *Kalt&Hoff*. You are in charge of – he stops and looks to the left, trying to find an appropriate word – you are in charge of the decoration. A strange smile appears on his face, but then quickly disappears when he sees my grim expression.

- Just decoration?! – I say angrily. – I don't think so! – I storm into the house.

- Gentlemen, I believe there's been a misunderstanding. I am in charge of the renovation, and I prefer to do it on my own.

They exchange surprised looks and I go on:

- Of course, as far as the electrics and plumbing are concerned, I will most certainly need your professional help, but ninety percent of the work will be done by me. Whether it's wall painting, carpentry, or working with the tiles. - I silence Vuk's objections by saying that I'll call them the moment I need them, which will certainly be soon. I see them out and tell Vuk that I'll probably spend the entire day in the house. I send him to fetch my coffee thermos and Helga's apple cobbler. I make sure he's gone and plug in my *Ladybug*. Listening to *Take on me* by A-ha I dance and take the sheets off the furniture.

The following days flew by. Right after breakfast, I'd go to the house, where I would stay almost until sundown. Vuk would bring me lunch, or I'd walk to one of the two restaurants. At dusk, I'd return to the inn for dinner and a regular chat with Helga and Bernard. Then I'd rush to the room so I could talk to Beyla, my parents, or Luka. I'd turn the lights off at 9 p.m. Proud of myself and the work I'd done, I would fall into a dreamless sleep, no nightmares in sight. As soon as I'd wake up, I would rush to my phone to read Liray's message, sent at 6:55 a. m., wishing me a wonderful day. And at 8:55 p.m. every day he would wish me good night.

Although I followed the plan I'd made, it took two weeks for me to realize that, if I was going to do it all by myself, the job wouldn't be finished until fall. The house was rotting all over; the walls, floors, and the electrics. That demanded hard rough work. I'd also decided to keep most of the furniture, which meant a lot of time spent on its restoration. I swallowed my pride and called the workers, letting them do all the rough work, and I focused on the furniture. "*Decorations*", the word echoed in my mind as I sanded the olive cabinet behind the house. Once the workers had taken over the house, I could only work outside. They would carefully bring out the pieces of furniture I worked on, place them under the awning stretching along the entire front side of the house, laying them

onto the improvised wooden floor. At night, they would cover it all with heavy tarpaulin. Luckily, there was no rain and the temperature was always above ten degrees Celsius, with long sunny intervals making days seem even warmer than they were. The second week of April, although it was a prelude to spring in every sense of the word, with bright skies, gentle breeze, and blooming nature, ended in heavy rain and generally bad weather. We had to react immediately and move the furniture inside. Most of it was returned to the house. However, since we have only fixed the upper floor, I was afraid that the new floors might get damaged, so I agreed with Tobias that we should move the rest to the lighthouse.

Making excuses about not having enough time, I hadn't gone there at all. I avoided it during my walks, pretending that part of Arkona didn't exist. Aware of the fact that I wasn't avoiding it just because of my fear of heights, but that there must have been some much greater reason, I avoided thinking about that, since everything had been going great so far. However, now the situation was alarming. I didn't have any time to hesitate. The furniture was loaded in the truck, and Otto and Vuk's reaction to my decision was really surprising. The impression that they do not agree with me, although they didn't say anything, followed me all the way to the lighthouse.

Incredibly heavy rain and strong icy wind followed us down the road. In ten minutes, it seemed as if all the water of this world came pouring down. The vehicles could barely move. In the end, a couple of meters from the lighthouse, it finally stopped. I decided to call Christian, who was driving the truck, and tell him to leave the furniture inside the truck, and leave the unpacking for tomorrow or some other, nicer day. However, I'd made up my mind to finally enter the tower with red roof, on top of which I could barely see the pale light.

– I thought the lighthouse was out of service – I said to Vuk who was slowly approaching the door, waiting for the right moment to go out.

– It is. However, the mechanism can be remote controlled from Rugenhof. Especially when weather is this bad.

– Well, there are no ships or sailing boats that can strand on the limestone – I tried to be funny.

– Anyway, it's a tradition – he said grumpily. I could see he wasn't happy about going outside into the horrible weather. I could imagine how angry he was with me, for choosing that particular moment to fight my demons and go there.

Although I suggested that he stays in the car, he said that was absolutely unacceptable. As he struggled to put on his raincoat, his phone rang and I seized the opportunity to go out without him. I ran the ten feet distance, but that was enough for me to open the doors of the old building and make puddles on the rough stone floor with all the rain dripping from my clothes. I took the hood off my head and started looking around in

astonishment, focusing on every part of the round room. I was surprised by the bright oak walls with visible annual rings. The light, although dimmed, did not illuminate just the winding stairs, but also, with the help of the wall lanterns, spread equally across the room. Stretching along the entire wall, except around the fireplace, was a circular bench. The seats were worn out, made of leather the color of fresh meat, and they leaned onto the supporting wall, no higher than sixteen inches. They obviously served for storing things. Around the massive stone fireplace, the walls were empty, apart from several old pictures of Arkona. I slowly come closer to the open fireplace. Although the hearth seemed warm, I had the impression that icy wind was coming down the chimney, which gave me chills. I shivered. I quickly turned around and screamed at the top of my lungs when my eyes met Tobias's deep green gaze. I stepped back in surprise. Although he was smiling, showing his perfect white teeth, there was something insane and cruel in his beautiful face. I felt like those wonderful emerald eyes were swallowing me, sending me into their depths.

– I didn't mean to scare you, Mrs. Devan – he said, grabbing my upper arm.

– It's all right – I stuttered, trying to muster a smile. – I just thought I was alone... and you surprised me. I can't believe I didn't see nor hear you when I came in.

- Oh, I was at the top – he released my upper arm and put his icy fingers around my hand, inviting me to follow him. – Would you care to join me? The weather is bad, but the view is still wonderful.

The painfully cold touch of his smooth skin made me pull my hand out instinctively and put it in my pocket.

– I'm afraid of heights. I'm sorry – I replied quickly in order to justify the less than pleasant gesture.

He laughed loudly. Spreading his lips, he wrinkled his forehead and mockingly replied that it's unbelievable that Alec Liray hired someone who had fear of heights to restore the lighthouse.

– A bit unprofessional and unusual, if I may say. – he concluded.

Knowing that I didn't really have an excuse, I shrugged. The doors flung open and Vuk stormed in, soaking wet and out of breath. Two steps later, he was standing right in front of me.

– Don't you ever run away from me like that again! – his red face told me that I'd managed to make him so furious he was breathing fire. I obviously made him show emotions I wasn't accustomed to.

- W..well... – I stuttered – I just went inside without you – I said trembling like a child. I felt as if I was explaining my behavior to my parents. – I mean, you saw me go in.

-I knew you were inside – he said coldly. – But I couldn't open the fucking door for almost ten minutes! And how come you're here, Tobias? – he turned to the architect who stood completely still and indifferent to Vuk's rage.

- I went in a minute before you – he said in a flat voice.

– What do you mean, you couldn't open the doors? You could've knocked, yelled, I mean, I was clearly no more than three feet away from them. – I spread my arms innocently.

Vuk suddenly turns back to me.

- Mrs. Devan, I've been banging on the door, yelling and trying to break in for ten whole minutes. If there wasn't for Otto and his tools, I would still be outside. You're trying to say that you didn't hear me?! If not me, then Otto, as he was breaking down the door with his saw and hammers?

Shocked, I just nodded silently and looked at Tobias who confirmed that we really didn't hear anything and that the old oak walls make good isolation.

– Tobias! If I didn't know you, I would think that you'd bought your degree! Isolation?! We were banging on the doors like crazy – Otto said simply, approaching him from behind. He stood in front of him, getting in his face. – Rotten oak on damp walls makes good isolation! If you say so! – then he turned to me, wrinkling his forehead and fixing his moustache and asked kindly – Are you all right, Mrs. Devan?

– Yes, I am – confused, I was trying to understand the entire situation – I am perfectly fine. But I really didn't hear anything. I was probably focusing too closely on the interior, that is – I walked towards the fireplace – I was looking at the hearth, trying to understand where the cold air was coming from – I leaned towards the dark hole and felt another gust of icy air.

- We can leave – I said and put on my hood. – We'll leave the furniture in the truck. This weather is probably affecting all of us.

Otto and Tobias nodded affirmatively, while Vuk just followed me, still boiling with rage. Cocking my head, I fluttered my eyelashes like a schoolgirl and stroked my hair. In a thin voice, I promised that I would be good.

A warm smile on his face told me that he forgives me. Then he gave Tobias a murderous look as he walked past him. – We'll talk in the morning! – he said sharply. – Good night!

We headed out and I was astonished to see that the lock was picked. The architect came with us. Otto stayed in order to fix the door. It was still raining outside. However, the rain was much lighter and we could get on our way to Vitt. As we were entering the village, I noticed that it was no longer raining, so we didn't get wet on our way to the inn. At least I didn't. When I reached for the door, Vuk told me that he had to change his

clothes and that he would be back soon. I nodded, letting him know that I understand him and that I'm sorry.

– I really didn't hear you banging on the door – I said honestly.

– I know – he said and went through the kitchen and into his room.

Shocked by his response, I tried to make sense out of everything that happened in the past thirty minutes, and I frowned. I hung my raincoat and went to my favorite spot. I sat down, took off my boots and snuggled up in the floral blanket. With a worried expression on my face, I look at the dancing flames in the fireplace... it wasn't the first time I lost track of time.

... I laugh and hold my arms around his waist, leaning onto his black leather jacket. He turns his head towards me and says – Trust me... - Trust me... he whispers softly in his hoarse voice. His eyes nailed to mine as he stands above me, his naked body close to mine. I stretch my hands out to him, sinking my nails into his strong chest. My desire for him draws red lines on his skin. He laughs. He takes my hands off his chest and softly kisses one palm and then the other. He slowly leans into a wet kiss. I feel his unusual scent... That's not Peter. Peter doesn't smell like that... I run my fingers through his hair. I look at his face, but I'm distracted by his heavy eyes. Glistening and sad at the same time. I lose myself in desire to vanish inside them... inside him...

Helga's ringing voice brought me back from my thoughts. I almost fell off the wooden bench when she shook me back to reality. I looked at her with my eyes open wide and she asked me if I was ok, sounding awfully worried. Catching my breath, I wiped sweat off my forehead. I nodded affirmatively and took a bid sip of water from the glass she offered me.

– I'm... fine – I stuttered. – I drifted away, looking at the fire. – I'm sorry I scared you.

Helga liked my response and accepted it quickly. She started setting the table and telling me how her mind often wanders off like that. I stopped listening to her. Some lost memories started flooding my mind again. I felt guilty. I frowned and Helga gave me another funny look. I smiled at her sweetly. Although I was burning up on the inside, I decided to engage in a conversation with my sweet hostess, trying to banish the sense of embarrassment and shame that was eating me up.

For the first time in three weeks, I wasn't able to fall asleep. I was completely absent-minded during dinner. I made an excuse about being too tired and cold and went to my room as soon as I got the chance. I wasn't in the mood to chat on Skype either. I sent my family a brief message telling them that the network was down because of the bad weather and that I was going straight to bed. After a long shower, I saw that I'd received a message from Phillip. The fact that he'd decided to contact me at the moment when my past began digging its way into the present just made me feel even more unpleasant.

Phillip's message read as follows: *Your lover is transferring me to Kamchatka! If I don't do as he says, I'm getting fired! You need to prevent that or I'll take Beyla and tell the world who you really are!*

I wiped my wet hand against my bathrobe and replied nervously: *If you're talking about Liray, I can't help you because I don't even know where he is! Besides, why would he waste his time on you? So stop blackmailing me and do your overpaid job!*

I received his reply in just a couple of seconds: *You've got seven days to fix this mess. I'm sure the media will be more than happy to publish a story about you and him planning my demise! Or even better, do you want me to say the real truth?!*

I started typing furiously and unleashing all the anger that had been building up for years. I hated him and I hated myself for letting him so thoughtlessly into my life. Before I clicked send, I looked at the armchair and was shocked to realize that, once again, I had managed to summon Liray. For the first few seconds I just sat there, petrified. Then I jumped on the bed, walking back and forth. Out of my mind, I started yelling at his silhouette and his sad eyes!

- Get out... Get the fuck out of my room! Get out of my armchair! Get out of my head! I know I'm not crazy! I'm not crazy! I'm not imagining you! I can't see you there! You are making me see you!

The towel slipped off my head. The bathrobe belt got untied. With ruffled hair, half naked, I stopped and stared and the figment of my imagination, with crazy look in my eyes. The silhouette I so clearly projected from my head. I was scared by its clarity. His piercing eyes, his hands on the armrests he was clutching with all his strength, his chest rising and falling, giving the impression he was breathing heavily. His half-open lips wanting to say something. I threw my phone at him and was shocked to see that he flinched. I came down from the bed, slowly, arching my back a bit, my head high. I came up to his face and felt his warm breath on my skin. He wasn't blinking. Just staring at me, deep sympathy in his eyes. I started hoping he was actually there. He told me to believe in miracles, and this is a miracle! That's what he meant! I raised my hand, wanting to touch his face. I shivered. I tried to control my breathing and stop my heart from jumping out of my chest. I smiled like a lunatic. Excited, because I would rather believe in miracles than the fact that I should be hospitalized. From the corner of my eye, I saw my reflection in the window. Still standing above the armchair, I quickly looked at the mirror next to the door. I only saw my ruffled reflection with my arm hanging in the air. Just me. My bathrobe that was about to fall, my scared face, my hand in the air a couple of inches from the empty white armchair. I continued watching myself in the mirror. I swing my arm through the air, expecting to touch, grab something. I silenced a cry with my hand, and felt pain in my chest as I stepped back. Eyes wide open, I looked at the armchair. Nothing there but my wrinkled shirt and my phone.

– God! – I screamed, letting tears run down my face. - God, why is this happening to me?
– I threw myself on the bed and dove into the pillows, putting one over my head. I shivered and began to weep... - I'm not crazy! I'm not crazy!

When my body got tired of crying and my mind of trying to find a reasonable explanation, I came out of the pile of pillows and covers. I dragged myself to the bathroom. I washed my face, opened the medicine cabinet and took an aspirin. I swallowed it. Returning it the box to the cabinet, I noticed there a bottle of lexilium. I opened it grumpily and took a pill. I frowned. Two would do the trick. I swallowed them and went back to bed. It was 2:34. I turned off the lamp. I hugged a pillow, hoping it would somehow comfort me. I decided to call doctor Lorenzo in the morning. I needed new drugs. More effective ones. Maybe a couple of days at his hospital. My eyes grew heavy. I turned to the side and looked at the empty armchair. I closed my eyes. Falling asleep, I felt a hint of Liray's smell. I struggled to open my eyes. I looked at the armchair with a blank expression on my face. It was still empty.

– Wonders! –I mumbled. – Fuck you and your wonders! – I fell asleep, dreaming of the hanging bridge and long shadows chasing me, through crooked towers burning from the ground.

The screen of my iPhone flickers and after it rang for the fourth time, the answering machine took over. – Bitch! Can you hear me, you whore?! – Phillip cursed.

- I'll destroy you! You sent his goons to hunt me down! I'll destroy both of you! You're not getting away with this! Mark my words! – I hear a thud and then a crackling sound coming from the phone. – Let me go! Liray can't do this to me! I want to talk to him! I have to tell him something! I demand that you call him! Let m...

I'm coming! – I mumble, hiding under the covers. The knocking stops for a moment, and then starts again. I crawl out and throw the covers aside. I feel like the life has been sucked out of me. I somehow manage to sit up on the edge of the bed. I look at my feet. The brightly colored winter socks remind me of my nana.

Nana was actually the nanny that took care of me while everyone else was busy. Milos and Emma met her soon after they'd moved to Old Skies. I was awfully sad and I couldn't make peace with being a stranger in the new surroundings. I cried and cried and refused to get out of my room. After three days, my parents managed to lure me out by telling me we were going to visit the castle of my great-grandma, queen Devana. When I saw the ruins of the fortress, I was so disappointed I felt even worse about being

there. I started running away from them, saying that I'd go away for good and that they'd never find me. I ran for a few meters and then tripped, fell, and hurt my knee. But then granny Vasilisa came to the rescue. She picked me up carefully and said something I did not understand, but that was enough for me to smile and realize that in that warm embrace of white skin that smelled like cotton I could find comfort and peace. My reaction to this woman was enough for my parents to ask her if she would be my nanny. It turned out that Vasilisa had been living alone for a while. She didn't have any children, and her husband had died several years before we met her. She supported herself by selling handmade knitwear at an improvised stand at the fortress entrance. Frail, petite, with big gray curls, and truly warm sky blue eyes, she didn't let me surrender in my battle against my demons and nightmares, not when I was a little child, nor as I grew older. Wise and quiet, she protected me with her heart filled with love and advice, whose support I unfortunately lost when I needed it most. Nana died in her sleep in 1996, on the first day of spring, a day after my twenty-second birthday, on March 21. Her death was the last straw, and it made me decide to go to the USA with Peter and leave Old Skies, Serbia, and my old life.

Knocking on the door gets louder. I rub my feet. – All right, I'm coming! – I shout again. When did I even put the winter socks on? The memory of nana always makes me sad and mushy. I wipe my tears against my sleeve. And those crazy parents of mine, they hired a woman without any recommendations. I laugh to myself. *How awesome are they!* I stop in front of the door and run my fingers through my hair a couple of times, and in the end just ruffle it again.

Who cares, I think to myself and grab the knob.

- Darling, do you always look like crap, or only on those special occasions when I see you? – Inga's laughing her heart out, spreading her arms in her tight black raincoat and black leather gloves, holding her sunglasses in one hand and her shiny black *Fendi* bag in the other. Around her head is a black scarf with dotted white *Fendi* logo. As always, she's wearing bright red lipstick. As always, she looks flawless.

- Do you always look like *Vogue* cover girl, or is it only when you want to make me feel like shit? – I smile and hug her. – How come you're here? – I ask.

-Oh, well, I can take a day off every once in a while! –she says as she goes in. She turns to me. – Seven days, actually! – she throws her bag on the armchair. – But before I go somewhere warmer, Liray asked me to see how you're doing and if you need anything. – she takes off her gloves, throws them next to the bag, and proceeds to elegantly unbutton her coat.

- If you ask me, I think he sent me here to check whether you hooked up with some hot construction worker. She gracefully turns around and takes off her coat. She's wearing a tight ribbed midi dress, deep shade of gray, wide-cut, with three-quarter sleeves. She puts her hands on her waist and looks at me from head to toe: - It's just that... darling,

you could hardly pick up a handyman apprentice! For heaven's sake, you look awful! And you sleep until two p.m.! What are you doing up so late, huh?!

I shake my head:

- Don't ask! - I move her bag so I could get my phone. - Phillip - I say, reading the name on the screen. - Excuse me for a second, please. - I sigh and listen to the message, stepping away from the window. I feel sick listening to my husband calling me a whore. That's all I manage to hear, because my battery's dead. I plug in the charger. Inga sits on the armrest looking at me with her eyebrow raised.

-Ugh ... -I shrug again-I think I'll just go home.

- I don't think so-she says plainly. - Unless your heart tells you so, I will have to disagree.

She comes closer and gently puts her thin white hand on my shoulder:

- Who or what is making you go back to Serbia?

- My past! - I frown.

-Oh! - she's surprised by my response. She stands beside me, putting her arm around my shoulders, and guides me to the bathroom. - If you let your past into your present, you have no future!

"My dear Purple, bad past must not interfere with your present. It will destroy your future!"

Before I go into the bathroom, I tell her:

- My nana used to say something just like that!

- What a wise woman! - I hear her through the door. -I'll go see Helga and order us lunch. Actually, a breakfast for you! I want you to join me in fifteen minutes, looking fresh and ready to tell me everything!

I tell Inga about the messages. My phone is still charging, so I can't read them to her, which is fortunate, because maybe she'd ask to see them, and then she'd read Phillip's threats. If I have to share embarrassing details, I'd rather tell her about seeing Liray in my room, than tell her about my husband blackmailing me. Inga pouts her lips, nods, and listens. After I finish, she admits they planned to send Phillip away to Kamchatka. He's one of the rare people who have managed to damage the company's image so much in so little time. Apart from doing a sloppy job, by damaging the company's image she means enjoying alcohol, women, and drugs. Since it's a Muslim country, *Arkona East* had a hard time covering that up. Sending him to Kamchatka was the best they can do for both sides. She puts her hand on mine. - Don't worry, darling. As far as I can tell, Alec will do everything his way if he has to, just to protect you.

- What's the deal with him? -I ask.
- With whom?-she says, putting her phone on her ear.
- Well, with Alec... and me. - I almost whisper.
- Like you don't know! - she gives me a broad smile and shakes her head.
- Oh, Mr. Liray! - she says. She gives me a quick wink and turns around. - Could you spare a few minutes? I think we have a tiny problem.

Bernard comes inside, opening the door wide, and I feel a breeze of fresh air coming my way. Inga walks to the window, still talking on the phone, leaving a gentle and soft scent of cotton behind her. Barely noticeable, but still strong enough to remind me of nana and make me storm out without a word. I run into my room, leaving the door open. I reach for the phone and call doctor Lorenzo. The sound of his strong Italian accent calms me down. Completely ignoring Inga who now stands at the door, breathing heavily, I ask him to schedule a session. At least a virtual one. We agree to talk at 6 p.m. via Skype.

- I really can't talk about it! - I say as I put my phone in the back pocket of my jeans.
- But, is everything going to be all right?! - she asks me and wrinkles her forehead. - You scared the hell out of me when you ran out. I didn't even finish my conversation.
- Oh, it's gonna be fine! - I say and put on my jacket. - Doctor Lorenzo is helping me deal with my past and my... - I look at the empty armchair - ... demons. Would you like to go to the house, see whether the work is moving along well?
- Oh! I can't wait to see it!-she says enthusiastically. I lock the door and we start walking hand in hand.
- Wait, have you seen Vuk?! I can't believe I haven't seen him all day! He was so mad at me last night. - I say sadly.
- I sent him to drive some stuff to Binz. Why was he angry? - she holds my arm even tighter and comes closer. I start talking about the storm and the whole event at the lighthouse.

When we finish looking around the house, Christian drives us to the lighthouse. The furniture is already inside. Two armchairs, the chairs from the living room, a sofa, a bench, and two kitchen cabinets I kept are upstairs, and on the ground floor are a locker, a chest of drawers, a rocking chair, one big chest for firewood and a smaller one I simply couldn't throw away, although it's really shabby. I slowly climb the narrow stairs. The interior looks exactly the same as on the ground floor, except there's no fireplace, so the bench extends along the entire wall. The leather on the seats looks a little less worn out. The light is coming from four small windows with iron frames, one on each side of the

world. There is a heavy hat stand next to the door, with a yellow raincoat with blue and white stripes on the sleeves and an old dark chocolate mail bag, underneath which is a pair of high rubber boots. It crosses my mind that Bernard wears exact same clothes and boots. However, I wouldn't be surprised if every other male citizen of Putgarten wore the same. Sudden storms on this island call for this kind of rubber footwear and clothes. My friend comes out the door and looks at the stairs leading up.

– Purple, darling, have you ever been upstairs? The view is wonderful, and there's a nice, cozy room up there, much more pleasant and warmer than these two.

I follow her and look in horror at the never-ending spiral metal stairs. Between the steps I see the retaining wall at the end of which I suppose is the room. I shiver: – There's no view or reason in the world that would make me climb those awful stairs! They look so loose and easy to crack! Look how hollow they are! – I frown in disgust. – I wouldn't set foot in there if Liray was waiting for me upstairs, completely naked! – I grin at Inga who laughs tilting her head back.

– Then should I tell him that all he can get from you at the lighthouse is a cold?! – she suddenly gets serious – You said that Tobias was upstairs? All the way up, or? – she asks, holding her hand against the wall as she goes down the steep stairs all the way to the ground floor.

- Well, I really don't know. He said the view was wonderful. I guess he was at the top. – I slowly follow her. – He scared the hell out of me, believe me, he had such crazy look in his eyes. – I shiver.

-Hmm... - Inga wrinkles her nose and takes off her gloves so she could take her phone from her bag. She sits on a chest and quickly writes a message. She puts her phone back in the bag and stands up. Fixing her coat, she says:

- He can't have been at the top. The tower is locked. There are only two keys. Mine and Liray's, the one he gave you. Do you still have it? – she asks carefully.

I search my pocket for a set of keys. Among them is one old-fashioned massive key, the color of old gold. I rattle the keys in front of her nose.

- Tobias may be a psycho, but he's not a pickpocket!

She nods affirmatively. The moment we step outside, black *Maybach* stops right in front of us.

– Our ride, just in time! Excellent – she says cheerfully. – I'd rather die than walk in these heels! – she opens the door before Vuk steps out. Following her in, I shout – Hello – and he gives me a warm reply and closes the door behind us.

- Oh, it's 5:15 already! – Inga looks at her little *Cartier* disappointedly. – You have a session with your doctor at six, right?

- Yeah... – I roll my eyes – I think I overreacted a bit. – I say almost repentantly. – I guess I was too frightened by Phillip and his threats. – I remember I didn't listen to the entire message. I pull out my phone and I am shocked to realize that the message is gone. I frown as I scroll down. Worried, I tell Inga I somehow deleted the message, and that I now feel even worse since I don't know why he called.

- Purple, let us worry about Phillip. – she says with a faint smile on her red lips.

- I know, Inga, but you... you don't what he's like. If things don't go his way, or something happens to him, he'll... - I bite my lip and look down.

- He'll what? – she asks me in a flat voice.

- Well...-I scratch my forehead. – He'll do everything he can to prove that I'm a bad mother and get custody of Beyla.-I say in a shaky voice.

She gently puts her hand on mine, squeezing it softly. – You really shouldn't worry. While you're on Skype with your doctor, I'll arrange everything with Phillip. Next time he calls, he'll be ecstatic-she winks the moment we enter Vitt.

Inga doesn't come out with me. She says cheerfully:

- Look, I'm now going to the hotel in Binz. I'll have a serious talk with Liray and other members of the board about Phillip. At 8 p.m., I want you to be at the hotel bar, all dressed up. It's time for us girls to have some fun! – she frowns sourly: - If that's even possible on this island – she winks at me and closes the door.

I rush to the room. I take off my jacket and my shoes and sit in the armchair. I impatiently look at my watch – *twenty minutes until the session*. Minutes went by and abated my desire to tell him that I've started hallucinating. At 6, I'm greeted by my doctor, with his black hair, thick eyebrows and wide nose. I tell him about my insecurity caused by the appearance of a new man in my life, a man I'm madly in love with. I tell him that I don't know how he feels about me, and that he blows hot and cold all the time. The disappointed expression on my good doctor's face is a sign that I chose the right story, and I didn't even have to make it up. He must have expected much more from an urgent session, so it will be shorter than planned, which means I'll have enough time to get ready for my night out with Inga. A few cocktails, some music, and good company sound like the best therapy at the moment.

It's nine in the evening and I'm finishing my second Chardonnay. Inga and I sit next to the big windows at the corner of the restaurant. We're casually chatting about our romantic failures and the stupid things we did for love. I'm relieved; even a woman like her can make a complete fool of herself just to get some man's attention.

- And of course-she says as she takes another glass of wine – with every one of them, I was convinced he was the one. You know – she says looking over my shoulder – the one that makes your thoughts embroider your own custom towel monograms. The one that

makes you feel a million butterflies in your stomach. The one that makes you blush when he talks to you and whose message overwhelms you with happiness. The one that makes you want to do an urgent compatibility horoscope analysis and wish for a bunch of snotty offspring who will be the reason you give up your career.

She takes a sip, puts her glass on the table, and pouts her lips. – I'll have to change my astrologer! – she says, deep in thought.

- Luckily, you're young, you have so much time ahead of you. – I try to comfort her. – Still, I can't believe you're so unlucky when it comes to men. Hm... - I squint – maybe it's the other way around? Maybe they're not lucky?

She laughs heartily:

- Yeah, yeah – she leans towards me, and signals me with her hand to come closer. She puts on an evil smile and whispers: - Well, it's true that...

- Well, well! Mrs. Personal Assistant, without her mighty boss, entertaining his plaything on her own! – a hoarse, strict woman's voice interrupts her and I automatically look up.

If I was ever afraid of dark as a child, picturing its thick darkness like the dead silence in the deepest part of the ocean, now, looking at the blackness of Morana's eyes, I realize that all the children's fear lives in the darkness of her gaze. Her eyes, so dark, so lightless, so dead, make me flinch when I see her next to us. Mean, thin, brightly colored lips, shiny black hair braided into a fishbone, face white as snow; she doesn't even try to look pleasant. With murderous look in her dark eyes, she switches her gaze from Inga to me, with too much anger, looking too offended.

Unlike me, frozen by her appearance, slapped in the face by her calling me Alec's plaything, Inga ignores her completely at first. She slowly finishes her wine, coughs softly into the cotton napkin, tapping her lower lip. She rolls her eyes and slightly cocks her head, looking at the woman next to us. She gives her a wide artificial smile and finally speaks:

- Morana?! What an unpleasant surprise! I thought that witches spend springs in their moldy catacombs. Don't tell me you're out of carcasses to eat? – she says coldly and impersonally, and then tells me in most fluent Serbian I've ever heard:

- My dear, please, ignore this woman completely. Luckily, her shallow mind doesn't allow her to understand more than two languages. Still, I'd like to ask you not to react to anything the two of us could say to each other. I'll do my best to get her out of our sight as soon as possible.

Slowly and obediently, I lean into my chair. Her good and clear Serbian, but also the way she spoke to me, leave me speechless, and I notice how Morana's angry expression slowly disappears under a wave of Inga's arrogance.

Morana just stands and watches for a couple of seconds, sour smile on her face, and then clicks her tongue angrily:

- No matter how much I'm repulsed by this hot weather, I couldn't miss the last spring – she puts her hands on the table and gets into Inga's face. – I know you're hiding something! I'm not sure what, but I'll find out. Luckily, you have so little time left. You'll make a mistake and then – she turns to me and claps her hands, imitating an explosion, and shouts: - BOOOM! Scared, I flinch, leaning into my chair and desperately holding onto the edge of the table.

- The end will finally come! – she says and winks at me.

- Stops scaring the woman. – says Inga calmly. – You'd better crawl back into your lair. You're starting to stink! Your behavior will make us lose an excellent associate. You have to understand, Morana, that unlike you, we have a life. A wonderful life at that!

Morana completely ignores Inga. Petrified, I watch her put her hands down and take my hands. She looks at them and turns them.

- Hmm... –she mumbles and I feel the unpleasant and rough touch of her icy skin. – Interesting. So your boss is still fucking Ellen? We thought this was his new toy.

I pull my hands out of hers. She gives a roaring laugh, stands up straight and tilts her head.

- You're right. It's too warm and cheerful in here for my taste! Fortunately, it's all about to change soon. – she points her finger at me. – This kid is strange. Too strange! – she turns around without saying goodbye and goes away from us, leaving a heavy, ugly smell behind her, the smell that reminds me of rotten meat.

While I'm battling the nausea caused by Morana's smell in the air and recovering from everything I've just heard, Inga is giving me a soft and warm smile.

- What, what is this? What has just happened? – I stutter.

She raises her eyebrow in surprise:

- This?! – she waves her hand. – Oh, it's just Morana. She used to work at *Arkona Oil & Gas*. She got fired two years ago under suspicion that she was involved in industrial espionage activities. Unfortunately, we didn't have any strong evidence, so she sued us. She won in court and we had to pay her 1.7 million euros. However, she thought that we should have given her much more. She became obsessed with Alec and the *Arkona Group*, so she always appears in the places we least expect her to be. She keeps provoking us, hoping we'd react in some inappropriate way, so she'd get the chance to sue us again.

- And you speaking Serbian?! – I squint. – You’ve never told me you spoke Serbian. And so fluently as well!

Inga blushes.

– Well, thank you for the compliment, but professor Pavlovic wouldn’t agree with you. Anyway, I always learn the language of the country I reside in. As you well know, I’ve been in Serbia for six months, and before that I lived in Croatia for more than a year. Luckily, your languages are the same.

In spite of my confusion, everything she says sounds logical.

– Morana is really insane—I say twirling my forefinger at my temple. However, I feel the smell of Morana’s skin on my hand, and I jump up in disgust. I ask Inga to excuse me and go to the ladies’ room to wash my hands.

Frowning, I let almost hot water run and start rubbing my hands vigorously. *God, how can someone stink like that?! Freaking psycho!* Wiping my hands, I remember she said that “he” was still fucking Ellen! She must have been talking about Liray. He dated that model, Ellen Schloss, for a long time – and then I get sad. *What if it’s true? What if that’s the reason he doesn’t want to be with me?!* Dejected, I look at my hands, fingers, and palms. *What do my hands have to do with Alec being with Ellen?* I shrug. *Purple, the woman is obviously insane and shouldn’t be trusted.* I comfort myself and go back to the restaurant where Inga orders us some more wine.

- Darling, what kept you so long? – her tongue falters. I move my chair to sit down. – Did you notice how cute that waiter is?! – she whispers, pointing indiscreetly at the tall blond waiter in white shirt with a bow tie. I take a big sip of wine.

– Excellent choice, Inga—I smile saucily. – Do you think he has a brother?—we both laugh heartily and toast.

Around 2 a.m., they practically kick us out of the bar where we went after the restaurant. Inga goes to her room with Vladimir, the waiter, and I drag myself to Vuk who somehow gets me into the limo and drives me to Vitt. He carries me to my room, drops me onto the bed, and I giggle as I bounce off the mattress.

- Good night, Mrs. Devan. Try to get some sleep. – he says as he goes out.

I mumble something that sounds like I understand his advice and close my eyes. The room is spinning.

– Oh, fuck! – I squeal, realizing I drank too much, and turn to the side.

- What are you laughing at?! – I angrily shout at Liray who’s “sitting” in the armchair again.

I pull the pillow underneath me and throw myself onto it. In a moment, I swing, stumble, and fall on the floor. I try to get up, but I realize I have no strength. I just sprawl on the floor. *This isn't bad either.* – I think to myself and fall asleep.

The first days of May in Rügen feel like a real late spring. Everything's green, the smell of blooming nature mixes with the soft scent of sea salt carried by the wind, and a large number of tourists wakes up the island and makes it bustle with life. There are more and more guests at the inn each day, and Bernard has his hands full with tourists wanting to sail the Baltic Sea in his boat and fish. *Kalt&Hoff* have finished not only the façade, but all other necessary repairs and alterations in the house as well, so that just leaves me to restore the furniture from the ground floor of the lighthouse. I still mostly do everything by myself. I sometimes ask Tobias to drive the necessary things in his little pickup truck, because I really don't want to go back to the lighthouse. Although we started off badly, it turns out the young architect and I have a lot in common. From music, books and films to a kind of boycotting social networks. At first, Vuk strictly demanded that he drives me there and back, but soon he starts loosening up and lets me come to Putgarten by an old bike that used to belong to Bernard. Instead of going to lunch, I often ride through the endless fields of wheat, sunflowers and brightly colored poppies. Losing myself in the beauty of the nature whose colors in the evening reflected in the sky, I completely forget to eat, and by the middle of May I notice that I've managed to lose almost eleven pound, in spite of Helga's good cooking. I feel great. Healthy, rested, making progress at the house every day and feeling proud of myself. My parents and Beyla are still in Hawaii. Although I miss my daughter, I feel happy knowing that she's happy and enjoying herself there. Except for my painful longing for Alec that doesn't seem to ever cease, everything's perfect. Too perfect, if you ask me. Liray doesn't come to Germany at all. He sends me messages all the time, or makes quick calls, asking how I am and if I need anything. Inga came here twice more and both times we ended up drunk, after which I went back to Vitt alone, and she dragged Vladimir to her hotel room.

- You finally managed to make it rain! – his arms crossed on his chest, leaning onto the door frame, Tobias watches me as I get the shower running in the bathroom for the first time.

Trying not to get wet, with my raincoat on, my feet bare, and my jumpsuit legs rolled up, I turn off the shower and get out of the wide stall that is now in the place of the old bathtub. Side and partition walls are covered with natural stone, and the floor is decorated with polished pebbles from the beaches of Rügen that I personally polished and placed in the floor, one by one. Ceiling above the stall is made up of small openings in three sizes with water dripping from them, making rain effect. Shower glass ends one and a half feet from the ceiling, letting steam spread freely across the room.

- Do you think it was a mistake to remove the bathtub? – I ask as I wipe my feet. I put on my socks and my *Timberland* boots.

Raising his arms as if he's surrendering, he says that I was right to do it, but that installing the shower took too much time and cost as much as the renovation of the entire floor.

– A person would think that for some reason you are emotionally attached to this bathroom. – He sounds almost as if he's mocking me.

I smile as I take off my raincoat.

– I always wanted rain in my bathroom. I couldn't pass up the chance to make it here. On my way out I quietly add:

– Don't tell anyone, but I plan to be the first to try it out. – I wink at him and walk away. My phone starts ringing.

I answer Inga's call cheerfully, but she confuses me right away. She explains that she completely forgot to tell me about tonight. That I have to leave for Berlin with Vuk right away, so I could pick something to wear.

- Inga, take it easy! I don't understand a word you're saying. – I somehow manage to interrupt her. – What did you forget? What's happening tonight?

- Oh, darling, tonight is the traditional May Ball at the Kurhaus!

- Well, all right—I say calmly. – What do I have to do with it? I mean, it's no big deal if I miss it.

- No, no, that's out of the question! – she says quickly. –You have to come! This is the first time the May Ball is organized under the sponsorship of the *Arkona Group*. We're all going to be there. It's going to be wonderful – she almost sings – you'll see!

- But... Inga, I don't want to sound like a stereotypical woman, but, I have nothing here that I could wear to a ball... actually – I stop to think – I do have one little black dress, but I don't know...

- That's why I'm calling you! –she sounded nervous. – This ball has centuries-long tradition and, of course, there is a dress code.

- Don't tell me I have to wear a costume? – I look at Tobias who cheerfully offers me an apple. I frown and shake my head.

- Maybe not a costume, but something reminiscent of that time – she almost whispers – the end of the nineteenth century.

I laugh loudly:

- You're kidding me, right?

- No, not in the least! – she sounds a bit offended.

- Inga, I am a bit strange – I laugh at what I heard – but to have a combination of a wedding dress and D'Artagnan's uniform in my closet, that would be too much. Even for me.

- Oh, darling, you're not listening to me at all! – she proceeds quickly. – You have to leave for Berlin with Vuk right away. Choose whatever you wish and don't care about the price! – she giggles. – I have to go now. I'm still in Madrid. I'll see you tonight at 8 p.m. Kisses!

- But, but... –I stutter but she already hung up.

I give Tobias a sad and confused look. He finishes his apple.

- I thought you knew about the ball – he says when he swallows the bite. – Actually, that's why I came here today – he smiles looking at me with his green eyes and runs his fingers through his curly hair. –I wanted to ask you to be my date tonight – he blushes a bit and looks down, looking shy like a boy.

- Well... no... I mean, I don't know – I wrinkle my forehead. – I really don't know. Especially since I have – I look at the clock behind him – six hours until the ball and all I have is manicure à la sandpaper! No, I don't think I'll be going there –I conclude, picking up the things from the table and putting them in a bag.

- Well, that's too bad... –he stutters disappointedly, opening the front door for me. – I thought you'd go. These balls are really special, and I would love to go there with you.

- If they had only called sooner, I would have gone, no doubt. This way, I have too little time to find everything I need and get ready. I'll come next year, you'll see! – I wink at him. – Besides, I decided to finish Pekic's *Rabies* tonight. It'll make my blood run cold – I put on a frightened face and walk down the lane, with black *Maybach* soon stopping right next to me. Vuk comes out of the car in a hurry.

- Mrs. Devan, we're ready to go – he nods formally.

- Go where?! – I raise my eyebrow.

- To Berlin!

I give him a wide smile and wave my hand, saying that it's not going to happen. That I'm going straight home. However, he tells me that Liray insists that I come to the ball.

- Will he be there? – I ask reluctantly.

- Certainly. – says Vuk briefly.

I purse my lips and think. Although I know I have no time to do anything, the chance to see Alec again seems too good to be missed. I jump into the car, cheerfully saying goodbye to Tobias. I tell him that we'll maybe see each other tonight.

Three hours of running around Berlin get me into rather unpleasant situations and make me tired as hell. When I enter the exclusive stores, they check me out and make rude comments, but what makes me really sad is the fact that I can't find anything that fits into the dress code. It's well past six. Feeling broken, I tell Vuk that it's time he takes me back to Vitt.

- Why don't you try somewhere else?! – he asks me after I sit in the back seat, dead tired.

- Well, I don't know. I went everywhere Inga told me to. And even if I were to find something now, I wouldn't have enough time to get ready and arrive there by 8 p.m.

Vuk nods affirmatively and starts the engine. I suddenly realize I'm awfully hungry. I ask him to stop somewhere and get us currywurst with fries. He stops by a small Imbiss and comes out, just to return a moment later talking on the phone.

- I'm sorry – he gives me a warm look. – We just have to go to one more place before we get food.

I ask him where we're going, but he doesn't answer and just rushes out of the city center.

Ten minutes later, I'm shocked to see that we're right in front of the *Arkona Group* headquarters. Remaining in his seat, Vuk opens the trunk and the security guard throws in a massive black box and a paper bag.

- All right – he says cheerfully – now we can get that currywurst.

We go back to Vitt and arrive at seven twenty. I decide not to say hello to my hosts and just go to my room feeling disappointed. Vuk follows me with the box and the bag in his hands. I turn around wanting to wave and wish him good night, but I step back, surprised that he's standing next to me.

- If you start getting ready now, we won't be too late – he goes into my room and places the box and the bag on my bed.

He bows and gives me a white envelope. I open it quickly:

"A good friend recommended this for you. I can't wait to see you. I'm sorry you're not my date. Kisses, Alec"

Beside myself with happiness and excitement, I read the message several times and then open the box.

I scream with joy when I see the luxurious long dress made of silk and taffeta. My eyes glistening, I take it into my hands, looking at every piece of it. It's made up of a corset top and a silken bottom part with flounces ending in tightly woven lace. The back end must drag on the floor, while the front end is the length of a mini skirt. The side of the corset is woven with black silk thread. A little black bolero jacket accompanies the dress. It's got long tight sleeves and a high Russian collar with two blood red ribbons on the sides, half inch wide, sewed in with thick old gold thread. Exact same ribbons are sewed around the ends of the sleeves. Above the ribbons are two heavy buttons the size of coins, also the color of old gold. I touch and examine every inch of the dress. Excited, I pull out the box with shiny black *Mary Janes* with high stiletto heel and a small platform. Thrilled, almost dancing, I run into the bathroom, knowing that I haven't got nearly enough time to make myself look my best.

Around nine, Vuk pulls up the car in front of the *Kurhaus*. He quickly goes out. He opens the door and offers me a hand. I hear the sound of music and the crowd. I take a deep breath, fix the simple low bun Helga helped me make and look at Vuk, begging me to tell me how I look.

- Beautiful – he says with a broad smile and walks me to the entrance.

Feeling nervous, excited, and tired, I walk into the majestic hall that looked as if time had stopped two centuries ago. Men in tailcoats and ornate uniforms from different countries, girls and women in long ball dresses, most of them resembling today's wedding gowns, they all engaged in lively conversations, scattered across the hall. Although the string orchestra's pleasant rendition of waltz called for a waltz, no one danced. I walk through the crowd, hoping to see Alec, when someone pulls me by the hand.

- You look perfect! – Tobias looks at me, mesmerized.

A bit confused, I return the compliment, genuinely impressed by the way he looks. He's wearing a custom made tailcoat, white shirt, and a bow tie. His long black bangs fall on the side of his face, perfectly accentuating his normally green and now emerald eyes. He looks sophisticated and elegant.

- Tobey, I have to admit you leave me speechless. – I smile gracefully.

- Who's your date? – he says as he looks around.

- Oh... – I breathe in, getting ready to tell him how I barely managed to get to the ball, when I notice Liray from the corner of my eye.

My lips shiver and I carefully look over Tobias's shoulder. Carelessly holding her hand on his shoulder, Ellen Schloss stood leaning onto Alec. Followed by a sad squeal in my body, my lips instantly go dry. Once again, I feel miserable, small, weak, and pathetic. Forgetting completely about Tobias who's asking me if I'm all right, with tears in my

eyes, I watch Ellen in her long turquoise mermaid dress, turning around and showing her voluptuous breast in a low-cut corset. Platinum hair combed into a perfect French bun, full, shiny lips, and snow white teeth, she is a perfect match for someone like Alec Liray.

Alec turns around and looks in my direction, so I quickly hide behind Tobias who gives me a bewildered look.

- Puprure, are you all right? You look as if you've seen a ghost – he says and turns around. I pull on his sleeve.

- Don't look! – I beg.

-Ah – he says mockingly. – Liray and Ellen. Don't tell me you didn't know they're back together?

-Well... – I stutter – I didn't... I mean, I don't pay much attention to what's happening in his life – I look down and stare sadly at the tips of my shoes.

- Honestly – he says kindly as he takes my hand – girls like her, you can find them anyplace. Apart from beauty, they have nothing else to offer.

I give him a sour smile.

- Tobey, please, just don't tell me how looks aren't important.

- That's not what I'm saying – he corrects himself quickly. – But, hey, look around. Most of the girls and women in this hall look exactly like her. They are all beautiful, attractive, dressed up, smelling great...

I roll my eyes.

- Tell me, please, how is this helping?!

- Well, it's simple. Look at them, and then look at you. At first glance, they all seem different, but actually, they're all the same. Fresh out of the factory! What's even worse, they probably share the same way of thinking. While you... - he steps back, takes my hands, and suddenly pulls me in. – You are unique and completely different – he cocks his head –you are you! – he adds cheerfully. – Would you do me the honor of being my date tonight? – his face lights up.

- It would be a shame for all this effort to go to waste – I say, alluding to the way I look. I wink at him and take him by the hand. I couldn't resist his sweet words.

- A drink!? –he says as we walk through the crowd and towards the bar.

- Lots of drinks! – I say, firmly holding his hand.

I know it's matter of minutes before Inga and Liray spot us. Because, although the hall is filled with people, Tobias and I are surprised to notice that no other woman is wearing a black dress. Finishing my second glass of champagne, I notice the orchestra isn't playing only the nineteenth century repertoire.

- If I hear another waltz, I'll support the trend of women suicides in the Russian Empire!
- I grin at confused Tobias. - I'll jump under a train like Anna Karenina - I almost stick my tongue out.

- Aha—he squints and nods affirmatively. - Actually, the way you look tonight somehow reminds me of Karenina.

I laugh loudly and tilt my head back. Then I hear the sound of English waltz and frown.

- Where's that tourist train? - I squeal.

- If you can't beat them, join them! - he laughs, guiding me to the dance floor, where several couples were dancing.

- No way! - I squeak, trying to get away. - I can't dance in here!

- Hush - he says, literally dragging me. - Such talent wasted at the bar? No chance, dear lady!

Under the influence of champagne, his compliments, and my desire for Liray to see me dancing with such a handsome man, I stop resisting and join him on the dance floor.

Tobias surprises me pleasantly, gently guiding me across the floor to the soft sound of the music. I feel as if he carries me and I let go, letting him guide me and graciously twirl me to every tone. During one of the twirls, I manage to catch Alec's angry gaze, which makes me dance even more enthusiastically and let go in the arms of the man who gives me his undivided attention tonight. A warm applause marks the end of the dance. Tobias bows and kisses my hand. I reply with a graceful bow. We're walking away from the dance floor when Inga grabs my hand.

-Purprure, darling - as always, she almost purrs saying my name. - What kept you so long? I left you a thousand messages on the answering machine.

- Oh -I shrug. - I was in such a hurry, I must have left the phone in my room.

She squints in a kind of disbelief, and then hugs Tobias enchantedly.

- Tobey, my wonderful boy, you grew into a real man. You are so elegant and gorgeous!

Inga's tacky behavior surprises both of us and Tobias confusedly tries to push her away.

- You really danced beautifully - Liray's hoarse, yet soft voice comes from my back, giving me goose bumps.

I take a deep breath. I clench my fists before I turn around and greet him coldly. I try to look as calm as possible and say “hello” followed by a slight nod. He gives me a soft, kind smile, but his eyes burn with dark anger. Ellen offers me her hand and introduces herself calmly and almost indifferently. I accept her hand politely and too cordially.

-Purple Devan – I say quickly.

-Oh, what an odd name. – she checks me out in surprise. – But I have to say, it matches that appearance of yours.

Then she gives a flirty look to Tobias who barely manages to escape Inga’s grasp – Is he your date? – she asks.

- Oh... no... - I say, gently taking Tobias’s hand. – He’s my accessory!

Everyone laughs, especially Inga, who steals his hand from me, dragging him to the dance floor. Helplessly, I watch them disappear in the crowd and then turn back to Liray and Ellen, taking the champagne the waiter brings me.

- Are you enjoying the ball, Purple? – Liray asks taking the champagne.

- Oh, it’s just perfect! – I say and raise my glass. We take a sip at the same time.

- Darling – says Ellen, looking at both of us in surprise – You two seem to have identical outfits! – she wrinkles her nose.

Completely focused on him and his face, I failed to notice the resemblance. Actually, my bolero jacket is a small, modified version of his jacket, which reminds me of a simple black officer uniform.

Fuck, this man is perfect! – I drool over him in my mind.

- What did you say, who are you wearing? – Ellen looks at him inquiringly. He just shrugs and says that Inga picked out his outfit.

- How about you, Purple?! – she squints and looks at every inch of my dress. I

shrug as well.

- I really have no idea. A friend of a friend picked it out for me. – I say, trying not to smile. I sneak a look at Liray.

His eyes don’t look so angry anymore. He slightly moves his head to the side, as if he’s trying to say “you’re welcome”. I feel fluttering in my stomach that turns into hot tingling when he leaves his glass on an empty plateau and takes mine from my hands and gives it to Ellen. Holding my hand, he takes me to the dance floor. As soon as we step among the couples twirling to the waltz, the music stops. Suddenly, the hall is filled with the sound of Perlman’s tango. I stand petrified, realizing to what tune we’re

supposed to dance. As I stop, I pull his hand a bit, so he turns around and gives me a puzzled look.

- Is something wrong?

- I... I don't know, I can't... - I stutter as I pull him closer.

He laughs.

- I think you can, trust me... - he comes closer, his glistening eyes diving into mine.

- I haven't danced tango in years - I say in one breath, completely lost in his eyes. He gently tucks a wisp of my hair behind my ear. I feel the soft touch of his fingers on my cheek and I remember he said something similar to me in Belgrade.

- I thought you don't dance?! - I barely whisper.

The looks down and I can see a faint smile at the left corner of his lips. - I never had someone to dance with... until now - he bows and slowly says:

- Purple, will you do me the honor of dancing with me?

Before I manage to reply he pulls me in and presses me to his chest. Carefully following the sad sound of the violin, he takes us to the middle of the room.

I feel his scent everywhere around me. I'm in rapture, absorbed in every step of the tango. At first, he gently guides me, his eyes and moves nailed to mine. Then, consumed by the strong emotion, he pushes me away looking over his left shoulder and twirls me passionately, guiding me along the entire dance floor. He holds me tight. His moves perfectly match every new intense tone and I easily follow his movement, dancing on my toes, guided by the soft pressure of his palm on mine, his firm grip as he transfers me from one spin to the other, his feet gliding on the floor.

Tango has always been my unfulfilled fantasy. I learned how to dance tango fifteen years ago, but I've never had the chance, the place, the partner. But now, perfectly synchronized with him, his movements and his breathing, as the crowd watches us in amazement, on the wings of magic, his body against mine, we are consumed by the eruption of passion shining from our every move and look, and my dream comes true, more beautiful than I've ever imagined.

A thunderous applause fills the entire *Kurhaus* and brings us back from the magic and into reality. Realizing we're still standing in a too intimate embrace, we smile at the people around us and distractedly walk away from the dance floor.

- What the hell was that? - Ellen hissed at Alec, red with fury.

- Well, tango, of course - he says, perfectly calm, still holding my hand.

- Beautiful, beautiful! – Inga quickly steps in, dragging Tobias by the hand. – Divine! – she giggles and gives Alec a devilish look. – And now, be nice. The press is already breathing down my neck. – she says quietly. – Mr. Liray, I think you should take Miss Schloss put to get some air. Just to stop rumors.

Alec rolls his eyes. He whispers in my ear, telling me we'll see each other later and puts his hand on the bottom of Ellen's back, guiding her towards the exit.

I'm still excited, breathing heavily, with a silly smile on my face, and I'm trying to understand Inga's reproachful expression and Tobias's blurry gaze. His piercing eyes have turned dark.

I approach him carefully, asking him if he's all right. He just nods. He whispers something in Inga's ear and she laughs. Tilting her head, she tells me she'll see me in the morning and walks to the bar with him.

I remain alone. Confused, I first follow them, but then I decide to go out to the terrace. The chatter is too loud, even outside, so I take a bottle of champagne, sneak out of the hall and walk down the wide stairs leading me into the bright night. I head for the wooden pier. Walking slowly between the flickering shadows of old lampposts on the bumpy surface, I enjoy the fresh breeze, the sound of the sea, and the vast blackness of the sky bespeckled with thousands of dazzling silver dots. At the end of the bridge, I lean on the fence, mesmerized by the twinkling constellations, and take a sip from the bottle.

- I hope you weren't planning to drink it all by yourself! – I suddenly feel Alec's voice coming from behind, like a soft caress.

- I hope you managed to refresh your girlfriend – I say without turning around, still staring at the dark vastness in front of me.

I feel a light tremble of the fence as he leans onto it, carefully taking the bottle from my hand.

– I told you I don't have a girlfriend. – he takes a sip. – And you... you told me you can't dance tango.

I smile as I remember our dance.

– I learned it a long time ago. I thought I'd forgotten it by now.

- When did you learn it? – he asks and takes another sip.

- Fifteen years ago – I say in a sad voice – I wanted it to be my first wedding dance.

I feel his surprised look.

– Oh, I didn't know you've been married to Phillip for so long.

I shake my head, take the bottle, and drink some champagne.

- I haven't... Fifteen years ago, I was engaged to another man.-I squint - Peter.

- Why didn't you marry Peter? - he sounds almost rude. - Somehow, all men seem better than the one you're married to, if I may say so.

I pout my lips.

- You may not, but - I shrug - now that you have, I have to admit you're right.

I finally turn to him. He's standing up straight, his eyes brighter than the stars. I bathe in his clear gaze. Hypnotized by his scent in the wind, I stand on my toes and kiss him.

- The reason I didn't marry him is because he left me. - I say in a sad voice and slowly walk back to the beach.

- I'm sorry, I didn't know... - he says repentantly as he follows me.

- That's ok. Neither did I - I laugh. - what's more, I only accidentally found out in New Orleans that he was with someone else and that he had an eight-month-old son... - I stop and look at his frozen expression.

- And I found that out when I took a room for us at her mom's inn - I nod.

- Oh, God... I'm sorry - he stutters, trying to find the right words, which makes me laugh and I pat him on the shoulder, taking the bottle from his hands.

- There, there, there's nothing to be sorry about. - I take a large sip. - Peter's only ambition in life was to have a houseful of children.

- Well, why didn't you fulfill his wish?! - he presses his lips together, as if he regrets asking.

- Oh, well, I can't have children. - I shrug and take another sip of champagne.

- Beyla.. - he stutters confusedly. - Then Beyla's not your daughter?!

- No. Beyla is my daughter! - although I'm aware that I said more than I should have, I reply calmly.

- Hmm... that means she's your and Phillip's child? Right? You managed to get pregnant? - he sounds happy.

- Yes, I managed to get pregnant. - I look deep into his eyes. - But not with Phillip. He's not her father.

I try to smile, but his shocked expression tells me not to. I think of taking another sip, but I frown and change my mind. Giving him the bottle, I pull the longer part of the dress closer, and slowly, as if what I said is no big deal, I walk to the end of the pier.

We walk in silence. He stops for a moment, as if he wants to ask me something, but he just shakes his head and continues walking beside me.

He walks me to my car. Kissing me gently on the forehead, he wishes me good night. I reply with a sad smile.

Vuk drives slowly. Sitting comfortably in my seat, I watch the constellations through the car window. I realize I'm getting dizzy, and for the first time in my life, I'm glad I'm drunk. However, I make a firm decision to stop drinking. Who knows what I might tell him next time we meet.

At the very entrance to Vitt, I see a motorcycle drive by at great speed. Vuk suddenly pulls over. Stopping right next to the car, tires squealing as he turns around, Liray appears unexpectedly. He throws his bike on the ground, quickly approaches the car, and opens my door. Out of breath, he offers me a hand and I accept it confusedly and get out of the car. Vuk starts the engine again and goes back to the city, while the two of us remain standing peacefully next to each other. Holding my hand, without a word, he examines every part of my face. I know he's trying to find the right words to ask me what he wants to know. Tears flood my eyes. I look up.

- I don't... -I sigh quietly. - I don't know who Beyla's father is - I whisper in a shaky voice.

- Well, all right - he caresses my hair comfortingly. - You're not the only one who decided to get a donor. But I don't understand Phillip's role in the whole story.

Tears falling down my face, I manage to muster a smile.

- Alec, I don't know who the father of my daughter is because... because I don't remember... I mean, I can't really remember the man I slept with!

Liray freezes and steps away, dropping my hand.

- For heaven's sake, Purple, how can you not know? - he sounds shocked. - Is it possible that you were that drunk?

- No...- I whisper.

- Drugged?

I shake my head.

- I didn't use any drugs, nor was I drugged by someone else, I didn't drink, nor - I raise my hands in the air - nor do I suffer from amnesia... Simply, I went out for a walk in the morning and woke up next day in my room with completely vague and confusing memories. A month later, I realized I was pregnant. To make the matters worse, I didn't know who the father was! - I start yelling hysterically.

- Are you sure it wasn't Peter or Phillip? - he asks me, trying to grab my arms.

I push him away in anger.

- Oh, why didn't I think of that?! – I mock him. – Look, I was in New Orleans, planning to see Peter for the first time after almost three months. On September 21 we were supposed to meet in a small inn. Like I said, I found out certain things, so I packed and checked into a hotel. I went outside to collect my thoughts. I listened to the buskers for a while, and then decided to go to the beach. The next thing I remember is sleeping naked in my bed!

As far as Phillip is concerned, I ran into him the same day I found out I was pregnant. Completely lost, I bumped into him as I was leaving the doctor's office in San Francisco, where I'd been living for a couple of years. Accidentally meeting someone from Old Skies, someone I went to high school with and someone I'd known my entire life, on the exact day I found out I was pregnant, I saw that as a sign... - I roll my eyes – I sign from the universe, from God, or who knows what. I went out for a cup of coffee and I told him everything. He listened to me carefully. He supported me in my decision to keep the baby and suggested that we should get married and said that he would accept the child as his own...

I sigh loudly and grab my head in pain.

- The worst of all is that I'd told him everything... everything about my life, and about these... these flashbacks that soon began to haunt me... the visions of me and... Liray wrinkles his forehead in surprise – and this man – I lower my voice – whose face and name I couldn't remember, but whose touch, words, and eyes my body and soul cannot forget. Tell me, what else could I do?! – I beg. – I spent more than ten years going to every clinic and institute I could find and all the experts were certain that I could never... that I could never have children. And then... I couldn't throw away this chance... to give birth to her. To me and my family, she was a gift from God. That's why Luka named her Beyla. – I smile, finally wiping the tears away.

- You know that in Slavic language Beyla means...

- God-given – Alec comes closer and gives me a warm embrace. – Giving birth to her wasn't a mistake – he says softly. – I'm sorry if I was harsh. I was really surprised. – he strokes my hair.

- Not as surprised as I was – I say, nestling in his arms.

- I trust Phillip is using that information to blackmail you? –he gently pulls on my hand, inviting me to go home.

I nod affirmatively.

- Phillip saw this situation as an opportunity to lead a life of leisure thanks to me. His mother died when he was still at college. He soon spent all the money he got by selling her apartment. He went to America, where he got fired and ran into me the following

day. – I look angrily at the sky. – What could I've done so wrong to the big guy to have him punishing me like this?!

He hugs me and holds me tight.

- Nothing! – he says. – It's just that everything happens for a reason.

I laugh and shake my head.

- I stopped believing in such mantras a long time ago... but – I look at him – I remember Beyla's father told me to trust him... and he drove a motorcycle... at least I hope so.

He brings his face close to mine and asks me if I know the exact date I got pregnant.

- September 21, 2005.

He looks down.

– That's the day mercenaries trespassed into our property in Kimberley... that's when they killed Isabel...

We walk to my room in silence. At the door, he gives me a longing kiss and asks me if he can spend the night.

He slowly sneaks out of bed, carefully tucking me in and caressing my face. I smile contently and turn to the other side, hugging the pillow. I open my eyes and see a blurry six on the clock. I yawn lazily and dive back into the pillow.

- Go to sleep, it's still early – he says quietly, kissing my temple. I snuggle down in bed and fall asleep instantly.

At 8 a.m. I'm wide awake. Alec went away while I was still asleep. I lie on my back, holding a piece of paper in front of my face, trying to read it in the faint light. Over and over again, I smile too broadly, euphoric about his message. I carefully read the letters, singing the words in my head. I put them together into a sentence, quietly, and the message's sound and meaning lets my heart mock my brain for not being right this time.

Alec Liray may be a bit weird, but my heart knows and my body feels that he honestly, purely, unconditionally cares about me. If I were used to love and attention, I would probably think he loves me. Because, what else could this be? What else can be the meaning of all the tenderness of this world landing on my skin with his every touch and kiss? What else, apart from love, can be his heartbeat synchronized with mine, while I burn with desire? What else, apart from love, can be his absolute acceptance of me and my twisted world?

"Purple, I'm so sorry you had to wake up without me, but if you let me take you out to dinner tonight, we can finish it with breakfast... I'll say when, you say where. Kisses, Alec".

Finally, after more than half an hour of remembering every curve and line of his handwriting, I get out of bed. The room smelled like him. I smell like him. I breathe into my left arm, taking in his scent. I never want to wash it away. I want it forever on my skin! *God, Purple, you're acting like a maniac!* I scold myself and laugh, because I couldn't care less if I look crazy sniffing my skin, while I wait for my iPod to connect. Luka's face, all wrinkled and puffed up from sleeping, appears on one half of the screen.

- Are you insane?! – he mumbles with a frown.

- Luka, I told him! I told him everything! – I scream impatiently.

- You told what to whom?! – he rubs his eyes and yawns lazily.

- Oh, wait – I can finally see the familiar amber eyes. – You must have told Liray something, since you are so excited! Huh? It must have been something stupid.

- I told him about Beyla! Luka, I told him everything!

I can see disapproval in his face. – Fuck, Purple! You didn't?! Are you out of your mind?!

- No, I'm not. I mean, I am... Oh, I don't know. We were talking, and I don't know... It just came out of my mouth... I had to tell him. He has to know why...

- What did Liray say?! – he interrupts me angrily.

- Well... at first, he was quiet. That's when I thought I'd made a mistake. But then he just hugged me. He held me in his arms, as if I was a little child...

- What did he say, Purple?! – he interrupts me again. – How did he react?! – he sounds too impatient.

- He told me it wasn't my fault! Imagine that! He told me he understood me, because it all happened because no one was taking care of me when I was scared, vulnerable, deserted... that I did the right thing, keeping my baby, because, no matter what, she was a gift from God... that, if I wanted to, he could hire some people to search for her father...

- And what did you tell him? – he's still dead serious.

- I told him that I wouldn't want to know... at least not hey. I'd only wish for these broken memories to stop haunting me, torturing me, and making me look for resemblances in every other man. You know what he said? – I close my eyes in disbelief. I remember his words. – He said that I shouldn't be afraid and that I shouldn't worry anymore. That from now on he'll be there to protect me and look after me. Me and Beyla.

- Anything else?! –his voice sounds softer.

- Lots of things! – I almost squeak with joy. – We kissed and cuddled and talked and he held me in his arms all night. I mean, we didn't have sex – I shrug. – But he said we'll go out to dinner tonight, and that we'll finish it with breakfast!

- Bleh - Luka is his old ironic and cynical self again. – That's so pathetic!

- Go to hell! – I scream, utterly offended. He starts laughing.

- All right, all right, maybe not that pathetic, but he sounds like a pansy. All sweet and cuddly, as if he hasn't got a cock! He must be fag. You'll see!

I frown. He giggles even louder.

- What's that silly expression on your face?! – he raises his eyebrows cheerfully. – So, where are you having your dinner? At Helga's? Splurging big style!

- Screw you, jackass! – I come close to the screen, looking angry as hell.

– I don't know where! He asked me to pick the place!

- So, what will it be? – he makes a concerned face. – Where is little Purple taking her billionaire, huh?

I wrinkle my nose. – I have no idea. – I sigh. – To be honest, apart from yesterday's shopping, I have only been to Binz.

I go to the window and look at the warm morning that looks like a prelude to a beautiful day at Arkona.

– He's in Berlin. I'll find something there for the two of us... - I stop, impressed by the perfectly nuanced greenness of the nature, melting into the bright sky.

- Luka, the day is wonderful! – I shout before I say goodbye and put away my iPod.

I open the window wide, letting the smell of ruyan and late spring into the room. I look at the lighthouses. A crazy idea comes to my mind. I quickly put my comfy thin *Ralph Lauren* sweater over my denim shorts and practically jumping, put on my high biker boots.

I'm thrilled with my idea of a perfect place to have dinner, which will be the best way to show both of us that I'm conquering my fears. I hug Helga enthusiastically, taking only some coffee in a thermos mug. I decide not to have breakfast, just in case if I get nauseous. Vuk is peacefully reading daily press and I kiss him on the head, childishly notifying him that I'll go by bike, that I'll return in an hour, and that he should prepare himself for a long afternoon, because I plan to do some shopping in Berlin. I run out,

letting my happiness be louder than the sound of the sea, the wind, and the jolly sound of the bicycle cogs.

Spending practically no time on the ground floor, as soon as I enter the lighthouse I climb the narrow stairs. Leaning onto the stone wall, carefully, step by step, without looking down, clutching the thermos in my hand. A bit out of breath and overly excited, I soon reach the locked door of the upper room in the tower.

My heart is in my throat as it fills with the sense of pride. I turn the key and carefully push open the heavy iron door.

Pain in my head caused by the blinding light feels like a knife in my eye. The pain caused by the hot coffee I spill on my arm and my leg as I drop the thermos is just as bad. But neither of them comes close to the pain in my soul caused by what I see in the room.

Gasping for air, I struggle to remain on my feet, leaning onto the cold, cracked door frame. I press my temples with my hands, trying to stop the throbbing pain. I let out an unhuman scream, trying to overcome the devastating sense of fear, which makes me break out in a cold sweat and remain paralyzed.

My head is buzzing with a million questions and the pounding of my heart, the heart that feels like it's no longer inside my chest. My eyes wide open, my body dripping wet, I feel like I'm suffocating and I try to catch my breath as I look at the pieces of my life, floating like movie clips over the screen that covers the wall in front of me.

I look at myself stumbling as I try to take my first steps towards Emma, while Milos is filming me with his large camera. I look at myself smiling at the first coin I got from the Tooth Fairy. I look at myself crying desperately after falling from my tricycle and banging my knee. Hypnotized by these images, feeling nothing, not even fear, I walk towards the wall. In front of it is a table with three widescreen monitors, a large desktop computer, a wireless keyboard, a mouse, and something that looks like a remote. I'm still staring at myself, skipping school with my best friend, kissing Peter, drunk as a lord. Hiding in the closet, waiting to be found in the game of hide and seek. Standing frozen as I watch Phillip kissing another woman in the *Piano Bar*, turning away from Alec. Biting cold makes me wrap my arms around my chest, trying to keep warm.

– What... the hell... is this? – I stutter loudly.

I stand less than two feet away from the screen showing a video of me crying because nana died. It's followed by a video of me screaming in my sleep because I'm having a nightmare. Date: March 20, 1990. My mouth and throat feel dry. Every movement of the tongue feels like sandpaper. The terror makes me break into tears. I stumble.

– Run! Get the fuck out of here! – I yell at myself.

I step back. I see myself on the screen, in a dark blue skirt, white shirt, and a red scarf around my neck, performing in front of the entire school. I see myself as I completely

unconsciously smile at this camera, ignoring Milos who's taking my picture from the front row. The video freezes. The camera moves in for a close-up. It zooms in on my face and all I see now are my eyes. Almond and filled with sadness.

I weep.

– God! Who... Why? What kind of lunatic would do something like this? – Frightened, I whisper and head for the exit. I clumsily hit my hip on the corner of the table. I stumble and try to land on the table, so I wouldn't fall down. My right hand accidentally ends up on the keyboard. The touch of my hand automatically turns on the monitor, and I can see the logo of the *Arkona Group* flashing on the screen.

– Oh, my God... - I sob, watching one of the four parts of the middle screen, in which Helga's looking through the content of my iPod and Vuk yawns indifferently beside the window. The remaining three parts show the empty inn, the living room of the purple house, and the ground floor of the lighthouse. I run to the door, not thinking for a second about my way down. Driven by the need to run away as soon as possible, I run down. However, somewhere in the middle of the stairs, I stop. I hold my hand against the wall, feeling out of breath.

- Oh, fuck! – I yell. Skipping every other step, I go back to the room. The screens are still showing segments of my life. But this time, I focus all my attention on the white metal lockers to my left. When I realize they're organized chronologically, from the year of my birth until now, I start opening them angrily, finding numerous plastic folders with the *Arkona Group* stamp, filled with documents about my life, with photographs attached. Furious, I start pulling them out and throwing them around. I angrily grab a couple of folders and run down the stairs. As I reach the ground floor, my iPhone rings. Startled, I take it out of my pocket, my hands shivering, and I see that it's Vuk. I close my eyes. Take several deep breaths. Trying to sound as calm as possible, I answer. I tell him I'm preparing something special for Alec and me, so I made a quick stop at the lighthouse, so I could pick up some things for dinner decoration. He says he'll come right away, but I disappointedly explain that's the only way I could kill time until tonight. I promise to call from the house, and then we can go straight to Berlin, but now I have to focus on decorating my love nest.

- All right, all right – he stammers and sounds ashamed. – Just don't be away for more than an hour.

- An hour and fifteen minutes – I say in a shrill voice and leave the phone on the stairs.

I take the raincoat off the hanger. I put it on and run to a group of Japanese tourists who are getting into their minibus parked in front of the old tower.

Curious, benevolent faces under the white capes with symbols of Rügen watch me with sympathy as I curl up under the large raincoat. I try to smile, hoping I would seem calmer. I hold the folders firmly on my lap, and no matter how much I'd like to peek

inside, I can't take that risk. What I've seen so far required 24 hour presence in my vicinity and I wouldn't be surprised if some of the cameras on the bus were meant for filling in the archive of my life. Why?! Why?! – the question echoes in my head as I try to make sense out of everything I saw. I give up on the idea to go to the police as soon as I leave Berlin's Alexanderplatz, get into a dark building, and open one of the folders I picked up randomly (June, 2006). A panic attack mixed with tears makes my body tremble as I flip through pictures of Beyla and me taken at the hospital right after she was born. There's also a copy of the newborn discharge summary, copies of our medical records, and a photo of her little head sleeping peacefully on her first night at home. It all makes me so nauseous, I begin to throw up. All the fear and shock I felt at the lighthouse are nothing compared to the fear for the life of my daughter. I scream angrily taking a picture of Beyla, along the edge of which is a word written in black marker: FATHER???

I panic and start looking through the other two folders. (February, 1998) is filled with pictures of Peter and me, taken during our Valentine's Day weekend in Santa Barbara. There are also pictures of Peter drunk, throwing up and kissing a voluptuous black girl. I carefully open the folder (September, 2010), where I again find the kind eyes of my daughter, playing with her friends outside the kindergarten. Then pictures of Phillip and me fighting. Pictures of me lying with my head in Luka's lap on the porch of his house. Unlike the previous two, this folder contains handwritten notes. I start reading them, but the skies suddenly open up, pouring icy rain, which wets the paper and smudges the ink. I close the folders and start running, trying not to drop anything and hiding under the awnings.

Although I'm tired, scared, completely lost, penniless, and phoneless, I keep running, until I realize I've left the city center and completely unconsciously arrived at the entrance of the wide multi-story building made of dark bulletproof glass, in front of which is a stone board with golden letters reading *Arkona Group*. Surprised, I step behind the bus stop ad. I peek just enough to see the front door clearly. Large number of people is going out of the building, so I suppose it's the end of the business day, and the frenzy caused by the rain seems like a great opportunity to go through the crowd unnoticed. I run across the street and head for the entrance. Several feet from the rotating door, I freeze. I realize that I'm entering the lair of shameless evil, without a plan, without support, without any kind of protection. I'm standing among a bunch of liars and conmen who are using my life and the life of my daughter for who knows what. I take off my hood, not minding the rain. I look at the top floor. Up there somewhere is Liray's office. I clutch my fists. The conscious part of my brain tells me to turn around and go to the nearest police station, but the feeling of immense anger makes blood rush to my head. I feel my body burn with heat and my mind gets clouded. My field of vision narrows, hatred stabbing my heart like a dagger, and all I want is to confront Liray, with any means possible, completely ignoring the consequences. I feel hot, so I unbutton my raincoat, but I put my hood back on. I head for the door. Without trying to stay out of anybody's way, I brush against a few people who give me black looks as they walk away.

I hide my face behind the folders as I explain the security guards in German that I'm bringing urgent reports from the Cape and Vitt to Miss Klemen. Two rugged men just nod and point towards the elevators. To my surprise, I realize there are more people in identical raincoats in the lobby. I smile to myself. How could I even think that something he gave me isn't theirs? Keeping my hood on, I begin a short conversation with the young man standing beside me in front of the elevator. Although he nods politely as I talk about bad weather and lack of opportunity to fish, I can clearly see he's abhorred by the way I look under the yellow fabric. Finally, the elevator doors open. I try to come in first, so I could be as far away from the doors and the buttons as possible. After everyone has pressed their buttons, I say half-aloud:

-Mr. Liray's floor, please.

Without turning around, an older lady in a dark blue coat with high collar presses the penultimate button. We slowly go up, and by the time the elevator reaches the last floor, there's no one in it but me. I carefully step out. The doors close with a ding, which alerts the curly secretary behind the wide black desk.

- Oh, how may I help you-she says too politely and looks at me from head to toe. - Did you perhaps get lost? - she clicks her tongue behind the shiny lips.

- No, I didn't.-I coldly take off my hood and shake the wet hair. I carefully look around, trying to spot Alec's office, and throw the folders on the desk. I lean over it and speak nervously into her face:

- Urgent reports from Arkona and the village! I have to deliver them right away!

She squints, touches the familiar logo on the folders and starts opening one of them. I slap her hand.

- Strictly confidential, darling! - I wink. - Who's going to deliver them, you or I?

- Mr. Liray is in a very important meeting. I'm forbidden to interrupt him. Leave the papers and I'll give them to him later. Please, just sign here - she says arrogantly and gives me the visitors book.

I look at the clock above her head. It's 4:37 p.m. I fill in the form and casually add that the reports were supposed to be on his desk half an hour ago, so Inga can take it out on her this time, not us from the lighthouse. I shoot her a sharp look and sign as Amelia Millintzov. She watches me angrily for a couple of seconds, and then picks up the handset. I lean over the desk and hang up.

- If he said you shouldn't interrupt him, why do you think he'll answer the phone? - I cock my head with a sour smile.

She takes my hand off the phone with disgust, takes the handset again, and gets into my face. - If he won't answer the phone, he most certainly won't let me interrupt him by

knocking on the door! Leave those reports, and I'll take them to him when he asks for them. Don't worry. I'll sit here and keep a close watch on them until the end of the meeting. I don't have any plans for this evening anyway – she says victoriously, peering at me over the top of her bright red glasses.

I roll my eyes.

- Of course you have no plans for tonight! – I put on the hood and lean over the desk again. – But, if you don't give them to him today, and by today, I mean right now, then I'll personally hand them in tomorrow! – I try to grab the folders, but she beats me to it.

At the same time, the elevator dings and a man runs out wearing a gray sports jacket and a dark blue baseball cap. He completely ignores us and runs to the only door on the right side of the room. The secretary gives him a sheepish look, while I stand, feeling the familiar smell go through my nostrils to the back of my head, making my blood boil. I tilt my head.

–Good, that's impossible! – I cry out.

I go around the desk and violently pull the folders from her hands, which makes her lurch into the chair. I then run to the door, following the fresh smell of the forest.

Paying no attention to the secretary's threats, I fling the door open and find myself in a warm, half-empty office without windows. Apart from the simple table, the combination of wenge and cherry tree wood, and simple square shelves on the side walls, there's no other furniture. The entire wall facing the door is covered with striped wallpaper in earthy and coffee shades. Across the center, the length of the table, but no more than twenty inches wide, there's a screen showing beautiful sights of Arkona in spring. The secretary tries to come in and I lean against the door, giving myself time to decide which way to go. Once I feel I can't hold the door anymore, I step away and run to the doors to my left. I firmly hold the folders against my chest and give Alec a look full of hatred. He flinches with surprise, seeing me across the conference table where he sits with three Arabs in snow white dishdashas, one woman in black abaja with golden embroidery around the edge of her scarf, a rugged man with light blond hair, wearing a black suit without a tie, and a corpulent girl with long bleached hair in a cheap damask women's suit the color ivory.

- Purple! – Liray gets up confusedly. – How come you're here? Did something happen?! Are you all right?!

I pay no attention to the shocked expressions of everyone in the room and saying nothing, focusing only on Alec, I walk towards him. The strong grip I feel on my arms stops me and I give a painful scream.

- No! Let go of her immediately! – Alec orders them in a strict voice.

Ignoring everyone else, he walks forward and stops one step away from me. He catches a glimpse of the folders I'm clutching and wrinkling in my hands, and then looks at me with sympathy. He nervously shakes his head in disapproval.

- Out – he mutters angrily – Everybody, out, now! Inga!

- But... but... - although I didn't see her when I went in, I can clearly hear her stutter behind my back.

- Out! Everybody! Didn't you hear me?! It's over! – he shouts in a deep voice filled with anger, so scary I myself take a step back. A couple of moments later, everyone goes out in a hurry, saying nothing.

- Purple... - he whispers – I... - he tries to put his hands on my face which makes me take a few steps back.

- Don't be afraid of me – he slowly walks towards me.

- Don't come any closer! Don't you dare! – I yell furiously and put the folders in the air so he can see them clearly.

He stops obediently. He gently bows his head and clutches his fists.

- I would never hurt you, Purple! Now, just calm down...

- Calm down?! – I yell. – You want me to calm down?! – my whole body's shaking. I open one of the folders. – After this?! – I angrily point at the content. – What's this?! Huh? What the hell is this?! Who are you?! Who are you, you fucking lunatic?!

I start hysterically throwing the papers and photos from the folder at him. The papers go flying around us. – What the fuck do you want from me?!

He's standing still, frozen. Eyes filled with pain, he watches me go postal and barely blinks.

– Why!? – I ask, tears running down my face as I spread out my shaky hands. – Why is my whole life video recorded and kept in the metal drawers in your stinky lighthouse? Why? - I cry out as I approach him. – What in the world have Beyla and I done to you?!

I start crying hysterically and feverishly hitting him on the chest and shoulders.

- What do you want from me? Who are you? Who are you?! – driven by rage, fear, disappointment, and hate, I stop when I realize I have no more strength, not to cry, not to hit him, not even to speak. I feel completely empty. Feeling weak, I wipe my face with my sleeve and look up at his sad gray eyes that seem to have absorbed every insult, every word I said. – Why? – I whisper. – Who are you?

He gives me a warm smile. He closes his eyes sadly, and when he opens them again, they go back to glistening with their full, bright glow. He leans towards me, moving my wet hair out of my face.

- No, no... don't you dare come near me!—shaking, I take a step back again.

- Shhh, Purple – he finally speaks. His voice is soft and warm. – Come, give me your hand. Sit, I'll explain everything.

Exhausted and frightened, I look at his hand. *Fuck, you've been crazy enough to come here on your own, now listen to what the lunatic has to say*, I say to myself and carefully give him my hand.

-NO! Don't! – a familiar voice startles me.

Taking his gray jacket off, Luka walks casually into the room and towards us.

- Luka! –I scream, as if I being brought back to life by the sight of the familiar and beloved face. I feel relieved and overjoyed. I run to him and jump into his arms. - I can't believe you're here! Take me away from here, please, right now! I sob, squeezing him tight. – Luka, everyone here is insane! – I dive deeper into his chest, breathing in his intense greenwood smell. The smell of the forest. – You... you can't imagine what he did, he's insane! – I whisper, slowly realizing he's not hugging me back. – Luka...? - I look at him, scared to death.

Ignoring me, he stands angrily with his jaw clenched, looking at Liray.

–What the fuck, Luka! –I shout desperately and pull his hand. He just gives me a dark and empty look that cuts me like a knife. – Luka... you... you... - I stutter.

- Purple - he interrupts me roughly. – This is much greater than you, for a change! – he almost growls. – Get away! You've made enough problems as it is –he gently pushes me away and walks towards Alec, who stands next to the big windows reflecting Berlin at night.

I stand, frozen, and watch. I can't believe that my Luka, my best friend, my brother, is approaching that lunatic Alec Liray, and, after bowing respectfully, he speaks, almost repentantly:

- It's too soon! You can't tell her! Her memories must be frozen! That's the only way for her to forget the entire event.

Freeze memories? Did Luka just suggest freezing my memories? – I shake my head feverishly, trying to regain my composure, because I can't believe what I've just heard. I don't want to believe this is actually happening.

- It's not your place to tell me when and what I should do! – still looking at the city lights, Alec raises his voice. – Purple has already suffered too much to continue struggling

with holes in her memory and blanks in time. Things are far too complicated as it is, Luka. – he sighs. – It's clear to all of us that we're one step away from the end. Her finding out the truth might not help us, but at least everything will be clearer to her.

- If I may – Luka corrects himself – You can't allow your feelings for her cloud your judgment. We all know she's too weak and insecure. If we let her in on the whole situation, it can easily happen that, subconsciously, through her words or behavior, she can reveal the legacy before The Big Night.

Reveal what? What Big Night? Fuck, what is this?! Luka's apparently even crazier than Alec! Frozen by the fact that the two of them obviously know each other, that Luka is a part of all this, and that the two of them are currently deciding about by fate, I start slowly, almost unnoticeably move back. I've already planned everything. As soon as I get out, I'll set off the fire alarm in the hallway, and then run down the stairs, among the people.

- Don't bother, dear Purple. It's not that easy to get out of here – Inga somehow appears right next to me, giving me a broad smile. She pulls me gently by the hand, offering me a chair to sit on and a glass of water.

- I believe you haven't eaten or drunk anything since this morning, take it, it will do you good.

I look at her with fear. I quickly look away, directing my gaze towards the window, where Luka stands nervously with Liray. He's still not facing me. I realize I'm almost dehydrated. I lick my lips as I take the glass, but then it hits me that the water must be poisoned, or whatever. I push it away with disgust, spilling some water on Inga's hand.

- Darling ? – she clicks her tongue. –Do we look like poisoners to you?! – she almost sings. –With these two, I can imagine what kind of things must be going through your mind – she takes a pitcher and two glasses from the table.

She pours a bit of water in both glasses and takes a sip from one of them to show me that it's not poisoned. She gives me the other glass. Her warm look makes me trust her and I'm just about to drink it when Liray turns around.

– I wouldn't drink that water if I were you.

I automatically spill it and spit out the sip that was in my mouth. I jump up and give her a furious look. She just shrugs:

- I just wanted to put her to sleep! I agree that it's not a good time to tell her the real truth about you and all of us – she walks determinedly towards them. – Unfortunately, our time is running out, and the Navi's are getting suspicious. They appear everywhere, like vultures, expecting you to make a mistake that will precipitate the event before The Big Night. Purple is your weakness anyway! If the word gets out, she, Beyla, her parents, everyone from her life will be too easy targets they'll use to challenge you!

- Exactly. They've driven us into a corner – Alec responds calmly. – They still haven't figured out Purple's role in everything, but they know that, for some reason, she's important to me. That's why they influenced Tobias, trying to make him enter the tower.

- No matter how hard they try, they'll hardly manage to understand on their own that she's the key to everything! – Luka interrupts him insolently. – However, Purple, familiar with this whole situation, Purple, whom you want to drag into all this, even if it means jeopardizing The Big Night, just so you could fu...

- Shut up! – Alec snaps at him, speaking in a heavy, unhuman voice, making every hair on my body stand up. I feel blood freezing in my veins when he grabs him by the neck and lifts him off the ground like a feather, using only one hand.

– What right do you have to tell me what to do?! You, who made this all happen because you weren't where you were supposed to be! You, whose purpose is to serve me, you dare to contradict me so!

Luka flaps his arms and legs, fighting for air, trying to apologize. Inga pulls Liray by the hand, whispering something in his ear, which makes him drop Luka right away, who sits on the floor coughing.

– I apologize, I am so sorry – he says repentantly, still fighting for air. Then he gives me a familiar, sweet look, the one I'm used to seeing. – I'm sorry, Purple...it's not your fault...
- he coughs. – You're good...

Still completely confused, I just want to get as soon and far away as possible:

- Aaall riiight! – I stretch out the sounds as I get up. – I see you've got some family issues
– I laugh heartily, pointing at the three of them.

- You see, I may have somewhat disrupted your relations here, but I told a friend I was here, so... she'll be worried that I'm gone.

All three listened to me carefully. – Well, I'll be going now, if it's not a problem. Huh? I mean, there, you don't have to tell or explain me anything. That's ok. As far as I'm concerned, I'll forget everything this instant! I raise my both arms and hold my forefingers against my temples, like I'm holding guns. I pretend I shot myself in the head and say:

– Done! There's nothing in my head anymore. Poof! Like you said, not frozen, but blown away memories. – I wave quickly and turn to the door.

- We almost believed you. Except for the friend part! – I hear Alec's voice behind my back. – Apart from your family, the only people you love are in this room.

I bow my head, realizing how right he is.

- Please, sit down – he continues. – I'll try to make things as clear as possible.

I take the chair and carefully sit down. Afraid of everything I might hear, all kinds of thoughts run through my head, spreading fear across my body.

After a couple of seconds, Alec says the only thing in the world I did not expect and it makes me laugh.

- Purple, I... –he sighs loudly and spreads his hands out, as if he's surrendering: - I'm not a human!

- Well... – I pout my lips – of course you're not a human! – All three of them look at me in shock. I shrug indifferently: - You're not a human, you're a billionaire! – I cynically wave my hands around, showing where we are.

Luka puts his hand on his mouth, trying to suppress laughter, and Inga bites her lip. Even Liray smiles.

- Puprure, I'm serious!–he speaks to me again in a serious tone. – I'm not a human. We... we're not humans.

My stomach starts to churn. I don't know what to control first. Should I try not to pee my pants out of fear or laughter? Anyway, it's not good. It's definitely not good when someone thinks they're not human. That means he must be a psycho, or a drug addict, or...

- I'm a god...

A GOD!! It resonates in my head. Did he just say that he, Alec Liray, is a god? ! I open my mouth in surprise, trying to recover from the shock. My pupils dilated, I stare at all three of them, who seem to be holding their breaths, waiting for my reaction.

God, what a freak! –I scream on the inside –What a horror! He really is insane! I almost slept with a schizophrenic jerk! Fucking billionaire, thinking he's a god! You're not a surgeon, God damn it! Oh, fuck, Purple, fuck, what have you gotten yourself into... –I smack myself on the forehead.

- Oh, really? You're a god?! – I grin saucily, still trying to control myself.

- And these two must be Jesus and Mary Magdalene? Huh? – I say, switching my gaze to them. – Fuck, of all the crap I've expected, the last thing I thought was that you were in a sect! Anyway, it was a pleasure. I hope you had good time playing with me, but I haven't signed anything and I'm not joining any religious cults. May I go now?! God! – I bow before Liray. Then I nod at Luka. – Son! – then I look at Inga – Holy Spirit, or whatever... - I press my palms together, as if I'm praying. – Amen!

All three begin to laugh.

– How could you have been mad at her?! – Inga yells at Luka.

Shaking with laughter, Luka barely manages to speak:

- I'm sorry. I can't help it, that's the way I am!

Liray takes his jacket off, puts it over the chair backrest, and then sits down comfortably. He loosens his tie, rolls up his sleeves, and speaks:

- Purple, Purple, Purple! Please, don't undermine my authority like that! – he runs his fingers through his hair. – Let's get some refreshments first, ok?! As far as I know, you didn't drink or eat anything today. If these guys at work hadn't been keeping me busy all day, and if I hadn't had to be in an isolated office because of that, I would have sensed it on time... This way, they've put all of us, especially you, through an unnecessary ordeal.

- Come on, honey, here's some fresh aronia juice and a prosciutto and cheese sandwich!

Feeling confused, I turn around and see Helga in her ethnic costume, cheerfully laying the tray on the massive conference table. Once she leaves it there, she kindly takes me by the hand and pulls out a chair for me.

- How did... When did you...? – I barely whisper.

- Leave us alone! – Liray orders them. –Lada, arrange things at the airport so we can leave for Bahla tonight!

Apart from my heavy, panicked breathing, the whole room goes silent. Liray remains still, just watching me. So gorgeous and so insane. While I'm thinking at the speed of light, imagining all the possible scenarios for my escape, he squints, making tiny crow feet appear around his eyes, and carefully starts talking.

- I know that everything I'm about to say is hard to comprehend, because you live in a completely different world, but believe me, everything I say is true. I'm not insane, I'm not a psycho. Please, try to open up your mind. Try to understand and believe my story... I... My real name is Jerovit. I'm the Slavic god of war and the early sun. Created by Svarog, to serve him and the Slavic people. I'm the only survivor of the world of Jav who possesses his original powers... at least for a bit longer.

I open my mouth in shock. *He's definitely insane. He just doesn't know it. He believes everything he's saying.*

- Svarog, my supreme god, the creator of the sky and the earth, the father of all other gods you people come from, created earth and everything in it in his dream. This dream still lasts and must never end, because awakened Svarog would face the evil and the horror that have flooded earth, destroyed his legacy, killed his army, and divided his successors. His rage would destroy the world and all the life in it in a flash.

- That means that this god of yours is sleeping like a baby, while the earth is drowning in centuries' worth of blood spilled in war? While every day a new disaster sullies the sky and the earth? While we, the humans, the ones he'd conjured up so nicely, throw atomic bombs back and forth, all the while he's snoring?! Is that right? – My sarcasm lets him know what I think about everything I've just heard.

- I know it's hard for you to accept all this, but please, let me tell you everything without interruptions. In the end, you'll hear and see that I'm telling the truth – he continues calmly. – About your question, Svarog, although he's the father of everything and the supreme god, he rules and controls only us. The gods, whose purpose, role, and place he had determined in one of the three parts of the world. Our duty is to take care of people and everything else he's created.

- Oh, thank God we're in safe hands – I roll my eyes.

He shakes his head and continues, ignoring my remark:

– There are three worlds – Jav, Prav, and Nav. Jav is the real, material world, the one you see, the one you live in. It is designed the way people usually considered it to be. The world of humans on earth and deity in the sky. Nav is the invisible world of the underworld and ghosts. The world of souls and death. People talk about it, although they are mostly afraid of it. Prav is the world ruled by the law of creation, the one where a force regulates the balance between Jav and Nav. Between deity and souls, between life and death. This force regulating the balance between good and evil is Svarog himself, the allgod, the almighty, or just God, as you call him now. Like I said, he controls only us, which is why he had designated Perun as the ruler of Jav and Veles as the ruler of Nav. As long as their powers are in balance, as long as he scales of force cannot tip in favor of either of the sides, Svarog remains asleep.

Unfortunately, the balance between the worlds has been disrupted for a while, and the only reason why Svarog hasn't sensed that is Perun's presence in Prav.

My innocent face tells him just how lost I am.

– And that's really important? – I utter. – This last part, I didn't understand a thing.

He nods affirmatively. – Prav is the immaterial word. In it, nothing has form. No living body could survive the force that rules there. Not even we, although we are gods. Because we can use our powers only while we are in our bodies. Our bodies are our temples, given to us by Svarog, along with different artifacts that give us the necessary energy and strength. Once we leave our bodies, we separate ourselves from the source of everything that makes us what we are, and we become vulnerable and weak. However, the only way to enter Prav is to free yourself from your material form. Some 850 years ago, Perun left his body, moving forever into Prav, where his constant presence creates the image of balance between two worlds. Making that decision, he

sacrificed his body and his strength, because after the fall of Arkona, 850 years ago, there was no other way to keep the balance.

- What does Perun have to do with the Arkona temples?! Svanevit and Jerovit are the gods of the Baltic Slavs? – I raise my eyebrow as I notice the connection. – How come that almighty god of yours failed to see that his subjects were being converted into Christianity? How could he not notice that his religion had been reduced to a fortress and one wooden temple?

- So you are listening? – he smiles. – I’m glad, but I can still hear sarcasm in your voice.

- Is that so?! – I roll my eyes, but stop talking so he could continue.

- You see, like I already told you, you have to understand that all Slavs have the same origin. They originate from one tribe that descended from us. They all lived happily, celebrating life and nature. They considered us, the gods, to be their ancestors, which is why they thought of themselves as divine beings. They believed in mother earth, the forces of nature, and the freedom of living. They didn’t give a name to their religion, because they didn’t feel the need. They celebrated seasons, the natural phenomena, they were afraid of disease and winter that came from Morana, and spring and sun coming from Jerovit brought them joy. As you can see, every god was related to a certain event or phenomenon in nature. That’s why for all the Slavs, no matter which subgroup they later belonged to, the god of the sky, rain and thunder was Perun, Mokosh was the goddess of fertility, Stribog was the god of winds...

Unfortunately, there was always tension among the gods themselves, caused by the ones who felt that injustice had been brought upon them and that they received weaker or worse powers than the others, which made them less popular and less beloved by the people. That was the reason to start a conflict that would later turn into a real war that, in a way, still hasn’t ended.

First Morana and Veles took the souls of the dead from Nav and impressed them into animals, and later humans themselves. These ungodly creatures they’ve created caused fear and turmoil. Their minds clouded, these living beings, fed by the souls of the dead, received supernatural strength. Their urges ran wild, the need to eat was replaced by the urge to kill. While humans on earth started battling the Besomars and other creatures we call the Navi’s, the gods of Jav confronted the gods of Nav for the first time. They soon retreated to the underworld, but the chaos they left behind was enough to plant the seed of fear into the hearts of the Slavs, the fear of the unknown and the supernatural. Over time, Morana started using the fear that was made worse by the winter and disease to send out her creatures to selectively kill or infect those who were prone to doubt and conversion. Those who had started spreading stories about how we had abandoned them, how they lived in the land of the damned. Those who despised others who were healthy and whose crops flourished, blaming them for ingratiating us. Dire winter months, which we cannot affect no matter how hard we tried, because that’s

how Svarog decided it should be, caused fights and quarrels, spreading hatred, and often leading to murder.

- Why did you let them convert to Christianity? Why did you allow your temples to be burned, cults ruined? Why did you not stop the suffering and the killing? How come Svarog didn't sense that? – Suddenly, I stop. I fear I'm being pulled into the story, with questions constantly rising in my head.

He nods and starts stretching with his hands still in his pockets.

– My people were a glorious one. Almost unbreakable... however, over time, they started disuniting, dividing into groups, and drifting away from their roots. In the end, more blood was being spilled in fights among themselves than in wars with others. To make things worse, they witnessed constant turmoil and events in which gods confronted one another, which always led to new natural disasters. Throughout five cold months, from November till March, agitated by the dark forces, people started losing faith in us. Convinced that we have deserted them, they started turning to other gods and religions, or even worse, to dark cults promulgated by Morana. You see, although we were more powerful and more numerous, the gods of Nav started defeating us and we began to weaken. We were losing what was most important to us, the faith of the people. What's more, during winter, we had to deal with constant attacks of the Navi's. Even in summer, they would distract us with various tricks, just so they could get their hands on our artifacts. You see, apart from the basic power we get from our bodies, we also get energy from special artifacts, those received from god, or our personal, that represent a part of us, embedded into some form of legacy.

Completely immersed in his story, I suddenly notice his dolorous look. For a moment, he seems so vulnerable and fragile.

He probably notices my sympathetic look, so he clears his throat. He quickly takes out his cell phone and makes a quick call to Inga. Then he sits opposite me again.

- I thought that you gods could at least communicate via telepathy?

- You see, that's correct. Just, now that's not possible.

-Why? –I interrupt him, almost mocking him.

- I think you'll figure it out on your own soon. Now I have just enough time to answer your question from before.

I raise my eyebrows, trying to remember what my question was in the first place.

- Exactly on December 22, 6508, or year 1000 according to your calendar, Stettin, today's Poland, which was under protection of the god Triglav, was attacked by hordes of Besomars, bogeymen, and other inhuman creatures. Triglav was one of the most powerful gods. He had three heads, each watching one of the three worlds. However,

when the Slavs moved from the proto-fatherland, Perun tied a golden ribbon over his eyes watching Jav, because Triglav was extremely devoted and attached to his people, which is why even the slightest injustice he might see would cause an extremely violent reaction. – He stops, swallowing his saliva. As if he's remembering the event, he shivers all over.

- The Navi's military, killing and burning everything in sight, caused chaos, and once Perun saw that Triglav was not coming to protect his people, he sent Mokosh, Stribog, and me among the citizens of Stettin so we could resolve the situation. The moment we arrived at the square where the idol statue of Triglav was erected, all the Navi's disappeared and we stood there alone among the corpses. Veles, who lured Triglav to Nav at night, telling him that Perun wanted to destroy both him and his cult, let him leave the underworld, but as Triglav was going out, Veles took off his blindfold. A painful cry shook his body as he saw the dead and butchered bodies of his people, and us among them, with swords in our hands. Blinded with rage, he crushed Stribog's shield in one blow. He stabbed him with his sword, and knocked Stribog's from his hand. To my dismay, Mokosh took the sword and broke it in two pieces. She broke the handle, unleashing the force of the wind. That was the last artifact of Stribog's power. He fell down and in a second dispersed into a million tiny particles. Mokosh disappeared in Nav. Perun's lightning came from the sky and struck Triglav. Cutting off his hand holding the shield, he made it easier for me to cut all his heads and knock his sword from his hand. His power was in his body, but also in his eyes – his jaw clenched with pain, Liray looks at the ground. – In every one of his eyes.

For another 168 years we had been fighting Navi's, with Mokosh on their side, as well as the Christianization of the Slavs. It was no longer about who had greater power, but about saving the world. Veles was aware that awakening Triglav, who would see chaos, would work to his benefit. He knew that his rage would destroy not only us, but the whole world. Millions of dead would fill his underworld, and he would become the absolute ruler of all souls. The only thing he was afraid of was that the victory of Nav would awaken Svarog. That's why he had to respect some laws to a certain extent.

Morana used every winter to attack the people. She was challenging us to intervene and defend, especially since at that time we were exposed and weak. During summer, she would use greater and greater number of freaks to induce discontent among the people who were already losing faith in Jav. First we lost Daibog, then Belobog. The balance between the worlds, as well as Svarog's peace, were the result of Perun's efforts to direct towards him the immense power of Arkona. Because, although all the Slavs around Arkona had converted to Christianity, willingly or otherwise, the Ruyans blindly worshiped and trusted their gods, especially Svanevit, and me... Jerovit.

For years they had been building and defending their city-state, surrounded by enemies. That's why we were trying even harder to protect them. They weren't venal or rotten on

the inside. They had let us into their hearts, and that gave us strength to start recovering. At least that's what we thought.

But Mokosh managed to seduce the high priest of the temple of Svanevit. She convinced him that she was pregnant and that he would get an heir, born by the goddess of fertility, which would bring him even closer to the world of Jav. He blindly obeyed her orders. It was him who gave away all Arkona's secrets and weaknesses to king Valderman, who attacked Arkona in 1168, together with the Christian tribes, who were in fact, converted Slavs. While the Danish were tearing Arkona apart at the temple of Svanevit, Svanevit and I were fighting Morana, Mokosh, Crnobog, and other Navi's. Svanevit slew Mokosh right away and I killed Crnobog. Morana was almost defeated and stabbed with my sword, when Valderman's Slavic warriors stormed into the temple and protected her with their bodies. We stepped away and put down our weapon, because a Slavic god never raises his hand against his descendants. Realizing we were being defeated, we started retreating, but then Svanevit was hit by a flaming spear that came straight from Nav. Perun's lightning then set fire to the ground between us, making a void that pulled in Morana, Navi's, but also a part of the Slavic army. Realizing they had provoked him to react badly and kill his own descendants, which meant that it was a matter of seconds before Svarog wakes up, Perun gave up his body and entered Prav as a spirit, making his pure and powerful soul give constant impression of balance between good and evil. Jav and Nav.

Although it seems to me that my reason is fighting against Liray's attempts to pull me into his madness, I also feel that I'm getting increasingly interested in the story, so I have to ask:

- Svanevit? –I ask, completely immersed in his story.

- Svanevit is fine. I mean, he's alive. The spear took most of his powers away, but he's all right. – He smiles warmly. – You've met him.

I confusedly try to remember the occasion. He suddenly stands up and tells me we have to go.

- Wait! How come you survived? I mean, how come you're still alive? Is that because you're the god of war? Who are the rest?

- Something like that. I'll explain it to you later. We have to go now – he points at the door where Luka, Inga, and Vuk are standing.

And my sanity kicks in again.

- Go where?!–I ask bewilderedly. I realize that, apart from an interesting fairytale, I heard nothing concrete. – I'm not going anywhere! – I start rebelling loudly. – Listen, I don't want to offend anyone, but I feel a bit lost here. I no longer know if there's something wrong with you or if it's me, but these fairytales of yours are insane. It's not

normal for people to think they're gods. Even if that was true, what would my role be in all this? You forgot to tell me that, Liray! What do you want from me? You... all of you... you... - I feel my body falling towards him and he gently catches me and lifts me up.-

- We're going to Bahla – he softly touches my ear with his lips.

- Jer, I hope you're confident about your decision – I hear Vuk talking to Liray.

I try to open my eyes, but they're too heavy.

Slumber pulls me into its dark bosom.

I'm running barefoot in a plaid cotton dress through thick grass speckled with purple blossoms. I feel the petals gently touching me, caressing my little feet. They tickle me at times, which makes me laugh cheerfully and turn around, happy to see Vasilisa as she trots behind me, holding her skirt. She yells, telling me to stop, not to go any further, but I don't listen. Enchanted by the soft rug of grass beneath my feet and the bright day glistening on my white skin, I run to the forest. There, behind the dark old oak trunks, under the thick green treetops, I see a child inviting me to come and play. I'm so happy; I haven't spent time with someone my age for a long time. Vasilisa's voice disappears in the distance as I'm getting closer to the little inviting hands, carried by an extraordinary, captivating smell. Although I'm doing my best to be as fast as I can, I suddenly become slow, barely moving through the thick grass, which is growing taller and thicker with each step. I turn around again. My nana is no longer behind me, the bright morning and the green grass are gone. There's nothing but the cracked, bumpy ground. Terrified, I realize that the ground, thick like clay, is melting beneath my feet. I get out of the slimy, warm mass. I run forward again, through the thick shrubs and weeds, towards the little girl. She's looking at me beseechingly. Her hair is almost blond. Short. She's wearing the same dress as I am. I decide that she will be my sister, if we manage to get out of here. I've always wanted to have a sister. I grab her hands. Although she looks like she's my age, her hands feel so tiny in mine. I feel the clay squishing beneath my feet. I know we have to run. I pull her hand.

- Come on! Come on, Purple! We have to go! – the girl is silent. She just keeps looking at me. – You have to, Purple! You have to come with me! – although I'm panicking, I try to make my voice sound as confident as possible. She gently squeezes my hand and gives me a glistening look filled with sorrow. – You... you... - I stutter.

I no longer pay attention to the clay, coming from all sides. I'm looking at her. Her face. Her figure. Her sad almond eyes.

- She's... - I realize in panic – she's ME!

Shocked, I let go of her hand, but she suddenly grabs my arms. She pulls me and we switch places. In a blink of an eye, she's covered and pulled in by the yellow earthy mass. Still, for just a second, before she disappears, I see the color of her eyes turn into a dark shade of my name.

- Noooo! – I shout. – No! –I scream, reaching out for her.

The scream makes me cringe so hard I wake up. I look around confusedly, trying to figure out where I am. In silence, broken only by the muffled sound of the engine, in the soft dark, striped with pale light dancing on the airplane floor, curled up, covered with a blanket, I'm lying on a wide pastel armchair bed. I try to sit up, but the seat belt pulls me back into the seat. Still thinking about my dream, and the memory of yesterday, complete madness and fear Liray and his stooges had caused, I start removing my belt in panic.

- I really hope you're looking for the restroom, not the exit – I hear Alec's voice coming from the dark next to me.

I ignore him and growl angrily. I continue my struggle with the belt.

– Allow me – he gently takes my hand, making me tingle, so I jump up as if I've touched fire. I raise my arms angrily, giving up on the belt.

- Wow... You must really be a god. You are powerful enough to free me with one hand. – I roll my eyes. Sitting up straight, I stretch my arms and look at the dark sky through the window.

- Do you still hope to see the stars right next to the plane when you look through the window at night? – he sits down opposite me and turns on the lamp next to the window.

- What?!–I give him a surprised look. – Oh, yeah – I frown. –You know my life better than I do. Is that the reason we're flying... where exactly?!

- We're flying to Oman. To Bahla. And yes, I know your entire life, but not better than you do.

- Oman?! – I frown. –Oh, well, yes. Going to the Near East makes sense, it's crawling with Slavs.

– Yeah, yeah... that's why – he smiles broadly and takes his black sweatshirt off. His shirt rolls up for a second and I see his perfect abs.

I'm not sure what kind of look I'm giving him, but he just adds:

– Well, I'm hot! Aren't you?

- Well, I don't know, perhaps. I'm sure you'll tell me! – I'm still wearing my *Ralph Lauren* sweater. But instead of my denim shorts, I notice I'm wearing extra-large gray men's sweatpants.

- What, we didn't even stop to get my stuff? – I pout.

- There was no time – he opens up his armrest and presses one of the numerous buttons.

The lights in the cabin go on just as the stewardess walks in.

– Helen, would you be so kind to bring us breakfast and coffee?

She nods politely and walks out.

- Would you like to freshen up? We'll be flying for another five hours – he says warmly.

- Aren't you worried about my family wondering where I am? – I ask instead of answering. – You realize that Milos and Emma will never stop looking for me. There's no chance they'll believe your lies – I shiver.

- Purple, trust me. No one wants to hurt you. You can use the satellite phone and call them right now. And as soon as we land, you can call them whenever you like, and as often as you like. You have to understand that I'll never let anything happen to you! That goes for your family, too.

His words and his tone calm me down a bit. However, the nervousness in my stomach caused by his insane belief that he's a god and that I'm a crucial element of his crazy story doesn't let me sit still.

- What do you want from me? – I whisper as the stewardess comes back and walks past us holding a tray.

- For now, I just want you to join me for the breakfast I owe you. – he stands up and offers me his hand. – And I promise, by the time we land, you'll have heard everything you wish to know.

We just look at each other in silence for a couple of seconds. Helen excused herself, slides past him, and walks out. He nods.

– Please – he begs, cocking his eyebrow. – Well, I am hungry – I accept his invitation and take his hand. – One of the things I'd like to know is where this has woman left our breakfast!

He pulls me in. For a second, his touch and strong grip banish all the dark thoughts from the past 24 hours from my head. But I also blush, once his sweatpants slip and leave me in my skimpy underwear. I quickly grab the sweatpants and pull them above my waist, mumbling angrily.

He laughs loudly.

– In all my years, I have never had a woman's pants drop on their own in front of me! Just like that! - he takes my hand again and leads me to the back part of the plane.

While the first part of the plane is decorated like business space, the back part looks much more impressive. Two white sofas facing each other are separated by a massive white club table with our breakfast. Right in front of the sofas, there's a gray partition wall with a LED TV. Behind the wall is a small bathroom, while at the tail of the plane is a huge French bed, almost as wide as the cabin. The lines are rather simple and subtle, the colors are white and beige, and the tiny details give the sense of warmth without taking up too much space.

- May I go wash my face?! – I sound like a child.

He doesn't reply, but just shows me the way and goes to the front part of the plane.

- Ha-ha, I don't know if you may ride a pony to school, but if your mom agrees, you'll get a little one for your birthday!

I stand frozen when I hear him as I step out of the bathroom. Confused, wearing a tank top and his sweatpants. I combed my hair into a bun, using two wooden pencils I found in one of the drawers. Although I tried, I didn't manage to make myself look decent, although the shower helped a bit. When he sees me, he calls me, showing the phone in his hand.

– Oh, here she is! Ok! Anyway, please say hello to your grandma and grandpa. And don't worry about the pony! We'll convince Purple somehow.

He gives me the large handset. I tingle all over with joy once I hear Beyla's squeaky voice. I almost fall down on the sofa, trying not to cry when she starts talking:

– Mommy, uncle Alec promised to buy me a pony for my birthday! May I color it purple?! – I put my hand on my chest and hold the handset tight. I look at him in surprise as he pours us coffee and prepares the croissants.

-*Who are you?*–I whisper to myself.

After talking to my family for about ten minutes, I feel relaxed and start eating. Only after Helen comes in again do I realize that we have already finished off the first tray. Once I finish, I snuggle into the sofa, laughing at my stomach showing under the top.

- God! –I point, smiling broadly.–How long has it been since the last time I ate?!

- Unfortunately, too long... I'm sorry – he says. – Really, had I sensed that you had entered the lighthouse, I would have come right away. I would have tried to explain it to you then. I can't imagine how all this has been affecting you... Hazel, unfortunately,

instead of being where he was supposed to be, ended up in who knows whose bed. That's why you got there and found out about everything the wrong way.

I take my coffee mug and put my legs up on the sofa.

- So you're still claiming that you're Jerovit? You still think that you're a god?

- I prefer being called Yaril. After all, I go by that name when I'm among the people.

- Don't you go by the name of Alec Liray when you're "among the people"?

- Exactly. Liray. - he nods affirmatively.

- Liray... - I stop and think - Liray... ahaaaa, you mean, Iaril spelled backwards! - I give him a goofy smile once I figure out the secret of name.

- And who's Hazel?

- Hazel is Luka.

- Is he... - I can't utter the word "god".

- No. Luka is not a god. He's a demigod. Hazel is the guardian of forests and trees. But for the past seven years, he has primarily been your guardian. He is a good and loyal subject, but because of his uncontrolled sexual desire, we have almost lost us you, or even worse, the entire Jav.

- So we've come to the part where I find out about my role in this fantasy world... - I still refuse to believe his story, although I burn with desire to finally find out everything. A breath of discomfort goes through my body, reminding me that deep inside I'm still not ready to face the truth, one even worse than the one I've already heard.

- Jav... Purple... that's the name of my world. And it's not made-up. It really exists. You can refuse to believe, but that changes nothing. Your stubbornness will not erase it, and I know that you are beginning to understand that everything I'm telling you is the truth, no matter how scary it might seem. This world is the sky around this plane, the sultanate where we're going, the ocean with dolphins in which your daughter swims. The world with its sun, planets, stars, and living beings. Jav is all that. And all its beauty, all the life in it, on your planet Earth, can disappear in a moment shorter than a breath or a blink of an eye. Although Perun has given up his human form, so his spirit could constantly be present by Svarog's side, it is necessary that there is at least one source of good in Jav that will send him his energy and thus contribute to the illusion of balance between the worlds. After the fall of Arkona, only Lada and I have preserved all the sources of our power and strength. As the god of war, I had eight swords and a shield. Lada, the goddess of summer, got her original power from a wild mare she rode and fibula made of willow and hazel. Although all gods are warriors in a way, Lada, Devana, Belobog, Koledo, Hors, and Radegast couldn't always handle battles, since they were

primarily gods of nature and life. On the other hand, I'm primarily the god of war, the god of blood... that's why I have suppressed the guardian of young life, sun, and spring in me and let the blind desire for revenge take over. A fearless hothead, I charged into battles with the Navi's. That's how I finally, blinded with rage caused by the plague, ran into Nav killing everyone in sight. I fell into a trap and got wounded badly, lost three swords, damaged my shield, and barely got out alive. Morana immediately realized what my artifacts were and used every opportunity to send her army against me alone. Whenever she could, she did that in hope they'll get snatch them or destroy them in battle.

There are also legacy artifacts we get by impressing a part of us into a part of nature. Apart from a few of them, such as Lada's fibula, Hors' wooden horn, and Radegast's lion's paw, there were no other artifacts of that kind. At first, we didn't need them, and later we avoided making them. Mostly because every impression of a god into animate or inanimate objects requires immense power to be used, whose light is so strong even an ordinary man can see it. Besides, leaving legacy in living beings proved to be a bad idea, due to their vulnerability. And when it comes to objects, we need to take them with us at all times.

I yawn loudly. This is really too much information for me. The whole story seems pointless again, so I can't help but say:

- So you keep the swords and the shield in your pants? That's why you never took them off? I knew you were hiding something in there! Unfortunately, I had a different sword in mind – I roll my eyes sarcastically and stretch my arms.

He smiles and keeps looking at me as he stretches his arm out to the side. He gently bends his wrist, and out of nowhere, a long, heavy sword materializes in his hand. The handle and the slightly arched cross-guard are made of a net of white, yellow, and red gold. On the handle, there's a sun with eight rays, surrounded by oak leaves made of gems. In the middle of that *swastika*, which actually reminds me of a wheel framed with white gold, there is a purple stone. The end of the handle, round and carved in old gold, represents Earth. The blade is shiny and smooth like a mirror. Reflecting light, it shows slight indentations on the upper surface and the sides, while the middle part is slightly widened.

I stare in astonishment as he flips it in his hand, as if it was a toy, and turns the tip of the blade towards the ground.

- You think I pulled it out of my sleeve?

He raises it again, pointing the tip at my shoulder. I sit back. My lips dry, I look at the blade, feeling terrified.

- This is the sharpest one, the eighth sword! The only one I've got left. And the only one that is in fact only what you see. A cold weapon. Forty years ago, in Siberia, my last

sword was destroyed. And the shield is so damaged, it has lost its energy – he pulls his hand to his chest, and the sword disappears the same way it appeared. He gives me a warm look.

- You can relax. I won't take it out anymore... unless you want me to?

I shake my head in disapproval.

- Ok, I won't! – he grins mischievously.

I slowly peel myself out of sofa. I take a sip of juice and wet my upper lip with the tip of my tongue. Looking at my glass, lost in thought, I try to accept the fact that the massive sword appeared in his hand and vanished just like that. I ask him, if that's just a regular sword and the only one left, whether that would mean that all his artifacts are destroyed. He nods affirmatively.

- You, then, actually have no powers! – *of course, perfect excuse to cover up his insanity... that sword must be a trick. Of course he's not a god.*

- The main source of my power is my body – he says carefully.

- Is it... like... bulletproof? – nothing else comes to my mind.

- My armor is almost completely impenetrable. However, as you already know, all armors have unprotected parts through which I could be hurt... and killed... Of course, I'm talking about gods. The Navi's and human weapons can't hurt me.

I cock my head.

– If I understand correctly, if something happens to you, the whole world dies with your body.

- Yes. In case that happened, my death would mark the start of awakening of Svarog and the end of Jav.

- I don't get it. If they attacked you so violently before, while you were powerful, why would they stop now? The whole thing with the wealth and the *Arkona Group* isn't really what you would call keeping a low profile.

- That's because they don't know that the sword isn't an artifact and because they don't know that my legacy still exists in Jav... a part of me... - he stops, his gray eyes sparkle and I finally recognize them. My blood turns to ice when he finishes his sentence: - ... impressed into a living being... into you.

They need a human sacrifice, they need a human sacrifice... scared out of my wits, I sit back, trying to be small, tiny, imperceptible... *God, he's going to kill me...*

- After the defeat in Siberia, it was clear to all of us that it's a matter of day before they notice my vulnerability. – he whispers in a hoarse voice – The only thing I could do was leave a part of myself in my legacy.

- Wh...why mm... why me? – I murmur.

- Every process of planting legacy into nature, like I said, requires power which causes significant reactions. However, there are certain dates when magic can otherwise be felt in nature. At those times, it's possible to cover up the process of impressing at a certain moment of the beginning or the end of that day. Of course, the traces remain visible long after that... even you humans can see them, but it's practically impossible to determine the person or thing that received the legacy. As the god of the early sun, I used the magic in the air caused by the birth of spring. I impressed a piece of me into you. The purple dust that covered you, Arkona, and a part of Rügen on the night you were born was a part of unleashing my power.

- Of all the children in the world, why did you pick me?! – I ask in a tearful voice.

- Although we rarely transferred our legacy, we always tried to impress it into pure Slavic descendants. Purple, you're a Devan! A direct descendant of goddess Devana.

- I... I'm not a real Serb! I'm not a South Slav at all! I told you, my family tree, it's such a chaotic mixture!

- No, you're not a Serb. You're not a real South Slav. But you have what matters most, and that is pure Slavic origin. It is that mixture of bloods of different peoples running through your veins that leads to one and only royal blood. To one people they all came from. To the Proto-Slavs, the descendants of gods! Your ancestors are descendants of Devana, the goddess of love, youth, and beauty. Milos even figured that out at some point. That is why Devana froze his memories when you came to Old Skies. She only left him a loose idea about the relationship between your last name and her fortress in Old Skies.

- Devana is alive? I thought...

- No. Devana is not alive – he looks through the window. The sunlight shines on his face. He looks old and tired.

- She died sixteen years ago in a fight with Morana. – he sighs. – You think that she died in her sleep. Devana was your nana, Vasilisa.

The memory of nana and Alec dragging her sweet and fragile character into this whole story make me angry. I jump up in anger, yelling at him across the table.

– Don't you dare! Don't you dare drag my nana into your fabrications!

He watches me calmly, with his deep, glistening look. He's making me believe him. But I don't want to and I can't! I sit back into the armchair. The sunlight suddenly breaks through the round window and I duck angrily. I take a deep breath.

- I wasn't even born in spring, I was born on March 20. It was still winter. – I sit back. – Besides, how come Morana and those Navi's of yours didn't find it strange that the whole island was marked with your color?

- In 1973, the first second of spring magic was on March 20, at 3:37 a.m. It finished at the same time next day. Your time of birth always coincides with the beginning or ending of the birth of the early sun. That way, the moment of sending your energy to Perun is hidden and protected from the Navi's.

My eyes wide open, I nod, as if I don't want to hear what he's trying to say and what I'm slowly beginning to realize.

- Every year on your birthday, you cross the hanging bridge between the sky and the earth of Jav. As you cross it, with every step you make you're sending proof of the existence of my legacy and power into Prav.

- I... I... – my chin is trembling, making it hard to speak. – I... I don't cross it, the boy crosses it... I... I can't even move... - suddenly, my last dream flashes before my eyes, the one where I try to hold the little hand as tight as I can, before it slips. The fear and pain I felt when I realized I was losing him pierce through my heart again. I finally got to see the face of the child, before he slipped into the abyss. The sad, almond eyes under straight, fluffy eyebrows. Soft rosy cheeks, pale full lips, short curly light hair, just like I remembered it. I scream, fighting for air. I curl up on the sofa, putting my hands over my head. I dive into the darkness of my skin.

– No, no, no... – I repeat as my body shakes feverishly. – That's not true! It can't be true! Alec sits beside me. He tries to take me in his arms, but I push him away.

- Get away! Get away from me! You're insane! None of this is true!

I am disgusted by his story! His appearance! The fact he knows what's happening in my head. Tears running down my face, I stand up. – You are nothing but a lunatic! I don't want to listen to you anymore! Go ahead, kill me, I don't care! Just shut up! – I try to figure out where I can go. I run to the back part of the plane, where the blinds are still closed and it's pleasantly dark.

I curl up under the covers. Like a scared child, I hide between the pillows. My eyes closed, I try to banish him from my thoughts, banish my dream that I see so clearly in my mind. The dream where I see the young me die.

I feel the mattress move as he sits beside me. He gently pulls me closer and I find myself on his chest. He holds me strong enough to stop the shivering. I stop crying. Although I

don't want to be in his arms, the soft warmth of his hug and his sparkly scent calm me down a bit.

I remain quiet and stare at the thin beam of sun coming through the blinds, cutting the space in half. I let him gently caress my hair, and no matter how hard I try to think, I realize my mind is empty. I hear nothing but him breathing deeply. I close my eyes and snuggle into his chest, quietly wondering what will become of me.

He's silent, caressing me. He speaks nothing. As if he's waiting for my body to become completely still and relaxed. After a couple of minutes, still holding me, he says that from now on, he'll spend every waking moment with me. He'll look after me and try to make up for all the confusion and traumas caused by freezing my memories every time I was on the verge of finding out the truth. I settle in comfortably, trying not to move from his chest. I know it's wrong, but for the first time in ages, I feel safe.

- You have to understand. We needed to be around you at all times. We had to look after you, follow you, and influence certain events in your life that took the course that was in no way good for you. All the big changes in your life are caused by our interference. Except... except for Beyla's birth. – he suddenly stops talking.

- Beyla... - I whisper. My heart flutters with joy as I remember her ginger curls and olive eyes.

– You want to tell me that not even gods know who the father of my child is?! – I smile sadly.

- No, we don't know. Especially since there was no chance for you to get pregnant. You weren't supposed to have children – he says carefully, but I start boiling with rage anyway, so I try to move away from him. He just holds me even tighter, and I feel completely calm again.

- You can't have children, because a part of god's legacy is inside you. That's why you couldn't get pregnant with any human being!

- You're trying to say that – dark thoughts flood my mind and I shiver.

- No, Beyla isn't the child of any of us, nor any of them... No one knows what happened on September 21, 2005 in New Orleans. No one, except for you! That's why I tried to get through to the memory of that day two nights ago – he says almost repentantly. He swallows saliva and goes on: - I sent you to New Orleans and directed you to Gabriella's inn. It was time you broke it off with Peter and met me. I wanted to finally get close to you, be around you, as a man of flesh and blood, and not just watch you stealthily as a ghost or through the screen. Unfortunately, that was when the Navi's attacked us on our territory in Kimberley for the first and the last time. To this day I haven't found out why they had endangered the stability of Nav. Although they wounded me at some point, I didn't let it show until we won, and then I fell and lost consciousness. Only at that time

you were alone, and I can't believe it. You got pregnant, and not even you know who the father is!

He gives me a warm smile.

- You know, Purple, you're not just the source of my strength, but also the source of the constant drama around you. Because, no matter how hard we tried to influence certain important events that really made your life difficult, you yourself made even bigger mess with your decisions.

He kisses my hair. – We'll be in Oman in less than an hour. Are you calm now?

- Well... I am. Although I don't know how, considering that hundreds of questions are running through my head. I don't know what to ask you first.

- My closeness calms you down. Your heart recognizes the beats of mine. It recognizes the origin of its blood. – he holds me tight again. – I know you have a lot of questions. But, believe me, I'm so tired of all the talking, we'll continue when we land.

His calm, hoarse voice is so soothing, and so is his firm grip and steady breathing.

– May I ask just one more question? – I ask sweetly, like a little girl.

He nods affirmatively.

- Why didn't you want to sleep with me?

As he falls about laughing, I slap myself in my thoughts. I can't believe I just asked him that! After all that he has done, after all that I've seen and heard, I'm asking why he didn't sleep with me. A part of me, the greater part, is still aware that he's insane.

-Puprure, only you can ask something like that! – he smiles broadly, with a happy expression on his face.

- I don't know why that came to my mind after all this – I shrug. Feeling ashamed, I try to pull out unnoticeably, pull the covers over my head and disappear completely.

He clears his throat, pulls me in, and runs his fingers through my hair. He stops, wanting to say something, but instead, he gives me a soft kiss and puts his hand on my neck. He softly caresses my cheek. – Let's try to get some sleep.

Looking deep into his eyes, I nod slightly.

Hot morning, splashed with strong scent of jasmine and olibanum welcomes us as we go out of the plane. Holding my hand, he takes me to the black *Range Rover Evoque* parked near the runway. Leaning against the police car nearby were two men in uniforms and one wearing traditional beige dishdasha. To my surprise, Alec speaks to them in Arab, giving them our passports. They kindly stamp them and say goodbye.

- Gods have passports? – I can't help but say as I get into the car.

He looks at me cheerfully, comes closer and gives me a kiss before he starts the engine.

– Yes, Purple. Gods have passports, too – he says as he puts on his sunglasses – and now, it would be great if you could stop teasing until we get to Bahla.

- If I have to – I roll my eyes. – I don't have my sunglasses! – I pout.

- Oh, yeah. I'm sorry, we didn't bring your things. – He stretches out his arm towards me. – I think they'll suit you perfectly – he smiles, giving me a brief look. My eyes wide open, I look at the glasses case in his hand. He drops it on my lap, steps on the gas and drives around the police car that was guiding us from the airport.

I look at the case with the familiar *Burberry* design on my lap, as if I'm expecting it to attack me any second, and I hold tight onto the seat.

– Come on, put them on! They don't bite. They're only glasses.

Those are only glasses, I say to myself, carefully opening the case. I put them on, mumbling that I was probably blinded by the sun, so I didn't see where he took them from.

- The place I took them from is out of the Sun's reach! – he nods sarcastically and laughs loudly, which makes me punch him on the shoulder. He laughs again.

The trip to Bahla takes two hours. Completely calm and relaxed, I watch the soft and rough landscapes of Oman. Instead of asking him at least one of the billion questions buzzing in my head, I enjoy the architecture, the wandering goats next to the lonely bushes and endless steep hills down the road. From time to time, he gives me a broad smile, making the butterflies in my stomach flutter and my cheeks blush. *God, he's not the one who's insane, I am!* – I say to myself and try to look through the window most of the time.

We enter Bahla without me noticing. Under the impression that we suddenly came through the desert to the sand walls of the old fortress, I finally conclude that I must have fallen asleep.

– This is it – he says, parking in the shade of a big, crooked tree.

– This? – I get out of the car disappointedly looking around. All I can see are ugly stone houses with cracked walls and closed blinds. I turn around. There's no one around. Just

silence, broken by the sound of soft wind coming from the fortress. Apart from the tree next to us, there are a few dry trunks, lifelessly and almost frighteningly spreading their dry, bumpy branches, making thin shadows. In the dust I see the colorful Bedouin carpets. I raise my glasses and I'm surprised to see a couple of gray cats on one of them, lying around lazily.

- Come on, Purple – he says, pulling me by the hand. I squeeze his hand tight, so it doesn't slip out of mine. He responds with a gentler squeeze.

- It's so spooky in here – I whisper, following him to the entrance.

- No, it's not. It's just vacation time. – he kisses my hair and opens the door, barely touching them. We stand in the middle of the fortress with walls the color of white sand. Within the fortress, there are four watchtowers attached to multi-story buildings, with two rows of rectangular windows at the top. Inside, there is a complex of identical single-story building without roofs, arranged parallel to the walls. Just like the outside, the inside looks so desolate. My mouth goes dry and I realize that I'm having another panic attack. I stand still, like frozen, which makes Alec flinch and turn around. Facing my terrified expression, he picks me up.

- It seems that you're getting used to me carrying you like this – he says sweetly. I don't even manage to smile, and we're already heading for one of the houses. The doors open slowly and a sudden gust of cold wind coming from the room makes me wrap my arms around him and close my eyes, but he puts me down and I open my eyes again. I notice that there is a symbol of a wheel in the middle of the door, the exact same shape and color as the one I saw on Liray's sword.

Everything around me is surreally vast, with wide, smooth, round pillars and tall glass ceiling with clear view of the bright, translucent blue sky. That certainly isn't what I expected to see inside the plain little house we entered. The floor under my feet is made of snow white marble, with edges decorated with brightly colored mosaics, with royal purple as the dominant color. The room is empty. Right in front of me is a wide door leading to the terrace under the shade of an oak with fresh green leaves. The sun shines through the treetop, illuminating the beautiful white lilies. Clean, fresh air in this place makes me stand up straight and take a deep breath. I absorb its clear freshness and I feel like my lungs are about to explode. I suddenly hear cheerful laughter from the terrace. Paying no attention to Alec, I take a few steps forward. I see a girl with long straight hair the color of hay. Barefoot, wearing a transparent white dress with a thin wreath of tiny flowers around her head. She runs around cheerfully, holding a young man by the hand, who's wearing only white pants. His hair light and tied into a tail, he looks like her twin brother. They laugh, looking back, as if they're running away from someone. They stop once they see me. They observe me confusedly, as if I was some kind of a wonder, and then give me a warm and hearty smile.

- Purple! Purple is here! – they shout, as if they’re calling out to someone. And soon, three more pairs appear. Almost identical, only the shades of their hair were different.

- Alec, what is this? Who are these people? – I ask, facing him for the first time since we got to the house.

- Those are fairies and elves – he says as he invites them in.

He walks slowly towards me.

- They have spent the past forty years in the celestial Jav. We couldn’t allow someone to catch them on earth and find out about you.

- Alec! What... the hell... is that? – I whisper as I watch him come closer. He looks like he has just walked out of an epic fantasy movie, the genre I’m not really fond of.

He’s wearing a tight black leather vest with metal elements on the shoulders. On the chest, there is a white gold symbol of sun in the center of which is an eight-ray swastika, surrounded by oak leaves. On both sides of his ribs are engraved four sword blades. Under the vest, he’s wearing a dark gray tunic with short sleeves embroidered with thin silver net on the edges. Right above his heart is a purpure stone fibula holding a long cape made of heavy black silk with purpure lining. His forearms are protected with black leather arm guards, and down the left side of his waist hangs the heavy sword I saw on the plane. He’s also wearing black high boots and black leather pants. I notice for the first time that the reflection of his hair is reddish, actually, ginger.

- The only way to show you and make you believe my story was to bring you here – he approaches me and offers me his hand.

Confused, I place my hand in his. He leads me to the terrace. We go down the stairs, passing by the happy faces of beautiful girls and men bowing as we walk by.

- You drugged me while we were on the plane! Didn’t you?! – I say as I realize that the stairs lead to some soft, white, fluffy steam, reminding me only of clouds.

- LSD? What else could cause this kind of hallucinations? – I continue babbling, trying to make sense out of everything I see and feel.

- Tell me, what do you want right now? – he says, stopping in the middle of nothing.

Surrounded by white fog with occasional golden sunrays coming through, I squeeze his hand, trying to prove myself that I’m conscious and awake.

- Tell me – he repeats in a hoarse voice that rings in my head, my heart, and between my legs.

I blush, realizing that, ignoring this utterly bizarre situation, my body still wants him. At the moment, the only honest answer would be that I want him to take me right here, right now, and feed me with his body.

I tingle all over, noticing his devilish smile.

- Oh, no, missy, that's out of the question! – he says and I interrupt him immediately:

- Beyla! I want to see Beyla! – I shout, trying not to show how shocked I am that he so easily guessed what I wanted first.

- She's asleep now. Be quiet – he whispers.

And somehow, we are now in a hotel room in Honolulu.

My heart is beating like crazy as I watch my daughter sleep peacefully in a canopy bed covered with a net. She's holding a little monkey in her arms. Her curly hair is scattered on the pillow and the tiny freckles on her face almost match the shade of her sun-kissed skin. Her lips are slightly open, so I can clearly hear her breathe. I want to take her in my arms, touch her, kiss her. I want to lie beside her, hold her curled up in my arms, protecting her from everything. From life and all this madness I'm in. I look at Alec and he nods affirmatively, so I stoop down and kiss her hair and her forehead, which almost rouses her from her sleep.

- Mommy – she utters, her eyes still closed, and turns to the other side.

Tears run down my face and just as I'm about to touch her, I feel Liray's hand on my shoulder.

The next moment, I'm standing in the "Neverland" again, the sea of fluffy clouds, or the sky of Jav, as Alec likes to call it. He hugs me and I feel his vest on my skin, cold and repulsive.

- Is this *swastika* of yours going to tattoo my face? – I say as I step away.

- Only when I'm wearing my armor – he kisses my forehead. – Do you trust me now? – he whispers into my ear.

I feel like I'm standing in the middle of an endless sea whose airy waves crash against the vast blue sky above us. In a space without a beginning or an end. Space without a sound, filled with nothing but fresh air and Alec's sparkly scent.

I nod affirmatively, although I really still can't accept anything I've seen and heard. I expect to wake up every second and come back to reality. I watch him. He has never looked better, younger. And I, I feel so old and tired.

- I'll believe everything you want, just please, I need a hot bath and some clean clothes.

He nods slightly.

- But, before that, I have something for you – he comes close and opens his palm, showing me a white gold ring with a stone that looks just like the one on his fibula. I look at it confusedly, at its wonderful glow, the reflection of the light on its transparent crystal surface. The rays shining through accentuate the eight-ray *swastika* in the center. He doesn't wait for me to ask why he's showing it to me and takes my left hand, carefully placing it on my ring finger:

- Please, wear it always. It's made from the stone that was once in my shield and is the only part that still contains the original energy. As long as it's on your hand, you'll be safe.

- From whom? From the Navi's? – I ask as I watch the light dance within it. I'm enchanted by the view.

- Yes, the Navi's... and me.

- You?! – I frown and put my hand behind my back. He takes it in his hand and kisses it.

- Let's just say that from now on, there will be no more memory losses, bad dreams, blanks in time, and no one will be able to manipulate your thoughts and decisions. The energy of the ring protects my legacy within you and every excess release of energy will be ascribed to the ring.

- But why did you say that it will protect me from you?! – I ask, as if I heard nothing he just said. I was looking for only one answer.

- Purple... I can hurt you physically, unintentionally... in case I sleep with you. I'm too rough for a human being. Especially a fragile one, like you...

Finally, an answer I like! *That means that with this ring I can fulfill my desire for him*, the naughty thought goes through my mind. I smile devilishly, looking around, wondering which way the bathroom is.

- Let's go, then – he nods and takes me through the thick clouds of white mist.

- Go? Where? How? – I follow him clumsily. A few steps later, we stand in front of tall doors with massive gold fittings. He opens them carefully and suddenly, we're in front of the plain house in Bahla again.

- So, what's the thing with this place, anyway? – I say, looking at the square within the fortress that has turned into a lively market with bustling crowd of people of different races.

The day is reaching its peak. The boiling heat and heavy moisture, the air filled with scents of different cultures, it all contributed to the sudden noise becoming too unpleasant for all my senses.

- No more carrying! – Alec leans towards me. Holding my hand, he takes me through the crowd, outside the fortress walls, where we're welcomed by the comfortable silence.

- What just happened? Where are we going anyway?

- We're going to a place where there's water, food, and clean clothes – he says as he opens the car door.

- I can't believe we're going to drive back for hours! – I frown with discontent.

- You said you were a god! Couldn't you picture it, wave your hand, click your heels, or whatever, and take us to the hotel room, or wherever we're going?!

- We're no longer in Bahla, as you can see – he smiles. – We'll get there soon. Trust me, you'll love it.

- Oh, I'd love a barrel of cold water and a piece of clean fabric to wrap around me. You haven't told me yet, what's the thing with Bahla?!

- There are certain places on Earth that are centers of magic. Various kinds of magic. From Vlach to voodoo, from sibir to hama, from black to white. New Orleans, Bahla, Kimberley, Ufa, Trinidad, Tara, Mumbai, Stonehenge, and some other places. However, Bahla is the place where a great amount of magic has been present at all times for centuries, more intense than in anywhere else. All the mages from around the world gather within these walls to shop, exchange, and create their wonders, using vast amounts of their energy that stays in the fortress. As such, the energy serves as a perfect cover for undivine creatures to enter Jav. Had I brought you into Jav directly from Arkona, or any other part of the world, your presence would have left a noticeable trace, which would have further confirmed your significance to me to Veles and Morana.

- But, now that I have the ring – I interrupt him. – couldn't we simply teleport somewhere? I can't stand any more travels, no matter what interesting stories they might carry – I weep.

- The ring is actually the reason we can't. It protects you from the Navi's, but it also protects you from me, from my influence on you. It protects your will to do something or be somewhere. That's why, if I wanted us to be in, say, Reykjavik now, you would stay here.

- Well, it's simple! – I raise my eyebrow. – I take it off, we go to Island, and then I put it back on! – I say as I roll my ring around my finger with my left thumb.

- Let me explain it to you this way – he says slowly, minding his words. – Try thinking of Nav as a secret agency, with nerds in its headquarters, whose assignment is to look at screens all day and keep track of what's happening in the world. *In the Arkona Group*. Where Inga and the rest of us are... However, they are primarily focused on noticing any unusual phenomena that would indicate that there is a sleeper. A living being or an

object of great importance to me, which contains important information about Jav and me. You, for example, have a secret transmitter inside your body, that activates when supernatural energy is used around you, or when you're subjected to its influence. If I was to teleport you from here to Beyla, even for a second, their satellite would automatically find you and show them your whereabouts. And their primary goal is to eliminate you, as the source of my legacy, my power. That's why we use planes, cars, phones, and computers when we're around you. Because we try not to use our powers when you're around. At least not the ones that could make you unwittingly turn on your locator. – He curves his lips. – Do you understand now?

- But what's exactly the point of this ring then?

- The ring protects you, so no one, not even I, can influence you with any kind of power or magic.

- But if they see it, I'm pretty sure they'll know it's yours!

- They'll know it's mine and they'll think that you're my mistress. Because – he speaks softly – all my girlfriends wore similar rings.

I give him a disappointed and angry look.

- No, it's not what you think. I gave them similar rings that protected them from me only... so they could sleep with me. – He looks straight ahead. – The only way for any of us to be with a human being is to protect the man or the woman with an amulet.

- So, when I'm wearing the ring, to me you're just a regular person, and the ring is actually repelling you from me?

- Yes – he replies briefly.

- When I take it off, I'm vulnerable in every way.

- Yes.

- When I put it back on, we can sleep together! – *Now I'm being direct! But that's good, I think to myself.*

- No.

- What do you mean no?! – I ask, feeling offended.

- If you don't wear it, I could hurt you. If you wear it, it will hurt me.

- But, what about the others? – I whisper confusedly.

- Unlike them, who are just humans, you have the original power of a god within you, which enhances the power of the ring. Don't forget that! This rock is your shield. It protects you from everyone, including me.

- Oh, come on! – I smack my forehead. – Why can't it be simple for once?! – I shake my head, as if I'm trying to get rid of the bunch of information that's been clogging my mind.

- I'm thirsty – I say in the end.

- Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot. – A bottle of water appears in his hand and I look in disbelief.

- And this is ok?!

- Purple, these are just harmless little things... I

take a sip.

- You sure went through a lot of trouble just to make sure you don't have sex with me – I sigh and look through the window. – It's not a big deal if you're not attracted to me – I murmur.

- Purple, that's not true, you know that...

I wave my hand, letting him know I don't want to listen to that again.

I really don't want to hear anything else. If I take in just one more piece of information, my brain will explode! I'll burn out! I look through the window. I realize we're passing by a beach. The turquoise sea absorbed the reflection of the gorgeous purple sky. I just want to put everything on hold. Restart. I want my mind to be a blank slate again, for life to write my story, this time simple and clear.

- God, it's beautiful – I whisper, staring at the extraordinary sunset.

Liray turns off the main road, downhill, towards the bay. Surrounded by rough, steep cliffs made up of dark rocks and fine white sand, and a tall wall hiding the palm trees, I see a terracotta house: its flat roof, large windows, and a wide balcony. We pass through the thriving garden and walk towards Vuk and Helga. They give me a warm welcome, with broad smiles on their faces. I reply with an angry nod.

– I just want to hit the shower! – I say gruffly. I try to ignore the questions in my head about their presence in Oman. Helga shows me to a bay view room upstairs. She tells me all about which room is where, when the dinner will be ready, and casually adds that I'm not allowed to go anywhere unattended. I pay no attention to her words and go out to the balcony. The sun is just about to set. The purpure sky, splashed with streaks of orange and red shining from the bright sphere peacefully sinking behind the turquoise horizon of the dark blue sea, reflects on the giant mirror bellow. The wind carries the scent of salt and dying heat. The dusk relaxes my muscles and I realize how tired I am. Coming out of the bathroom, I see Alec's note. He's inviting me to dine with him. Although I smile happily at first, my heart jumping with joy, the ring on my finger reminds me that he needs me, but not the way I'd like him to. Instead of putting my

clothes on, I just slip under the covers and go to sleep. Hugging the pillow, I look at the thin layer of darkness enveloping the room. I think of Beyla and fall asleep in a second.

We spend the next few days at the house with occasional trips to the beach. We drink coffee on my terrace, waiting for the dawn to turn into morning, and then again in the evening, when I get ready for bed, we lie on the balcony and look at the bright sky and count the stars. Alec tells me about the early Slavs, the lost worlds, about battles, defeats, and victories. I listen to him, lying on his chest, feeling his warmth and the beating of his heart. I let his hoarse voice tuck me in and put me to sleep, after which he carries me to bed and leaves. I talk to my family every day and shrug when they ask me if I know where Luka is. Actually, telling them that I don't know what's happening to him is the only truth in the ocean of lies I tell them.

We sometimes go to Bahla, so I could see Beyla, teleporting from the vestibule of Jav to Hawaii. And it's not just that, I love simply appearing in different places and times that come to my mind. I have learned how to relax. I've begun to enjoy and accept the fact that I, Purple Devan, am a direct descendant of the Slavic goddess Devana, that thirty-nine years ago, in spring, the god of war and the early sun, Yaril, left a part of his legacy within me. Instead of telling me stories, he takes me to different periods of my life, where I see myself and them, and suddenly, everything that's happened to me makes sense. All of a sudden, I know why I didn't get into the car with Vera when she got drunk and stole her parents' car on her eighteenth birthday and crashed it after driving for 60 feet, getting badly injured. I know why, out of the blue, I decided to get drunk alone in 10 minutes, waiting for Nikola, all dressed up and excited. When he saw how wasted I was, he went out with my best friend Tiana instead of me. After just a couple of weeks, in one of his fits of jealousy, he beat her up so badly, she ended up in the ER.

- Why Peter and Phillip? – I ask him one night, on our way to Muscat. – Couldn't you... - I look down – get Phillip out of the picture earlier?

- Peter... Peter was an excellent choice! His lack of ambition influenced you, too. In time, without his support, you gave up on various dreams and ideas. The trip to America was only a bit influenced by us. It was important that you stay somewhere in the middle. Not to stick out. So we pulled you down every time you were getting good at something.

- There was so much I wanted to do... - I sigh disappointedly.

- Yes, there was – he looks at me. – And you would succeed in everything if there weren't for us to sabotage you. I'm sorry.

- You're sorry?! – I roll my eyes. – You wouldn't do any of those things if you were sorry!

- Purple, I can't even begin to explain what I'd been going through and how I felt while I...

- While you were watching Phillip treating me like that?! Did you grab some popcorn, watching him killing me bit by bit with his blackmails? Huh? Was that a part of your plan, too?

- No. Phillip was your choice. We didn't influence him.

- How come? Why?! – I ask angrily.

- Because at that time, I was recovering from the Navi's attack. Because we lost you for 24 hours and because you were already pregnant by the time we recovered from everything. Because a mother's decision about who's going to be the man in her life can't be influenced by anyone, not even me. Especially if she chooses a descendant of a Slavic tribe, and apart from that, Phillip is also the last descendant of the Millintz.

I look at him bewilderedly.

– You are the mother of the new Slavic blood! Thanks to you, Devana's family tree has blossomed again. That means that how you raise your child and who you raise the new Slavic life with was completely up to you. You, unfortunately, kept Phillip close to Beyla no matter what, that way keeping him close to you as well.

- Nonsense! – I roll my eyes – You could have...

- We couldn't do anything! - he interrupts me harshly. – Nothing, except to offer him things that would keep him away from you. Like jobs, money, women. Unfortunately, what happened between the two of you while you were together was something I could only watch helplessly. Your fear that he'd show you in a bad light and convince Beyla and everyone else that you were a promiscuous, dishonest person and a bad mother, kept me away, while it kept him close to you. Until you decided that he had to disappear from your life, until you said it out loud both to yourself and him, my hands were tied!

My further questions are interrupted by the camera flashes in front of the *Chedi Hotel*, where we agreed to have dinner. I cover my face instinctively, while he tries to slowly drive through.

- Alec, where did they come from? Couldn't you predict this? – He takes my hand and shows me the ring.

– Doesn't it scare you, being only human while you're with me?

- In your presence, all I want is to be human... in every situation. – he says, caressing every inch of my face with his eyes.

I look at him. My desire for him is still there, I just keep it locked up inside since I got the ring. His feelings for me are of different kind. He hasn't even tried to kiss me, or touch me as a woman again. But that look of his, that passion and sparkle in his eyes still light

my fire. Alec quickly opens the door and goes out, smiling cheerfully at the journalists who are, thanks to the security, now several feet away.

Then he walks over and opens my door.

– Just smile and wave your left hand, so they could see the ring – he whispers, taking my hand so I could get out.

I wave coyly, trying to look as calm as possible.

- Mrs. Devan has proved to be an excellent restorer. That's why we've hired her to work on several *Arkona Group* projects in Oman. One of them is actually run by Mrs. Devan's husband. That's why I would like to ask you to get thoroughly informed before jumping to any kind of conclusions – he cheerfully answers the question about the two of us dating, puts his hand on my back, and takes me to the *Chedi*.

We go to the beach. The white baldachins are set up and the torches around them are softly burning, illuminating the silk pillows on the white covers. The moment we sit down, Alec's phone rings. His expression tells me that it has something to do with me.

- Sorry, Inga – he says, scrolling through pages on his phone.

– We have already hit the gossip columns. Unfortunately, you need to leave for Germany tonight. Morana will seriously dig through your biography after this.

- Haven't you already changed the data about me?

- Yes, we have... It's just that I've been spending all this time around you, it will seem suspicious to her.

- Well, all right, she'll think that I'm your mistress.

- No, she won't... – he looks at the horizon – She'll know that you're much more than that! I'll stay in Oman for two more days, and then I leave for New York. Please, you just stay in Vitt. I'll join you in late June. I know I've promised I'll never leave you again, but trust me... it's necessary to...

- Alec, Beyla's birthday is in ten days. My work in Putgarten should be done by June 21. I promised that I'd organize her the best birthday ever, and that we would never be apart again. I have to be in Old Skies by June 10, at the latest!

- Oh, of course, I'm sorry, I forgot. Of course you'll be home by then. And Luka will be taking care of you until I return. I hope I'm invited to Beyla's birthday – he says, sipping wine the waiter brought.

- You promised her a pony that can be painted purple! I'd say you're more than invited – we toast. – Especially since horse as a gift is out of the question. I wink.

We spend the rest of the evening in silence, enjoying the food and drink. He gives me several deep, tired looks, followed by a warm smile. I know he's more worried than he seems. Around midnight, we go straight to the airport. The security follows us to the runway, the same one that was there when we landed. The engine is already running and Helen is waiting for us at the entrance. I feel tears building up as we part. We stand facing each other, saying nothing.

- Once again, no luggage! - I say just to break the awful silence.

He gives me a warm smile.

- You have my sweatpants on the plane, in case you're cold. Just make sure they don't drop in front of the pilots!

I hit him on the shoulder, trying not to blush as I remember how the sweatpants slid right off me in front of him.

- Oh, even when I'm naked, the only thing I can attract is a cold. So don't worry about the pilots! Or anyone else - I offer him a hand so we can part with a handshake.

He accepts it gently.

- I'll call you. Don't worry about a thing. - he says, looking deep into my eyes. - Take care, and please, don't take the ring off.

- All right - I answer briefly, trying to pull out my hand. He just holds it tighter.

He watches me for a couple of seconds, as if he wants to say something. Then he pulls me in, runs his fingers through my hair, and kisses me passionately. He separates my lips with his, letting our tongues intertwine, mixing our hot breaths. He hugs me lustfully. I run my fingers through his hair, quenching my thirst for him in a never-ending kiss. I suddenly feel his arms and soon the whole body unusually, almost painfully shivering. I try to pull away, but he just holds me even closer. Pressed against his chest, I notice his racing and irregular heartbeat.

- Are you all right? - I stutter, trying to pull away again.

- Yeah... don't worry - he lays his cheek on my head. - Everything's all right and everything will be all right.

- Mr. Liray, we have to go - Helen calls us from the plane.

He doesn't want to let me go from his arms. Before I go in, I turn around once again. His hands in his pockets, in a dark blue shirt with rolled up sleeves and straight black pants, he stands there with his hair ruffled by my hands and his face filled with pain. He looks more like a scared boy than a grown man. And he certainly doesn't look like a god. He nods and calmly, with his back straight, watches the plane take off.

I work hard, trying to forget how much I long for him. The first few days back in Vitt are rather interesting. The purple house with its new white façade looks perfect. All the work in and around the house is done. I only need to take care of some decorations and knick-knacks that arrived while I was gone. Although Alec offered me to stay at the house until I return to Serbia, I still choose to stay with Helga and Bernard. The fact that Bernard is actually Svanevit, or Vit as Helga calls him, doesn't surprise me half as much as the fact that Vuk is a man of flesh and blood. That he's the direct descendant of the Slavic tribe of Ljutics, famous for always remaining true to their roots. Just like his ancestors, he's trained to protect and serve his gods. Luka comes right after me. He doesn't look good. His beard unkempt, hair ruffled, he looks somehow disturbed. I ask him where he's been hiding and he just says:

– Thailand!

He mostly spends his time at the lighthouse. I'm pretty mad at him, so I try to avoid seeing him. When I first came back, I often went for long walks with Vit, listening to him talk about the golden age of Arkona, the night of my birth, the fears and hopes about me. But the stories that interested me most were the ones about Alec, or Yar, as Bernard calls him. I memorized every word about his greatness, courage, devotion, about the burden he carries all alone on his back. About his rage and anger, his desire for revenge and blood, the one he only began to control once he realized he did succeed in leaving a part of his legacy inside me, although they barely managed to stop him from killing Phillip on two dreadful occasions.

- You know, he's a human oxymoron! On one hand, he carries within him the rage and vehemence of war, and on the other, the gentle nature of spring. If Svarog wanted to screw up someone, then it's definitely my Yar – he said on one occasion, getting ready for his afternoon nap.

Although I talk to Alec every day, our conversations are brief exchanges of information and feel almost like business talks. On one hand, I miss him more than I would ever want to miss someone, and no ring could ever have the power to kill my longing for him. On the other hand, these silent conversations, these carefully chosen words of his, and his overwhelming consideration just break my heart.

It is the morning before I go back to Old Skies, and I want to make the most of it. I had my breakfast in front of the inn, and now, drinking my coffee, enjoying the sweet June sun and the gentle wind, I'm thinking of going for a walk around the cape and visiting the lighthouse. Although everyone thinks that I shouldn't go there on my own, to my surprise, they have decided to humor me. I only have to call Luka to tell him that I'm coming to see him.

The day is perfect. I walk down the steep and winding Royal Stairs, surrounded by the thick treetops. Everything around me is green, healthy, and fresh. In fact, it seems that all the nature in Rügen has reached that level of beauty that leaves you breathless at the very first sight. The perfect landscapes, the perfect weather, the perfect people, the perfect peace, and the almost perfect happiness. I think about Alec, holding my hand on the wooden rail, walking down to the beach. If Beyla and he were here right now, oh, Gosh, wouldn't that be swell! The last part of the thought makes me laugh.

I finally step down from the stairs and step on the smooth flint stones mixed with the scattered sharp rocks in the shoal, under the shade of the white limestone cape. The wind is whistling and spreading the strong smell of salt. The beach is rather narrow and small. The sea, although restless, looks clear and mellow as it gently bathes the rocks. I take my shoes off and step into the water, looking at the crystal surface reflecting the sun.

Suddenly, the sharp, unpleasant smell of rot stings my senses and makes me nauseous. I bend over with disgust and walk out of the water, noticing a shadow dancing on the surface, right next to mine. The fear steals away the color of my skin, painting it the ugly shade of pale, making it resemble the skin of the person standing next to me. I take a step back and hear Morana's shrill and sour greeting.

- Sorry – she says, swallowing me with her empty eyes.

- I didn't mean to scare you.

- No, no – I stutter. – I just didn't hear you, I was lost in thought.

- Yeah, I can see that – she interrupts me. – I can see you speak perfect German now, after only a couple of days! – she says spitefully – Your English must be even better!

Oh, fuck, Purple! Oh, fuck, is this really happening?! – I give her a goofy smile:

- Oh, well, I speak those two languages since forever – I say after hesitating a bit – Actually, I'm fluent in five languages, and use three more.

Morana frowns, surprised by my response. I have to admit, I'm surprised myself.

- So what was all that drama and pretending you couldn't understand me? She steps forward and raises her thin eyebrow. – What are you hiding?

The wind brings the unbearable stench again. I wave in front of my nose in disgust.

- Sorry, I just can't take such strong scents – I step away. – That's why I always feel uncomfortable around you. Just, it's not your problem, it's mine – I nod sadly. – I remember this Nikola guy I had a crush on – I continue. – He used such strong perfumes, I almost vomited the first time we kissed – I lie. – That's why I try not to communicate

with people whose smell is too strong for my senses. I don't want them to feel uncomfortable.

She grins and nods as if she doesn't believe me.

– Oh, really? You poor thing! I still don't get why you pretended that you couldn't understand me.

- Morana, I didn't want to talk to you because... because I thought you and Alec had something – I wrinkle my nose. – I was already upset because he's so – I look at the horizon – so mysterious. I found it strange when you showed up for the first time, just like that, all alone. And you look like the kind of woman he'd find attractive.

She laughs loudly and tilts her head back.

– Oh, darling! Of all the women in the world, I'm the last woman your sweet Alec would have anything to do with!

I look at her confusedly and put my hand over my mouth and nose again.

– Would you look at that – she shouts and gets into my face, making me nauseous all over again, so much I can barely stand it. Her skinny hand pulls mine away from my face, bending my fingers so that she could look closer at the purple ring.

- My brother should stop handing out rings like they were candy. One for every single one of his whores! Although... she stops – this one must be new. I've never seen it before – she says and raises my almost lifeless hand, looking at the ring with great interest.

I stare at her in shock, completely ignoring her unbearable smell. I try to make an interrogative sentence.

- Oh, the great Alec Liray forgot to tell you that he's my brother?! – she says, still looking at my hand. – That's just like him – she squints. – Did he perhaps tell you about the meaning of this symbol engraved in the stone?

Morana is Jerovit's sister?! – I try to remember everything I've heard, there must be something I've missed.

She curls her thin lip at me, waiting for my response.

- No. He didn't mention that you're his sister... Nor did Inga... I can't see why! – I stutter.

She rolls her eyes.

– What about the symbol? Did he tell you anything about it? Why did he give you this ring? You have to admit, it's a pretty intimate gift.

- Purple... – her inquiring look makes me freeze. – He told me that he saw the ring at an auction in New York, and it reminded him of me. I didn't ask about the symbol. I was too psyched because Alec gave something like that to me.

- You and a bunch of others ! – she nods compassionately.

– Just this morning I saw that he was with Ellen Schloss yesterday, at some reception in London. I heard that she had a hard time forgiving him after your pictures from the *Chedi* had flooded the portals – she clicks her tongue mockingly. – They say she blackmailed him into marriage, and my poor brother accepted right away. – she laughs insidiously. – Yari's finally getting married! I hope I'll be invited to the wedding!

I try to collect my thoughts. Adjust my breathing to the pain caused by my every word. Her rotten smell suddenly becomes irrelevant, compared to the weight of disappointment that just fell on my body and soul. Still trying to think of something clever to say, my whole body freezes once she suddenly grabs both of my arms. She looks straight into my eyes and starts saying some rhythmical gibberish, as if she's reciting, or even worse – chanting!

Paralyzed with fear, unable to react, I swallow the darkness of her eyes that seem to be trying to get into my head. I hear her saying these nonsense words louder and louder, squeezing my arms more violently with every sound she pronounces. My arms are relaxed. I feel pleasant warmth spreading from my left hand through my entire body. Morana's face deforms for a second. She looks at me in shock, a moment before Luka pulls me out of her hands. He shoves her with his strong arms and she falls to the ground. He comes closer looking worried and asks me if I'm ok. After I answer affirmatively, he jumps towards Morana, resembling an animal. She jumps up and Luka just grazes against her.

- Don't you ever come close to her again! Got it?! – he roars and shoves her again, making her stumble.

- There's something strange about this woman, Hazel! You're hiding something! And I'll find out what it is! It must be something big, since you're trying so hard to protect her! . she hisses as she walks forward.

- And what could that be? There's nothing strange about her, Morana! As you well know, she's just another pussy, like all the others Yar fucks occasionally!

- Oh, no, no! – she yells, pointing her finger at me.

- She's different! She's special!

- Yes, she is! She's special, because unlike others, she's not an airhead, so we can't convince her that you're just our crazy former worker. Now we'll have to freeze her memory! – he gives her an angry look. – Go back to the lair you sneaked out of, it's not

your time yet! – he waves at her and she disappears, leaving a thin trail of smelly black smoke.

Luka rushes to my side. I still don't move. He hugs me, comforts me, and says that everything will be all right.

- Morana is his sister?! – I stutter.

He nods affirmatively. – He doesn't like to talk about it.

- Has he been with Ellen all this time? – I whisper.

Luka's forest scent finally calms me down and clears my senses. I don't really need an answer. Unbearable sorrow tears me apart as he kisses my hair, trying to comfort me.

- He's getting married? How's that even possible?! – I look at him with my eyes filled with tears.

- I'm sorry, Purple – I can barely hear him.

- I... I... I can't stand anything anymore! – I sob, letting tears run down my face.

Luka gives me the warmest hug.

- I want to go to Old Skies today.

He slowly follows me down the stairs and nods affirmatively.

- You'll be sleeping in your bed tonight.

We're back at the inn. Bernard is fixing his baits and Inga is sitting outside with Vuk. She walks up to me right away and hugs me kindly, saying that Alec would come right away if he could. That he would surely explain everything. That it's all fake. That Morana blew it out of proportion, just to see my reaction. That in the future I'll have to behave as if I don't remember anything.

- No, nooo! – I yell angrily. – I'm not listening to any more of this nonsense!

- But you have to understand! – Inga is being persistent.

- I can't and I don't want to understand anything! – I say angrily, ignoring Helga who brings me a plate of food and drink.

- Yar would be here right now if he could! You know that! – Inga's still not giving up.

- And why can't he come?! – I interrupt her.

- Because the Navi's would sense that he suddenly used his powers to go from one part of the world to another. It would look suspicious.

- Is that right?! And they won't sense that you used yours?! They won't find it suspicious that you're suddenly here in Vitt?! Don't you worry that they might think that I'm too important to you?! - I run to my room, fed up with everything. - You're excuses are lame! - I shout before I slam the door right in front of her. I start packing frantically. - Lunatics! - I grumble. - A bunch of lunatics! And I'm crazier than all of them, letting myself get involved in all this! Crazy fanatics! No wonder! They're keeping me her drugged up! - I begin to scream.

The anger is eating me up inside. Tearing me apart! I realize that my life for the last four months has been insane. Surreal. Fucking gods! Shoving the clothes into my suitcase, my ring gets caught in the zipper. I barely manage to get it out. I take it off in rage. - Special! Special my ass! - I shout and throw it in the corner of the room.

- Have I ever told you that you swear too much?! - Alec's hoarse voice bewilders me. - But I distinctly remember telling you not to take off that ring. - he says as he gets up from the armchair.

I watch him as he walks towards me in his gray t-shirt and dark jeans. He gives me a warm smile, but his face looks worried. I see him standing right in front of me with his fists clenched and I know something's not right. He's somehow not right. He's not here. I try to touch him, but my hand goes right through him, as if he was made of air.

- Oh, God! - I say and my mouth distort just before I faint.

The first thing I hear is Liray's cheerful voice: - We'll have to work on this fainting of yours - he says cheerfully, sitting in the armchair.

I realize I'm lying on the bed, under the covers, and it's almost dusk. I see the ring on the night table.

- What, what is this? How long have I been unconscious? - I mumble.

- Well... not long. But you slept for almost two hours. Now that you took off the ring, after you fainted, Inga put you to sleep.

- You... you're like a ghost... still? - I slowly sit up.

- Yes, I am. I think I've told you that I can leave my body whenever I want to.

- But now you have no powers...? - I stutter.

- That's right. I don't have my powers now. However, neither do you - he points at the ring - so I can be around you, and also the Navi's can't sense that I'm here.

- Why did you take off the ring? - he asks in a strict voice.

- Because... because... - I feel ashamed and I begin to blush.

I look at my hands, nervously cracking my knuckles.

- Morana is your sister? – I finally ask.

- Yes, that's true. – he says slowly.

- I don't like talking about the fact that Morana is my sister. I don't like talking about the fact that Veles stole me from Jav when I was a kid and that for a long time I believed that he was my father.

- How? How did you...? – I look at him confusedly.

- How did I find out? – he sighs.

- The worst possible way! I fell in love with Morana – he looks down.

- She enjoyed abusing my desire for her. Once, she asked me to prove how much I loved her by sneaking into Jav and stealing one of the gods' artifacts. Blinded by my love for her, I attacked Perun and killed three elves. Fortunately, Perun defeated me. At first, they held me as a prisoner, because I was a real savage, but after a while, I came to my senses and found out the truth about my life. I found out that Perun was my real father. And I was devastated to learn that Morana was my sister, who decided to join Veles, mad at Svarog for making her the goddess of winter.

-Mhh... – I mumble, still looking at my pale fingers.

- Is that all you wanted to know, Purple? – he asks me kindly. – Is that why you took off the ring and exposed yourself to danger?

- You know damn well why I did that – I finally look at him. – Ellen Schloss... - I barely hear myself pronounce her name in a weepy voice.

Although he stands up and sits next to me, the mattress doesn't respond to his weight. Although he raises his hand to move my hair out of my face, nothing moves. I don't feel a thing. Nothing but his scent. He sighs and slowly starts explaining how, even if he could get married, he would only marry me. He asked me to raise my hand at the *Chedi*, so everyone could see the ring in the pictures, which would drive Ellen crazy and cause her to make public scandals. That's why he went everywhere with her after that and did everything too publicly, to convince the world that he was mad about her.

- That is, so Veles and Morana would think that you're just one of my many mistresses. – he looks down. – And still, my sister dared to come out to Arkona again, just as the summer is about to begin. – he sighs. – She knows me, she knows what I'm like when I'm in love. That's why she risked so much, just to test you.

- How could she know that? – as soon as I finish my sentence, I realize how stupid my question is.

- Puprure, the only woman I was ever in love with... he only one I've ever loved was her!

- You're trying to say that..

- Yes, Purple. I'm trying to say that I've never loved anyone else after her. I didn't need to, I didn't want to... until twenty years ago. That was when I realized that I love you.

I look at him and I don't breathe. I don't blink.

- But twenty years ago I was, I was...

- You were nineteen. Head over heels in love with some jerk, Nikola. When he finally asked you out, I made you feel even more nervous, which made you drink almost half a bottle of brandy. Vasilisa was so mad at me because of that. So I had to tell her that I was actually jealous of Nikola. Later, I was jealous of every other man in your life. Even Hazel, because he got to spend so much time with you. – he smiles softly.

- Yar, the plane has just landed in Binz. Purple and Hazel can leave in an hour. – Vuk shouts after he knocks on the door.

- Please, now put the ring back on – he says as he stands up.

- But then I won't be able to see you – I sound like a little girl.

- You'll see me at Beyla's birthday party the day after tomorrow – he leans in for a kiss that remains somewhere in the air, and disappears.

Disappointed, I just sit on the bed with my arms crossed, pouting like a spoiled child, angry that he's left. I suddenly hear his deep voice ordering me to put the ring back on, which scares me so much I jump off the bed. Before the purple ring shines again on my left hand, I hear his ringing laughter.

It's the morning of June 21 and our family house is bustling with noise and excitement. Milos, Emma, Amelia, Luka, and I are trying to finish the decorations for Beyla's birthday. Lavish backyard decoration, featuring silver and purple ribbons, flag banners, bows, and balloons, intertwined with bright orange lanterns, strictly demanded by the birthday girl, truly looks like the setting of a fairytale. My daughter walks in the moment we place the presents on the table and the handymen in the corner of the yard finish setting up the bouncy castle. Wearing her babydoll nightie, squeaking with joy, she runs into my arms, clapping excitedly and enjoying everything she sees.

– It's wonderful! – she exclaims, running around barefoot on the soft grass, twirling and doing funny pirouettes.

She runs over to the gifts, lifting them up. She carefully examines every angle of the colorful boxes, trying to guess what's inside. We're having a hard time talking her out of opening the presents before the party officially starts in several hours. We have breakfast outside, having light and loud conversation about everything that happened in the past few months. We're constantly interrupting one another until Beyla finally asks if her father is coming. Awkward silence. Everyone looks at me, and I just smile confusedly, trying to look cheerful. I pull her closer and she sits on my lap:

– Well, look – I start carefully. – Daddy bought and sent you a special gift, but – I whisper in her ear. – He's on a very, very special secret assignment. That's why he couldn't come today, but...

Beyla suddenly turns around and shuts me up with her sad olive eyes. She looks like she's going to start crying any second, but instead, she smiles broadly.

– Mom, you're such a liar! – she jumps off my lap and runs towards the silhouette approaching us from the back entrance to the yard.

We all turn around and see Phillip lift her up and spin around in the air.

– Daddy! Daddy, you're here! – she squeaked happily.

– Come on, have breakfast with us! – she says, pulling him by the hand once he puts her down. She guides him to the table.

Standing right next to us, Phillip grins sourly.

– Good morning, family! Did you miss me? I know you did. Especially you, my dear wife!
– he leans in for a kiss, but I literally jump up from the chair.

Luka instantly walks over and puts his hands on my shoulders.

– You didn't miss your dear husband?! – he grins, as if offended, and sits on the chair opposite mine, inviting Beyla to sit on his lap.

She hugs him around the neck, whispering that he shouldn't worry. Luka's trying to hit on me all the time, but she doesn't let him. We all put on fake smiles. The unpleasant situation is interrupted by the caterers who start bringing food. Emma and Amelia go to the kitchen, and Milos takes Beyla to the bouncy castle so she could try it out. Luka is still standing behind my back, peacefully watching Phillip, who pours himself some coffee.

– Why are you here?! – I ask him after a short, unpleasant pause.

Mixing the melting sugar with his spoon, he gives me a wicked look.

– Nothing could stop me from coming to my only daughter's birthday! Not my job, not the distance, not even your lover's thugs!

Luka moves instinctively and walks towards him, but I pull him back. Phillip takes a sip, sits back, and lights a cigarette.

- Look at our good neighbor, so protective of you! Is he one of Liray's mercenaries, too??
- he coughs, laughing sarcastically.

He looks gray and shriveled. His once shiny, smooth skin now looks so terribly wrinkled. His hair is longer than usual and striped with wide gray locks above his ears. Pursing his lips, he exhales a cloud of smoke towards Luka and me.

- I'm serious. Why are you here?! What do you want now? - I repeat my question.

- What every father wants! - he says sourly. - To be with my daughter! Why, were you thinking of forbidding me to see her?! - he leans over the table and calls for her loudly, looking at us all the while. She comes in an instant.

- Yes, daddy? - She kisses his scruffy beard, frowning as she feels the prickles on her face.

- Would you like to show daddy everything you brought from Hawaii?!

- Yeah! - she shouts merrily and leaps, heading for her room. Phillip gets up lazily and throws the cigarette bud into the coffee mug.

- See ya later - he winks and enters the house.

- How, Luka? Why is he here? - I get up. - I thought you and Alec were keeping him away from me?

He shrugs :

- He has probably already spent all the money he got. Don't worry, Yar is coming here today, so... - he caresses my cheek. - Try to relax, doll up, and enjoy the day. I'll keep an eye on Phillip.

- I'm afraid he'll say something today... - I interrupt him, cracking my knuckles.

- He looks like he could really use some cash. I don't think he'll say anything. At least not until he tries to get some money from you - he says quietly.

Luka's right. Although I can't say that Phillip doesn't care about Beyla, money has always been the most important thing in his life, and it must be the only reason why he came today. Emma tells me that the guests will start arriving in two hours. I slowly walk upstairs so I could start getting ready. I stop in front of Beyla's room, and listen to her talk about her adventures with the dolphins.

- Phillip, the phone! - Emma shouts from the ground floor. As if it was an order, he storms out of the room. Although he brushes against me as he walks by, he doesn't even

look at me. I knock on the door frame and see my daughter holding the photo album and standing confusedly by the bed.

– Honey, daddy had to answer an urgent business call. Come with me, let's take a bath and get ready for the party. You wouldn't like Jelena to look more like a princess than you do, now would you?!

She frowns and walks past me.

– I don't know why you invited her in the first place! Her mom says that we're all freaks!
– she marches into my room.

– Well, that's exactly why I called her! – I bend over, touch her tiny nose with my forefinger, and wink at her.

- Freaks throw the best parties! – I wrinkle my nose and cross my eyes, pulling a funny face. She laughs and jumps into my arms.

Her hair falls on my face as I put her in the tub. The clear, floral, spring smell of her hair makes me flinch. I get dizzy for a moment. Through the haze, I see her frightened, frozen expression.

- Mommy, mommy! Are you all right?! – she cries.

I blink a couple of times, trying to smile. I shake my head.

– You bet I'm all right! – I manage to say the whole sentence. – Mommy just had too much chocolate for breakfast – I stick my tongue out with a disgusted expression on my face.

– Mom, you never do anything right! – she shakes her finger at me and sits in the tub.

My senses clear up once I take the showerhead in my hand and start spraying her, which makes her laugh cheerfully.

At 1 p.m. sharp, the guests start arriving. Beyla, wearing a white dress sprinkled with purple drops, with a wide ribbon the color of her hair tied around her waist, waits for them impatiently, standing at the door and following them to the backyard once they arrive. She proudly listens to their reactions. Although we have no close relatives in Old Skies, or Serbia for that matter, Milos and Emma, and especially Amelia, managed to get to know a large number of people, and some of them are now their close friends. I, on the other hand, came back from America, got married to Phillip, and lost the friends I once considered close, so the list of people close to my heart is a short one indeed. My parents and my aunt are well respected for being scientists and renowned scholars, while I'm mostly seen as the everlasting source of gossip material. Although I've always been kind to others, I could never fit into the world of those mean little souls that are held in such high esteem in our town. I completely ignore them and everything

happening around them. The only reason I live in Old Skies is the feeling of security it gives to my daughter and me. Still, the Devan family has always been interesting to others. That's why everyone gladly accepted the invitation to the party. The older folks came to see my parents, the moms came looking for some fresh gossip, but also to see Luka, the dads came for the good food and drink, and the kids came to enjoy the fairytale setting. I'm trying to be a good hostess, chatting up the guests and thanking them all for coming, but I can't help but look around, monitoring Phillips movement. Although I know that Luka is keeping an eye on him, his presence makes me feel more than uncomfortable. Especially since he's been filling up his glass with brandy the whole time. He tries communicating with guests for a while, but soon he finds a table in the corner, facing the exit. He keeps frowning at his watch and tapping his foot nervously.

Ten minutes after two moms desperately tried to let me know ever so subtly that they've read somewhere that Liray and I are together, he walks into the yard. He's wearing straight white pants and a shirt with rolled up sleeves and light purple stripes. He stops at the exit. Our eyes meet and he gives me a warm smile before he walks up to Phillip. His appearance attracts the attention of all the adults in the yard. Maybe it's because he's famous, and maybe just because of the stuff he's holding in his hands. In one hand, he's holding a white box with purple bow, and in the other he's got a bunch of large carrots with green leaves and a large red bow tied around them. He says a couple of words to Phillip, after which he almost runs to the entrance where Inga's waiting for him and they walk into the house. Alec watches them as they go away. I apologize to the women drooling over him for leaving them, and walk towards him. His hair has that ginger reflection again. His gray eyes glisten happily as he watches me.

– Those carrots had better end up in a salad, and not where I suspect they will! – I purse my lips as I stop in front of him. I stand on my toes and kiss him on the cheek.

– Welcome! – I utter, trying not to blush as my lips touch his short beard.

– It's a pleasure to be here, Purple! – he stoops and kisses me back. – You look gorgeous!

It was this compliment that I was hoping for when I chose the simple, tight petroleum green dress. Its color really makes the beautiful purple shade of the ring stand out. Still, he managed to make me blush. I look down.

– You're beautiful even when you're blushing! Much more beautiful than when you swear. – His lips, almost touching my ear, and his hot breath make me shiver and I feel fluttering in my stomach.

– Mommy, mommy! Daddy left! I saw him leave! – Beyla comes running to us, her eyes filled with tears. I hug her and she hides her face in my arms.

– Mommy, daddy didn't even want to turn around when I called for him! He pretended he didn't hear me, but I know he did! Where did he go? Why?! – she weeps. I rock her

gently, trying to comfort her, telling her he had to go to work right away, because only he can fix the mistakes others made.

- My darling! I'm sure he didn't hear you.

- But why didn't he tell me he had to go?! – she cries.

- He didn't want to spoil your birthday. He knew you'd be sad. He'll come back as soon as he can. – I kiss her hair and gently touch her cheek. She dives into my arms again and whispers sadly, as if talking to herself:

– He never has time for me!

She holds her arms tight around my neck for a couple of seconds.

– Mommy, there's a man here holding some carrots in his hand – she says, looking at the strange bouquet in Alec's hand. She stops hugging me and we both stand up. Beyla crosses her arms on her chest and cocks her head.

– I hope those carrots aren't for me?! – she asks in a strict voice.

- Oh, these?! – Liray acts surprised and lifts the carrots above her head. – No, no, that's not for you. That's for someone else.

- For whom?! – Beyla squints, utterly intrigued.

- For him! – says Liray, pointing towards the back entrance and Vuk walking towards us with a little brown pony. I look at Alec angrily, Alec shrugs cheerfully, and Beyla screams. She covers her mouth with her hands and jumps with joy. Then she starts running towards the pony, but a few steps away from him she stops, turns around, and runs to us. The moment Liray gives her the other gift, she jumps into his arms. He lifts her up confusedly and clumsily accepts her kiss.

– Oh, thank you, thank you! This is the best gift ever! – she hugs him again and gives him another kiss.

– You're uncle Alec, right?! – she asks once she finally stops hugging him.

– Yes, I'm Alec – he says confusedly.

– Let's go see the pony! You have to show me how he works!

- Should... should I carry her?! – he stutters, giving me a surprised look.

I smile and nod affirmatively. Beyla hugs him again and he carries her towards Vuk and the pony. The children and the adults have already gathered around them. I watch them talk happily, before he gently puts her down on the little saddle. Then he starts clumsily answering the myriad of questions my daughter and others ask him. I'm overwhelmed

with joy. It's such a perfect sight, for both my eyes and my heart. Beyla and Alec! The perfect man, the perfect father...

- A god! - I come back from my thoughts and see Luka standing next to me. - A god, Purple. He's a god. He isn't and he can never be a normal person. Especially not a father. So don't look at him like that. I'm sorry, but you should know that's impossible.

- I know - I sigh sadly. - But when I look at them like this, when I see them together - I look into Hazel's amber eyes. - It just seems perfect. - Alec is now casually chatting with my family. He gives us a brief look and winks.

- Purple, Yaril is putting himself and all of us in danger by giving you the ring that blocks his powers when he's around you. What you're fantasizing about could never work in the long run. In a few months, Yar will need all his strength and power.

- Well... - I look at the gem on my finger - it protects...

- It protects only you. From the Navi's, but from him as well. Imagine someone found out his powers were blocked. Imagine that, during the winter, when we're under constant attack, someone realizes you're his legacy, or even worse, that he's vulnerable around you. In a matter of minutes, it would all be over.

- But, but... - I try to face the ugly truth I just heard.

- Don't tell him anything - he says when he notices that Liray is coming closer.

- He's still mad at me because of the lighthouse - Luka smiles at me, taps Alec on the shoulder and runs over to Beyla and the kids, asking who's ready for the magician.

- Is everything all right? - Alec asks kindly once he notices the expression on my face.

I shake my head and say I'm worried about Phillip.

- He asked for money. He's already on his way to the airport. Don't worry. They'll pay more attention this time. He won't disturb you again.

- Oh, that would be great. Thank you so much - I say and try to open the present he gave me, but he stops me, putting his hand on mine.

- Let's do that later - he looks towards the center of the yard, where children are already gathering around the table.

- The cake! - I smack myself on the forehead.

The last of the guests left at dusk. Milos made Alec stay “for another glass of homemade brandy” and gave Beyla the perfect opportunity to sit in Alec’s lap. Soon, curled up in his arms, she fell asleep. I quietly ask him to stand up and he gently lifts her up and follows me upstairs. Placing her carefully on the bed, he moves to the side so I could change her clothes. She opens her eyes for a second, mumbles something and falls asleep again with a smile on her face. We slowly sneak out. At the door, Alec grabs my both hands and looks at me.

- I had a wonderful time with all of you today... I should...

- Don’t go! - I interrupt him quickly. - Stay... - I barely whisper, looking deep into his eyes.

- I’m sorry, but I can’t stay any longer... I have things to do.

I sigh disappointedly and pull my hands out of his.

- Ok, then, Yaril! Do as you wish - I try to act angry and cover up my disappointment.

- Yaril? - he says softly. - This is the first time you called me by my real name.

- And the last! - I say angrily and go down the stairs.

- Stop, Purple - he puts his hand on my shoulder..

- I can’t stay any longer, but it would mean the world to me if you accepted to go with me somewhere.

- Where?! - I ask tersely. Why?!

Placing his hand on my back, he pulls me in, close enough so I can feel his breath on my face. He tucks a wisp of my hair behind my ear.

- I want you to be with me tonight. That’s all I can say.

I purse my lips and frown as if I’m thinking hard. He surprises me, brushing his lips against mine.

- Trust me! - he winks at me, turns around, and goes quickly down the stairs.

He says goodbye to my parents and on his way out he says he’ll pick me up in two hours.

Confused, I watch Vuk and Inga follow him, and then just shrug when my parents, standing at the bottom of the stairs, ask me if I’m going out tonight.

- I have no idea.

I go out of the bathroom and see a message from Alec, notifying me that I should wear a simple dress and some flat shoes and that I have to bring the gift he gave me. I spend half an hour trying out every single dress I have, outraged by the fact that none of them

goes well with flats. I finally decide to wear a tad transparent long white A-line skirt. I find a simple white top with thin straps and wear my flat coffee colored sandals. I take a small purse with long tassels the color of old wine. Just as I'm about to open the present, he sends me a message, telling me to come down. My family is already fast asleep. I try to be as quiet as possible as I go out of the house.

He's standing there, leaning against his *Triumph*, in his stonewashed jeans, gray *All Star* sneakers, and a plain white T-shirt with square neck, accentuating his broad shoulders and strong arms. He looks young, fresh, strong. He looks like sex! Like THE sex! Actually, he looks like the god of sex! My thoughts put a naughty smile on my face.

He walks towards me saying:

– You know, this is driving me crazy!

I cock my head, letting him know I have no idea what he's trying to say.

- It's driving me crazy, not being able to hear your thoughts!

I laugh heartily:

– Huh, imagine that! Now you know how I feel all the time! Why the bike again? – I say, pouting, and give him the box with the present. I take the smaller helmet and just drop it on my head.

- I can't believe you haven't opened it yet – he says as he takes off the lid.

Struggling with the belt, I lean forward, trying to see the content. However, he closes it quickly, saying that if I have waited this long, I can wait a couple more minutes. He leaves the box in the compartment on the side of the seat and warns me that I should roll up my skirt. He sits on the motorcycle.

– Where's your helmet?! – holding my skirt up, I straddle the bike and sit down. Instead of responding, he just nods.

I put my arms around his waist and my head on his back. I allow myself to be consumed by the heat caused by his closeness. I enjoy the fast ride and close my eyes, trying to breathe in every molecule of his scent carried by the wind.

I notice that he's slowing down, so I stop holding on so tight. I open my eyes. We're at Devana's fortress. I sit up, realizing we're in the middle of the old building, which is closed to visitors at night. He stops in front of the massive wooden doors leading to the right wing. The inside of the fortress looks eerie, illuminated by the lazy pale light. Sudden feeling of fear makes me wrap my arms around him again. Feeling my grip, he sits up straight and puts his hands on mine.

– Don't be afraid – he whispers softly.

I slowly let go and get off the bike somehow, but I soon freeze again and cling to his side once I hear the ringing laughter, echoing off the walls.

- Did, did you hear that?! – I stutter.

I prick up my ears, trying to catch that sound again in the whistling wind.

- Yes, I did – he says as he takes the box out of the compartment and takes me by the hand.

- Purple, trust me! – he says softly and I follow him, holding his hand tight.

- I hope you don't offer some kind of human sacrifice in here, or something like that... - I hide behind his back as he opens the doors. – You know, I'm not a virgin! And I'm not that tasty either. Mostly fat and bones.

He turns towards me.

- What?!

- I mean, if you eat people, I'm neither tasty nor healthy – I make a silly face. – I'm something of a fattened carp.

Alec bursts out laughing and pulls me in. The doors open wide and we step outside the walls of the fortress, standing at the right bank of the river Danube, where no human has set foot before. At least not in the past eight centuries.

Above the dark surface of the river, the infinite kingdom of the stars glistens. The moon, wide and full, casts his bright shadow on the bank, and in this shadow, surrounded by tall flaming torches and long white flags ornate with grapevines, a group of young women and men dance and sing. They are all dressed like the fairies and elves in Nav. Only the girls have wreaths of flowers on their heads. We walk towards the group of people standing at the very edge of the dark oak forest, by the warm fire. We approach them and a woman with long blond hair turns around to greet us. I look in disbelief at that kind, familiar smile.

- Inga! – I shout excitedly.

- Lada – she says sweetly. – My real name is Lada – she bows gracefully. – I am the goddess of summer.

She kisses my cheeks three times.

- Today, apart from Beyla's birthday, we celebrate Kupala. Yar probably didn't tell you, as usual – she looks at him angrily.

- Here, I'll do it now – he says and gives me the gift box.

- Oh, God, it's beautiful – I say as I lift the lid. I see a wreath made of willow and grapevine, with lavender, white lily, bright privet, and pale chrysanthemum flowers.

He carefully takes it in his hands and puts it on my hair.

- It's perfect! – Inga exclaims – isn't it?! – she asks everybody else standing by the fire.

I finally recognize their faces.

Luka is the first to approach me. He kisses me softly and caresses my cheek.

- If this guy ever hurts you, I'll kick his ass! Even if he turns me into an oak – he says malevolently. He pats Alec on the shoulder and walks away.

Then I'm greeted by Vit, Helga, Otto, Christian, Vuk, and two tall blondes. In the end, they all go somewhere and leave the two of us alone.

I turn to Alec.

- If you think that partial nudity will distract me from this strange situation, you are so wrong, my dear Yaril – I say once I realize that he's wearing nothing but simple white pants, just like the other men.

- As Lada already told you, today is the beginning of summer. The summer solstice. The day when the nature's power, strength, and fertility are at their peak. Everything after tonight is just shedding of the good energy. Tonight, it's all about happiness, joy, and love. None of the creatures from Nav can step on our earth and sky. Here, in the fortress of Devana, the goddess of love, is where all of us from Jav gather. Gods, demigods, but also the mortals in touch with their Slavic origin. We're here to celebrate life!

- Tonight is one of those days when you can impress your legacy into someone or something, right? Like on my birthday? – I ask, turning the idea over in my mind.

- Yes – he says, fixing my wreath that slipped a bit to the side. – We could. Actually, Lada could, if she was strong enough. You see, her body cannot unleash such a large amount of power necessary for impressing into nature.

- And all these people, this night?! How did they get here?

- Purple, I'm only helpless around you – he gives me a faint smile. – Yes, about the ring, could you take it off now? Just for a couple of hours?

His question comes as a surprise to me.

- You want to read my mind?! – I grin.

- Among other things! But it's mainly because I want you to participate in Kupala. I don't want your ring to be a hindrance to the process.

- Kupala?! – I frown. – I’m pretty sure I’ve heard that word before.

I take off the ring and give it to him, watching it disappear in his hand.

- It is a custom – he starts explaining – for a girl to take off her wreath and let it float down the river. The man who finds the wreath and returns it to her is the love of her life. But before that, we have a ceremony of spiritual and body cleansing. In order to cleanse our spirit, we burn a female figure made of hay and grass at the stake, and we cleanse our bodies by immersing them in water. Only pure soul and body can deal with the fear and disease of winter.

- Come on, Purple! Dance with us! – shouts Inga, pulling me by the hand and separating me from Alec. She draws me into the merry circle of girls dancing around the largest flame.

- But I don’t know how! – I hesitate, watching their seductive dance.

– Yes, you do, darling! – Inga puts her arm around my waist. – Just relax and feel the rhythm.

At first, I feel clumsy, but soon it becomes so easy to follow their sensual movement. Carried by the notes coming from my own heart, I close my eyes. I sway on the tips of my toes and breeze through the entire dance. The music becomes quiet and the first thing I see when I open my eyes is Alec, watching me through the flame, mesmerized. Although most of the men around him are younger than he is, he is superior to them in every possible way, from his dignified posture to his mature, manly looks. He nods approvingly and gives me the faintest smile.

You are THE sex! – I think to myself, admiring every inch of his body as the shadows dance on his skin. He smiles broadly, tilting his head, which makes me roll my eyes.

– Get out of my head! – I shout angrily. He laughs even harder.

I blush as they move me to the side, making room for the burning of the hay figure.

- Girls, it’s time! – says Lada and all the girls rush to the water. They step into the river, almost up to their waists. Singing merrily, they take off their wreaths and drop them onto the water. Suddenly, I notice they’re all looking at me.

– Come on, Purple! – says a black haired girl. – Don’t you want to know who’s your destiny?

Looking straight ahead, I slowly step into the water. They start singing again and I gently take off my wreath and let it float down the calm surface of the water. Silence ensues, filled with the scent of flowers and expectation. None of them moves, which makes me stand still as well.

In a couple of seconds, the water begins to toss and roil and soon the men start diving out of the river. Their sudden appearance from the restless waves shocks me and the fear makes me fall on my back, straight into the water. The river goes still and I finally stand up, noticing that all the men are carrying wreaths in their hands and returning them to the girls. Suddenly, a big wave makes me lose my balance and I barely manage not to fall. Right in front of me, from the dark water absorbing the sparkly moon dust, Alec dives out with his hands offering me my wreath. The laughter and happy cheering spreading all around us go silent in my thoughts and I focus only on his smooth torso and the water drops running down his skin as he comes closer. I feel so nervous my body shivers. I look down as he puts the wreath on my head. He places two fingers under my chin and slowly lifts my head. I look into his face, his glistening gray eyes. Eyes I've been seeing my whole life and dreaming about in the wrong light. He puts his arm around me and pulls me in for a soft kiss, his tongue touching mine for a split second.

- Trust me... - he whispers before he gives me another kiss, passionate and long. As his hot breath mixes with mine, he lifts me up and carries me in his arms.

His lips still caressing mine, he carries me between the scattered couples dancing and kissing and takes me to the forest. Passing between the wide treetops of the old trees, I feel the distinct smell of linden as he places me under the white baldachin bathing in the soft light of the candles. I don't even wonder how all of it got there. I don't want to know anything, I just need to be sure that his body is craving for mine just as much as mine is for his. He nods affirmatively, hearing my thoughts. His lips touch my neck and I tilt my head to the side with a quiet sigh.

The tip of his tongue runs down my neck, reaching the collar bone. Then he softly kisses me up to my ear and bites it gently. I run my fingers through his hair as his hot breath burns my skin with passion. He whispers how much he loves me and I open my eyes. I see his face in front of mine. His clear eyes filled with desire watch me as if he wants to tell me something. Afraid he'll reject me once again, I kiss him with greedy passion and lust. I pull him in. He kisses me back, running his fingers down my breast and stomach. His hot skin pressed against mine lets me know we no longer have our clothes on. His weight makes me tingle all over, daring me to feel him in every atom of my body.

His wet lips tease me. He slides down my breasts, my hard nipples, across the stomach down to my thighs, kissing them softly. I feel his tongue between my legs for just a brief instant and I sigh loudly, tilting my head back. I bite my lip. The wet, pulsating feeling between my legs makes me spread them slowly, and he starts rhythmically touching me with his tongue. The unbearable pleasure makes me scream, wrinkling the sheets around me in my hands. Shivers followed by the sweet tension in my thighs, make me pull his hair and make him face me. He places his palms on the bed and breathes heavily, his lips almost touching mine. He presses his throbbing manhood against my wet, pulsating pelvis and stays there for what seems like infinity. He looks deep into my eyes,

absorbing my mad desire for him, his body, and his erection inside me. I lick my lips with excitement. He gives me a wet, passionate kiss and slides into me in one gentle, smooth, perfect thrust. As if he was made for me, he fills me up, so hard and thick, making me scream loudly and desperately grab his chest. He enters me slowly, gently. He's in no rush. He knows how much I crave for him, and that makes him even more excited. He circles slowly, driving me crazy, making me shiver under his weight and thrust. I move closer to him, pushing my hips towards him. He starts kissing me faster, on my lips, face, neck. Burning my cheeks with his beard, he thrusts harder, deeper. I run my fingers down his back, burning with desire, and sink my nails into his skin, pushing him deeper inside me, wishing he would stay there forever, inside me, so hard and big. The tingling sensation consumes my body and I scream out his name. Swarms of tiny pins on my skin, caused by the delicious excitement, make all my muscles spasm. They fill every cell of my body with burning desire that makes my heart pound like crazy. An explosion of happiness tickles my every nerve the moment he collapses on top of me in convulsive motion. It's a moment so close to death. A moment without air, without consciousness. Out of breath, we look deep into each other's eyes.

I wish we could stay like this forever! – I think to myself as he gives me a warm, loving look. Breathing more steadily, he laughs at my thoughts and kisses me softly.

- I wish that, too! – he says and kisses me again. He smoothly runs the tip of his tongue across my lips and a long sigh escapes from my chest.

- We've got all night! – he says. His full lips on my pink nipples fill me with excitement and I let out a naughty giggle, arching my body obediently...

The fluttering freshness in the air makes me curl up under the covers. I open my eyes lazily and make a grumpy effort to get used to the sunlight coming through the thick oak treetops. The white baldachin dances in the gentle wind filled with the smell of dew, wild flowers, and Alec. I stretch out like a kitten and feel a wet kiss on my neck before his strong hand pulls me closer to him.

– Good morning, my love – he whispers contently, right above my ear. – Did you sleep well? – the softness of his deep voice, his naked body so close to mine, and the memory of the last night's rapture occupy my mind, and I shyly slide away from his arms. I hide my head under the covers.

- What time is it?! – I say quietly, hating myself for asking such a stupid question and behaving like a child.

- Is everything all right, Purple? – he asks playfully and peeks under the covers.

– Are you planning to stay there all day, or...?

- Oh! – a shy beam of light directs my attention to his awakened manhood.

I bite my lip naughtily, feeling sweet flutters in my stomach and between my legs.

– I think I could stay here all day – I answer kittenishly. I lick my lips, wanting to touch his hard member, but the sight of the purple stone on my hand makes me pull away. I sit up and stare at my hand.

- But... but why? – I ask sadly, rolling the ring around my finger. He slowly sits up and takes my hands in his.

– I’m sorry. The morning took away all the magic that let us enjoy each other last night. -
- He touches the glassy surface of the ring with his thumb. – Your safety comes first, my love.

– But... no one will attack me here! – I try to let him know that I still need him, that I still want him.

– I know they won’t, but you need to be protected from me. – He takes my hand and kisses it gently, frowning with pain.

– You’re not going to hurt me! – I pull my hand away angrily. Placing my right palm over the ring, I tell him in a weepy voice that I know and feel that he won’t hurt me.

– I felt that last night! – I add sadly.

He wraps the sheets around my back. Tucking my hair behind my ear, with a sad smile on his face, he tells me that the tenderness I felt last night isn’t something he can give me again. No matter how much he wanted or tried to, it’s impossible.

– We cannot be intimate with mortals, we’re not made that way. Especially not me. The god of war, made of rage and fury. I’m too... - he stops, looking for the right word – heavy!

- But I trust you! – I put my hand on his cheek. – We can try! I can easily put the ring back on if you get too... heavy.

Putting his hand on mine, he slides his other hand down my forearm. Feeling my pulse, he kisses my wrist. He tightens his grip once he feels my heart go faster.

– I’m sorry! A second is enough for me to lose control! – the spasm in his face when he kisses my pulsating wrist again lets me know that my desire makes his pain worse. I move slightly, wrapping the sheets around my back.

– What happens now? How are things going to work between us from now on? – I ask, putting my arms around my knees and resting my head on them.

- First, I'll take you home. It's almost six. They'll wonder where you are, and it's also time for this place to disappear. – he stands up and looks around, as if looking for something.

I stand up, watching his tight, manly body bathing in bright morning light. He lifts his shirt and sees the silly rapturous expression on my face.

–Purple, we have to go! – he laughs as he puts his shirt on.

My eyebrows and lips quiver as if I'm going to cry. I grab a pillow and throw it at him.

– Why?! – I yell and dive into the covers theatrically. – Why do you torture me? – I weep as he throws my skirt at my head.

- Torture? I torture you?! – he sounds almost angry and I look at him under my skirt.

He puts on his pants, looking upset.

– I torture her?! – he said, as if he's talking to himself.

- I've been longing for her for years! I know every inch of her body by heart! I remember her every move! Every sigh of pleasure as others take her! I've been burning with desire for her for longer than I can remember! And I torture her?! – he pulls the sheets and uncovers me in one quick move.

– I'm tortured by every fucking moment we spend apart! I'm tortured by my hunger for you that I cannot satisfy! I'm tortured by the fear of giving in to my desire for you and not being able to control myself. I'm tortured by the thought of the beast inside me ruining everything!

Out of breath, he runs his fingers through his hair.

– I'm sorry – I whisper and start putting my clothes on.

- Purple – he sits beside me. – Oh, it's not... it's not your fault. I'm sorry – he hugs me. – I'm sorry for everything. You didn't ask for any of this.

He holds me in his arms for a while. We say nothing, because words have lost all meaning. We listen to our hearts beat steadily as one.

- Liray – I utter, still curled up in his arms.

- Yes, my love – he replies softly.

- I didn't know that gods swear! – I grin.

He laughs and puts me over his knee.

– You're a bad influence! – he gently slaps my tush. – Get that sweet ass of yours out of bed and let's go! – he orders cheerfully.

The house is still quiet when we walk in. I'm waiting for water to boil when his phone rings. A blunt feeling of disappointment, caused by the tone of his voice as he talks to Ellen, cuts like a knife, making all my limbs painfully numb.

- *Don't go* – I whisper in my mind – *please, not yet! Not to her!*

He finishes the conversation and hugs me from behind. Kissing my neck, he takes the pot with boiling water off the stove.

- I have to go, Purple – he sighs in a cracked voice, holding me tight.

I put my head on his chest. I just nod affirmatively and I nervously start making coffee.

- All right – I mumble and don't even turn around to walk him out.

I stand there, lost in thought, listening to the sound of the motorcycle disappearing in the distance. The coffee's boiling, spilling over the edge of the pot, and I see Luka's hand taking it off the stove. He says nothing and just turns me around and holds me. The soothing forest scent and his warm embrace remind me of the time before Liray. Before Hazel, when he was just Luka.

- I've missed you – I whisper through tears.

- I've missed you, too, Purple. I've missed you too. - he says, kissing me on the forehead.

Ever since we got the pony, our house has been swarming with children coming around to play with it. It's been almost a month since Beyla's birthday, and she still hasn't let us take the horsie, whom she named Sunbeam, to a proper stable. He's been living in the adapted garden house at the far end of the yard. My parents have decided to spend the hot summer months in Old Skies for a change, so we mostly spend our time by the pool. And everybody's so cheerful. A bit too cheerful for my taste. It's obvious that they don't want to leave me alone because of the news of Alec and Ellen's wedding scheduled for September 21. Although he sends me messages all the time, although he calls and sends letters and emails, I don't answer. Talking to Luka, I realized that he's doing what he has to do, and that staying out of my life is the best solution. That's why I didn't want to see him when he came here in mid-August. I just told him that I understand and that he shouldn't worry. My happiness, or our happiness, mustn't endanger others. Fuck! It's not the first time I have to make a sacrifice.

Inga, that is, Lada, often comes by with Vuk, pretending that she was in the neighborhood. She always tries to let me know how much he suffers and how hard it is

for him. Once she even suggested taking off the ring, so we could feel each other. I didn't want to. Although I know that there's nothing that could ever erase him from my heart, my life, and my memory, I don't think that we should be in touch. No touch whatsoever!

The days just go by. Uneventful. On one hand, at least I sleep well, for a change. Better than before, anyway. On the other, aware of everything that's happened, aware of the reason why he's not by my side, I am torn with pain every time I see their pictures and the ring on her hand. I know perfectly well why she's wearing that purple stone and it hurts. Sometimes, it hurts even more than missing him.

While I'm trying not to show what's going on in my heart, my family's trying to entertain me and keep my mind off things, so I could somehow heal the scars my sorrow makes, scars I obviously cannot hide.

September came sooner than anyone expected. Beyla's back to school, and I've decided to go back to *The Bazaar*. Milos and Emma are in Hawaii again, and Luka and Amelia are back to work. Everything seems to go back to normal. Our strange little community is once again its old complicated self and, of course, perfect gossip material. Sometimes I'm so busy and lost in my everyday mess that I forget about everything that's happened. I forget about everything I know, everything I've seen, everything I am. I sometimes even forget about the real truth about life and the world that has been revealed to me and I catch myself dreaming about some simple, happy future, away from everyone, just Beyla and Alec by my side.

On the sixteenth of September, I walk Beyla to school and open *The Bazaar*. Just as I finish making coffee, the bells on the door make me step outside the kitchen. I'm surprised to see Vesna, one of the moms from the PTO. If I were to make a list of people I'd happily send to Nav, she would make the top five. With her thin reddish hair, long, yellowish face, thin, arched tattooed eyebrows, and firm conviction that the fact that she's a lawyer means that people should bow before her, she is responsible for spreading all major gossips about people in her surroundings and beyond. Although she has a skinny face, her body is a meaty square and she wouldn't know good taste if it hit it on the head. Her style gurus seem to be the stars of bad soap operas and cheap folk singers. She walks into *The Bazaar* as if she owns the world, her lips lined with dark pencil distorted into an artificial smile. She chose to wear her pink mini dress with crochet boots in matching color with white leather on the toes. I smile at this short version of a person, and she takes it as a greeting. She waves and dashes towards me, saying how my store is adorable. Of course, she's never bought any of my stuff. And the fact that she's here now doesn't mean she will. The only reason why she ever stops by is to tell me a gossip or think of a new one. I carefully take a sip of coffee and lean against the counter, listening to her clack about needing a present for a friend who married some rich guy in Germany and one of the numerous real estate properties she owns just happens to be in Rügen. She examines me from head to toe, studying my reaction to the mention of the island. And a surprised expression does appear on my face.

– Serbs in Rügen?! – I try to cover up my reaction with a question. – I really didn’t know
– I whistle, pretending to be amazed.

- Oh, she’s a Serb, but he’s a German – she winks at me. – One of the managers at *Arkona Energy*, - she grins – you know, your friend Liray’s company. – she emphasizes the word “friend” and looks around, as if she’s afraid someone might hear her.

Then she gets in my face.

– Natasha. That’s the name of my friend. She’s invited to the wedding on Saturday, and imagine that, she just called me last night to tell me that the wedding has been called off.

I put my cup on the counter, trying to look as calm as possible. Telling my heart to be still, I shrug, trying to show her that I don’t understand what she’s trying to say.

She rolls her eyes.

– Purple! She told me that Liray called off the wedding and moved to his Arkona home two days ago.

Please, be calm. Please, be calm! – I try to control myself and silence the joy that’s putting a goofy smile on my face. She raises her eyebrows inquiringly, and I notice how much they resemble leeches.

– Oh, I’m sorry! I’m smiling because I don’t understand why you’re telling me all this!

- What do you mean, why?! – she looks offended. – Well, the two of you are close friends.
– again, emphasis on “friends” – I thought you knew something about it. You know, I promised Natasha that I would find a reliable source to confirm this – she pulls out a copy of *Gossip*.

The cover is filled with pictures of Ellen and Alec with a striking black bold type headline: “Break up! Left at the altar”

I look at the image of Alec in a three-piece suit, talking on the phone as he gets into his *Maybach*.

- Huh. It looks like you didn’t know anything about it! – her shrill voice brings me back from my thoughts and I look at her confusedly.

- No – I shake my head. – I really didn’t.

– Oh, you’re obviously not that close anymore, after – she winks – Beyla’s birthday.

She jumps up, looking at her watch, and says that she should get going. She leaves in a rush, telling me that I can keep the copy of the papers.

When the doors shut behind her, I start flipping through the pages enthusiastically and absorbing the text about the break up accompanied by paparazzo photos. If my

happiness was visible, it would leave a mark larger than the purpure dust of impression. I quickly start packing and rummaging through my purse. Looking for my car keys, I look at the cover again and the large photo of Ellen. I'm just about to scream with pleasure, seeing that she's no longer wearing the ring, but something else attracts my attention, making me break out in a cold sweat.

In the crowd standing around the entrance, while everyone was looking at the gorgeous blonde, one person was looking straight at the camera. My hands shaking, I bring the papers closer to my face. Dark eyes accentuated with heavy makeup smiled malevolently on Morana's pale face.

- Did you see that?! – Luka suddenly walks in, boiling with rage.

- Did you see what that crazy man did?! – he throws several copies of various tabloids in front of me.

- Yes, I did – I stutter, frightened by his face distorted with anger as he shows me that Morana is in every picture. – He put us all in danger! All of us! – He grabs his head and starts pacing up and down. – Fucking lunatic!

- But... but... that doesn't have to mean... that doesn't have to mean anything! – I stutter.

- Purple, Purple! – he nods – my sweet, innocent Purple! – I don't know what Yar told you, but I'm pretty sure he left out many important parts.

His phone rings and he throws it on the ground, cursing when he sees who's calling him. He sits down in the armchair.

– He's calling because he can't get through to me. Your ring is preventing him from contacting me the normal way, so he has to call me. On the phone! Get it? – he yells – On the phone! - he lets out a crazy laugh. – The god who could blow away half of the world with one breath, the one I've followed since I was created, the one I live for, the one I protect and the one I would die for, calling me on my fucking smartphone! Because he can't do anything when I'm around you. Get it?! What if Morana was here instead of me? Imagine how long would it take for her to think of a way to kill you, without us even noticing?!

Ever since you were born, we've looked after you. We protect you, follow you. There isn't a single detail about your life that we don't know. We've been waiting for thirty-nine years for you to cross that fucking bridge and now that there's only...

- The ring is protecting me from her! – I interrupt him angrily. – So that no one can hurt me, not her, not anybody else!

He puts on a mean grin and gives me a piercing look.

- Yes, Purple. The ring protects you from the gods, the Navi's, me, all of us – he rolls his eyes – supernatural creatures and most of the people on earth. What Yar forgot to mention is that it doesn't work on the direct descendants of Slavic tribes, like the Devans, the Ljutics, the Millintzs, the Bodrics, and...

Suddenly, Luka freezes. I see a painful spasm in his face before he falls over to the ground. In front of the open doors of my *Bazaar*, in his yellow raincoat and green rubber boots, stands Bernard with his hand raised. He puts his hand down and his bright eyes smile softly at me.

- Are you all right? – he asks me before he approaches Luka and kneels next to him. Frozen, I barely manage to nod affirmatively.

Luka seems to regain consciousness.

- Purple, I'll have to hide him from everyone for a while. My dear boy! – he says, pulling him closer. – You've been on earth for too long, time to go to the sky.

- From everyone – he says slowly – Hazel is incredibly attached to Yar, that's why he worries so much about him... But, he worries about you, too. He's just a kid.

He lifts him up like a baby. His voice is soft, almost as if he's singing.

- I apologize for barging in like this, but my old lady and I couldn't let Hazel do something stupid. Come by for some fresh juice – he winks and turns around, leaving *The Bazaar* in a few quick steps.

I'm sitting alone in the store when Amelia calls me and asks me if I've read today's news. I answer affirmatively and hang up. I'm waiting for something to happen. I'm waiting for him to call. Or at least Inga. But my phone is silent. The day goes by peacefully, nothing happens, and I slowly head home. I arrive to see Beyla playing with Sunbeam. Amelia is reading on the terrace. She peers at me over the top of her glasses when I just collapse into the armchair next to her. My daughter waves at me cheerfully and I wave back.

- Amelia, I have to go see him! – I say, still looking at Beyla.

- I thought you'd already left – she closes her book.

-Don't worry. Luka will help me watch the little one.

- Luka... – I stop, remembering his crazy expression. - Luka had to pay an urgent visit to his family up north.

- Oh – she takes off her glasses in surprise – Is everything all right? I talked to him this morning, he didn't mention anything.

- He came by to *The Bazaar* before he left – I shiver all over, and my aunt sees that as my reaction to the cold.

- No wonder you're cold! You never dress properly! You should really start taking care of your health! - she scolds me and invites Beyla to come over.

Covered in mud and green grass stains, she reluctantly says goodbye to the pony and runs to the house.

- She's just like you! - Amelia laughs when she hears my daughter's brief reply to the question "how's school?" - I hate to study.

I chase her to the bathroom and ask aunty to check when the first next plane to Berlin departs.

- What are you doing in Berlin, mommy? - she asks me as she gets into the tub filled with bubbles.

- Oh, just work - I lie and start undressing.

- Watch out, here comes the destroyer - I shout before I jump into the tub, splashing water all over the bathroom.

Amelia shakes her head as she steps onto the wet tiles.

- You have a flight at 8 p.m. In less than three hours.

- Perfect. As soon as this little monster takes a bath, I'll be on my way! Darling, please, book me a ticket. I have no luggage. And you, baby girl, watch out for my special brush for fluffy ginger hair - I say, bending my fingers as if I'm playing the piano as I get closer to her.

She giggles and immerses herself in water.

I land in Berlin just after 10 p.m. As soon as the plane touches the ground, I nervously turn on my phone. Apart from the kind messages from *T-Mobile* giving me information about roaming, there's nothing else. Heavy, humid night envelops everything as I walk out of the airport. I shiver with cold. Amelia's right, I should start wearing warmer clothes. I hail a cab and instead of going to the *Arkona Group* headquarters, as I initially planned, I decide to go directly to Rügen. The cab driver gives me a funny look and tells me in a heavy foreign accent that that's more than 120 miles from here.

- Luckily, these are German roads. We'll be there in less than two hours! - I tap him on the shoulder. - Don't worry, just drive! - I settle comfortably in my seat and ask him to turn on the air conditioning.

The driver shrugs, as if he wants to say that it's all the same to him. He turns on the meter and turns up the heat. I send Amelia a message, telling her that I'm on my way to Putgarten and that everything is fine. I curl up next to the window and look at the dark, hermetic sky, and the pale outline of the moon appearing behind a thick gray cloud for a

brief instant. The driver luckily doesn't talk much. He turns on the radio and I hear Jagger's distinctive voice singing *Anybody Seen My Baby*.

If I weren't wearing the ring, I would think that Alec is responsible for the music. The familiar melody makes me think about him again, about everything that happened. Was it crazy to just jump on the plane like this and head for Arkona? How smart or dangerous is my decision? What will he say when he sees me? Why didn't he call? Is it true that he can't sense me like before? I remember the traces he used to leave behind. His scent in the air, his shadow in the sky, his breath carried by the wind.

I arrive in Putgarten ten minutes after midnight. I pay the cab fare and get out into the cold, deaf, rainy night. I stop for a moment, trying to figure out where I'm going. The darkness around me and the sharp wind strike fear into my bones. I put my jacket over my head and hurry down the road. Although I know that the ring is protecting me, I cannot banish this overwhelming sense of fear. I listen to every sound coming from the unpleasant darkness, and the steps behind me, coming closer and closer make me flinch. The light on the porch of Liray's house flickers through the bare trees and I gather strength to turn around. There's no one behind me. Only the wet road and the pale street lights. I walk backwards for a while, squinting at the surroundings. Nothing! Not a living soul in sight. I nod, laughing at my own foolishness, but a new, louder sound of heavy heels on the asphalt makes me run for my life. Grabbing the knob, I run into the house.

– Puurpurre! – I hear a weepy voice calling my name, mixing with the sound of howling wind carrying the sharp scent of salt from the sea.

I slam the doors and lean against them. My heart is beating like crazy. Gasping for air, I have a feeling that, if nothing else gets me, I'll die of a heart attack. The pleasant warmth and the soft light coming from the lamps help me calm down. I look around. Everything is just where it's supposed to be and the whole room looks incredibly tidy. Apart from the burning lights, there is no sign that anybody lives here. I frown, although I knew the whole time that he could be anywhere. Still, I hoped I'd find him in Arkona. All the photos and headlines about the break up were telling me that he wanted me to see them. I go up the stairs. I giggle quietly and bite my lip once I hear water running in the bathroom. I crack the door open and the hot steam leaves my face wet. I tiptoe through the foggy room. Enjoying the strong streams of water running down his body like rain, he stands completely still, looking at the floor, his palms pressed against the wall. Every muscle in his arms, back, and legs becomes tense once he feels my presence. I take off my jacket and walk towards him, unbuttoning my plaid shirt. He's still looking down. Closing his eyes, frowning, he clenches the rocks on the wall so tight, they begin to crack.

– I didn't want you to come! – he says as he turns around. He's standing up straight, his arms loose and fists clenched, breathing unevenly. Following the trail of water, my eyes

slide down his wet hair, face, broad shoulders, strong torso, perfect abs, and his cock, which, although not erect, looks impressive.

– I don't believe you – I say as I take off my shirt. I unbuckle my belt and take off the pants. He watches my every move, saying nothing. Although he tilts his head back and shakes it in disapproval when I undo my bra, the reaction of his cock to what he sees puts a devilish smile on my face.

– Purple, please! You know I can't! – he clenches his fists and swallows saliva when I take off my panties and stand naked in front of him. I walk towards the shower, but a painful spasm in his face makes me stop. I raise my left hand, taking off my ring.

– No! Stop, don't! – he grabs my hand and pulls me closer trying to stop me, but the stone is already between my fingertips.

– You don't know what you're doing! – he yells angrily, squeezing my arm. Fighting the unpleasant pain caused by his grip, I raise my hand holding the ring and drop it, letting the water take it down the drain.

– I could hurt you! – he whispers as he lets go of my arm.

I nod affirmatively.

– You could also cure me!

– You don't understand, Purple! I could kill you! – he looks down.

– No, you couldn't – I say, carefully pressing my palm against the left side of his chest.

His heart is pounding and he's breathing heavily. I come closer and kiss the place where I was holding my hand a moment before. His hot skin on my lips makes me tingle all over. I carefully move away and look into his eyes.

He watches me closely. I know he's in my head. I know he's reading my mind and soul. I know he feels my love and desire for him. He knows how much I need him and he knows that I finally believe him.

– I want you! – he says, feeling me tingle at the touch of his hot breath.

Breathing excitedly, I close my eyes and open my mouth slightly. He gives me a surprisingly soft kiss. So gentle it makes me smile. *I knew you can be gentle*, I think to myself. Opening my eyes, I notice his fiery, lustful gaze.

– I fucking want you so bad! – he says and lifts me up, kissing me passionately.

I wrap my legs around his waist. Running my fingers through his hair, I frown with pain as he nails me against the rough stone wall. He quickly steps back, but I pull him closer, pressing his head against my neck.

– You’re not going to hurt me! – I whisper into his ear. His eyes glisten as he nods affirmatively and dives into my neck.

His hunger for me leaves hot trails of his tongue and fingers on my skin. My desire for him burns between my thighs, my passion making my nails draw red lines on his shoulders. He thrusts into me all the way, suddenly, causing my entire body to shiver. I sigh loudly, tilting my head back, opening my legs for him. I enjoy his hardness filling me up completely, making my body forget about the pain between my legs. At first, he’s just still inside me, focusing on my breasts and nipples, licking them with the tip of his tongue, touching them with his lips and biting them briefly. I shiver under his hands caressing my thighs. He puts his large hands on my ass and thrusts into me, deeper and harder. I moan loudly, feeling nothing but his cock inside me, making me more excited with every thrust. He holds my ass tight, pushing deeper and deeper, kissing me lustfully. He separates us from the stone wall and doesn’t stop thrusting as he takes me to the room. He throws me on the bed and turns me around, taking me from behind. He pulls my hair, making me press my head against his chest. His lips dive into my neck again, his hands on my breasts. He squeezes them tight and his touch burns my skin as he slides his palm down, between my legs. He touches me lightly at first, but feeling how wet I am, his fingers start playing and I moan, arching my back, filled with anticipation. He slowly nestles his hot glans inside me, still caressing me with his fingertips, entering me slowly, gradually, letting me feel the full size of his manhood, every inch. He makes me shiver and burn and I begin to moan louder and louder. Spurred by my excitement, he thrusts even harder, making me fall into deep orgasmic trance. My heart pounds like crazy and I gasp for air. I try to recover from the explosion of light in my head. He throws me on the bed so I land on my back, grabs my legs and pulls me in, thrusting into me, deep and hard. His hot breath burns my cheeks and neck. The delicious pleasure spreads through my body again. I moan loudly, saying his name and pulling his ruffled hair. He suddenly grabs my arms and stretches them above my head. Squeezing them, he thrusts into me like a hungry, uncontrollable beast, filling me up with his hardness. I feel him feeding on my wet, pulsating loins and loud moans following his every thrust. I feel so free, enjoying his thrusts and kisses. My body melts and my heart pounds as every muscle in my body begins to contract and for a moment, contractions turn into a spasm, unleashing the bright eruption of colors that sends me into silent, weightless space of peace and quiet. Surreal pleasure makes me smile broadly, feeling him pulsate and shiver, shooting the hot white stream inside me. His eyes are suddenly clear and he lets go of my arms, trying to control his breathing and asking me worriedly if I’m all right. Although every part of my body hurts, I can’t help but smile.

He frowns, carefully watching every part of my face, feeling my body shiver as it calms down, trying to recognize the hurricane of emotions raging inside me. He stutters in surprise:

– I don’t understand. I don’t understand what you’re feeling!

- Me neither! – I shrug.

I caress his cheek and pull him closer, feeling so tired. Like a little child, he nestles between my head and shoulders. He kisses my neck and I fall asleep.

- I thought I died! – I say as I lazily open my eyes.

- Good morning to you too – he says, caressing my shoulder.

– Well, it seems that you’re not weak enough to die after one night of sex with a god! – he cocks his head. His hand on my stomach, he gently pulls me in.

- Mmmmm, but if it was several times in a row... - I smile kittenishly, letting him know that waking up with his hot skin against mine turned me on again.

- But... I think that after several times in a row with you, I would die! – he grins and pulls me on top of him.

- Ooh, what’s that supposed to mean, Yaril?! – I ask, gently rubbing his manhood.

Moving my hair out of my face, he leans in for a soft kiss.

- That means that I would die for you!

His expression, after seeing how shocked I am, lets me know that he doesn’t like my reaction to what I’m hearing.

I punch him on the shoulder.

- Don’t talk like that! You can’t die, because then we’ll all go to hell. And – I hit him even harder – stop rummaging through my head! That’s not nice!

I start kissing him on the chest.

- You don’t have to know how much I want you and... - I continue as I move lower – all the things I’d like to do with you.

I move below the navel, running my tongue across his wide glans. I think that I could suck every single drop from him, which makes him shiver and tilt his head back with satisfaction.

– Didn’t I tell you to get out of my mind?! – I stand up, pretending that I’m mad and I’m shocked to see the purpure stone on the night table.

- Why? Why did you bring it back?! – I ask angrily. – I don't want to wear it anymore!
- Purple – he says as he sits up and takes the ring. – You have to wear it!
- No, I don't! – I hiss. – Can't you see that I don't need any protection from you?!
- You know it's not just that! What about the Navi's?
- It's protecting me from them, huh? – I pull the covers angrily and wrap them around me. – If I understood Luka correctly, Morana can easily find a way to kill me, without any of you noticing! She just needs to find a particular person to do it for you!

His expression lets me know that he has no idea what happened to Luka.

- You're trying to say that you don't know that Bernard picked him up from *The Bazaar*, because he had a fit of rage after finding out that you broke up with Ellen because of me?

- Vit came by to *The Bazaar*?! – he's surprised.

- Well, he just showed up. He knocked him out, told me that he's taking him to the sky and left. – I snap my fingers. – Just like that. Do I really have to tell you all this? Can't you see it in my head?!

He watches me absentmindedly for a while. He looks as if he wants to say something, but instead he just pulls me in and lets me nestle in his arms.

- Ok, you don't have to wear it! It really is easier for me to know where you are and how you feel. He kisses my hair and looks through the window, resting his chin on my head.

– Is everything all right? – I barely dare to ask. He nods affirmatively.

– Don't worry. It's nothing that can't be solved. - he kisses my temple and I fall asleep.

Dark shadows fill the room when I wake up alone in bed. I prop up on my elbows, listening to the sound of the wind sneaking through the treetops. I feel our smells captured in the air, caressing my senses, making me stretch out like a kitten. I get up, remembering that my clothes are scattered on the bathroom floor, so I take Alec's wrinkled shirt lying by the bed. The smell of the shirt almost makes me dizzy, and I realize that I'll never get enough of him and his scent. I slowly go downstairs. Although I know he knows that I'm awake, I want to surprise him at least a little bit. At the last step, I peek my head in and see him wearing only jeans, leaning against the fireplace, looking towards me. His smiling face when he notices me peeking from the stairs and

his arms waiting to hold me, melt my heart like butter and I run to his arms like a happy child. He lifts me up and twirls me around. Giving me a kiss, he asks me if I slept well.

- Yes... although... - I give him a piercing look – I thought that you'd be there when I wake up!

- Oh, I'm sorry! We have a guest – he says, pointing at Bernard sitting on the sofa.

I blush with shame. I remember that underneath the carelessly buttoned shirt, I'm wearing nothing. I try to hide behind him, but both of them laugh heartily. Alec's gaze tells me to look at my legs. I pull up the shirt confusedly and feel white boxers and a tank top.

- Now that you don't have the ring, I can dress you any way I like! – he laughs, offering me the purple ring that appeared in his palm again.

I clumsily say hello to Bernard, and then shake my head angrily, dismissing the idea of putting the ring back on. He sighs.

– Only when we are in the company of other people... please. Your thoughts are too loud, naught, confusing, and therefore rather distracting. – he says, taking my hand gently. – You asked me not to be inside your head. This is the only way to stop me – he gives me a warm smile – otherwise, I won't get out of it!

I purse my lips and put my hand in front of his face so he could put the ring back on.

– But, - his eyes glisten naughtily – I expect to see this ring as far away as possible from you when we're alone.

Once again, I feel ashamed in front of Bernard and laugh quietly as I look down. He gently strokes my hair, asking me if I'd like some coffee. I nod affirmatively and sit in the wide leather armchair. He brings us each a cup of coffee and sits on the armrest, nodding at Bernard. – Go on!

It takes me a couple of minutes to understand that Vit is talking about Hazel leaving Jav this morning and disappearing without a trace. When I ask how come Alec doesn't know where he is, Vit tells me that Luka often uses the power of the forest when he gets mad, so he could camouflage himself and get away from everyone for a couple of days.

- I'll probably know where he is in a few days – says Alec.

- Why can't you find out today? – I ask in surprise.

Instead of replying, he looks into my face and calmly says that he's weak at the moment.

- I don't understand... - I stutter – Is it the ring? – I try to take it off.

-No, no! – he puts his hand on mine.

I see deep sorrow in his eyes and he tries to mask it with a faint smile.

- It has nothing to do with the ring, nor...

- I think you should tell her everything – Bernard interrupts him. Alec gives him an angry look, but says nothing.

– Yar! I don't understand why not, now that she knows who we are and who she is!

Alec just watches him angrily, saying nothing. The old man just takes a sip of coffee, looking rather indifferent.

– Ok, if you don't want to, I will! – he says as he puts the cup on the saucer.

- Purple, Yar was attacked again after Kupala and he was heavily wounded! I

jump up in shock.

- How?! Where?! But... but... - I stutter and turn to him with tears in my eyes.

- Don't worry! I'm ok now. – he strokes my hair, but I push him away.

- Why didn't you tell me? When did that happen? – I yell bewilderedly. – That was right after... after... - I remember it was after Beyla's birthday. Right after we slept together for the first time.

- Hey! – he puts his palms on my cheeks. – It's over! I have recovered almost all of my strength. In a few days, I'll be as good as new!

- You will, but not yet! – Bernard adds.

- You won't recover until she – he points at me – finishes her passage.

His index finger pointed at me and his strict look leave me puzzled. I am just about to say that I have no idea what he's talking about, but then I suddenly realize that he's talking about my dream!

– I, I'll finish it right away! – I stand up and walk over to Vit.

– Whenever you wish! Whenever you need! Is the old man at the other side of the bridge a god as well, or...?

- I'm the old man... - I hear Alec behind my back.

- But, but, he is... - I stutter as I slowly turn around – you? He's...

- He's me. – he gives me a penetrating look.

- Purple, every year on your birthday, you try to cross the bridge so the legacy that you are could join Yaril – Bernard steps in. – Yar told you that with every step of your

birthday dream, you send proof of existence of his legacy and source of good power and force to Jav. Your energy, together with his own, Perun directs towards Svarog and that way, he makes sure he remains peacefully asleep.

What he didn't tell you is that, every forty years there's something that we call The Big Night. That's when the doors of Prav open for the supreme gods of Jav and Nav – once Perun, now Yar and Veles - to send their energy directly to Svarog.

Every time, from Cape Arkona, each on his own side, Yaril at the doors of Jav, Veles in front of my temple, under which are the doors of Nav, send Svarog the proof of their strength and confirm the existence of their original power. That way, they prove that they are his worthy descendants, guardians of the world he's left behind. The energy they send gets renewed and the doors close, leaving Svarog asleep. And for the next forty years, we continue our battle against the Navi's, but lately it's been getting harder and harder to come out victorious.

Although I'm honestly trying, I can't understand what he's trying to tell me and what all of this has to do with me.

Realizing this, Vit sighs.

– The Big Night takes place once in forty years. However, every year, on December 22, it is The White Night. That's when the power of the original and legacy artifacts is sent to the First Field of Prav, which accumulates the energy over the years, so it would return to its owners on The Big Night, forty times as strong, renewing the energy that originated from them and their artifacts.

Every year, after you fail to cross the bridge and join him as his legacy, Yar has to send a part of his original energy from his body, which is why it takes him longer and longer to recover from the attacks of the Navi's. Had you managed to cross the bridge by now, he would have been sending the power of his legacy instead.

- It's all my fault – I weep, overcome with guilt and sorrow, realizing how much pain I have caused him.

– I... – my chin trembles. – Why didn't you make me? Why didn't you influence me somehow, force me to finally cross it?!

- No, no, it's not your fault – Alec gives me a comforting hug. – We... we can't influence you when you're on the bridge, because you belong to neither sky nor earth when you're there. And you... - he holds me tighter – you didn't know about all this. Unfortunately, on the bridge, you're always a little child, and the fear is preventing you from reaching me.

- But... why, why do you look like that in my dream? – I ask him addlebrained. – Is that what you actually look like?!

He squints and wrinkles his nose – Do you really think that’s my real face?! – he puts on an angry smile.

- Well... – I shrug. I’m aware that once again, I know nothing and understand nothing.

- Purple, on the bridge, you’re a scared child, and the fear makes you see me that way. I nod.

- If I cross the bridge now, will that mean that you’ll have all your energy again?

- Yes. It will! – he caresses my cheek comfortingly.

- I told you there’s nothing to worry about.

- Yes – says Vit as he stands up. – It’s just that The Big Night is before your birthday. Yaril has to recover as much as possible so he could send enough energy to Svarog and stay alive. – I give Alec another frightened look, and he rolls his eyes.

- Vit! – he shouts angrily. – Stop scaring her!

Svanevit just shakes his head. – Yar, I just want her to know how important it is for you to stay away from danger – he gives me a kind look.

- You see, Purple, you’re the source of his energy. Although you’re still not unified with him, as long as you’re on earth, you give him a certain amount of energy that can keep him alive. Especially in case he loses all his body strength. On the other hand, it’s clear that without you, the chance for him to live to see the next Big Night is practically non-existent. – he raises his eyebrow. – You both have to stay out of trouble. And now, if you’d excuse me, Helga is waiting for me to come to dinner.

We walk him out, and Alec suddenly pulls me in for a kiss, which makes him cringe with pain. I angrily take off the ring and throw it across the room.

- You need to learn how to control yourself and stop reading my mind!

He slowly looks up, trying to banish the pain and gives me a broad smile.

- How could any man control himself around you?

I roll my eyes and he lifts me up and takes me to the bed in a matter of seconds.

- You’ve got to be joking?! – I shout, realizing I’m completely naked.

- I almost never joke – he says, and his pants disappear as well. I prop up on my elbows, wrinkling my nose angrily.

- Bernard said that you mustn’t waste your energy!

He lays me down on my back again.

– I’m not wasting energy – he smiles devilishly. – I’m taking it – and then, after he kisses every inch of my skin, his tongue slides between my thighs.

The first days of October seem like a prelude to a grim and cold fall. I’m back in Old Skies so I could be with Beyla, and Alec has moved to Belgrade, notifying the public that he plans to spend the next few months personally supervising the business operations of *Arkona East*. I see him almost every day. At first, I almost always went to his place, but now he’s spending much more time at our home. He and Beyla have become incredibly close. One rainy morning, she caught us lying in my bed, and she just smiled and snuggled between us. She just curled up in his arms and went back to sleep. As far as Phillip is concerned, I told everyone that I divorced him right after Beyla’s birthday. That wasn’t true. Alec sent him to Thailand, fired him, and gave him a large amount of money, explaining what would happen if he just thought of coming near us. He also found out that Luka was residing in that part of the world. I asked Alec to help me contact him, but he just shook his head, telling me that Hazel did that before. Enjoying his presence, spending long weekends in snowy Putgarten, I sometimes forget who he is, who I am, and how little time is left until The Big Night.

It’s December and Yar is once again his old mighty self. He’s using his strength and power easily, but it’s getting harder for him to channel his fierceness during sex. One night, after realizing how out of control he is and that he could seriously hurt me, angry with himself, he just disappeared without a word. Next morning he showed up, hammered and sad, holding the most beautiful white lily with purple edges, just like the ones I saw in the garden of Jav.

Begging for my forgiveness, telling me he would never hurt me, he melted my heart with his sweetness and fell asleep on my lap.

- Are you seriously telling me that a god can get drunk?! – I asked him as soon as he woke up.

– Of course I can! – he gave me a broad smile. – My sweet love, I’m not Superman!

I cocked my head and clicked my tongue.

– Well, how much does a god have to drink to get as drunk as you were last night?!

- You don’t want to know! – he said, pulling me in.

– Of course, your drinks don’t have that kind of effect on me. But Vit makes excellent brandy. And after last night, the only thing I wanted was to get drunk, like a real man! – he frowned and shuddered.

– Imagine how badly I could’ve hurt you... - he sighed, shaking his head.

- Yar... – I approached him from behind and put my head on his back as I hugged him. ... you won’t hurt me, ever. – I whisper.

We sat like that for a while. Silent, leaning against his skin, I listened to him breathe. I knew that he was in my head and my body. I knew that he felt how much I trust him and how much I love him.

– I have to go to Berlin – he said, heading for the bathroom.

Shocked, I walked behind him, letting sadness flood my face with tears when I realized that the bathroom was empty and that he’d left again. I haven’t seen him since.

On the nineteenth of December, most of the people in Old Skies celebrate Saint Nicholas. I take Beyla to school and go to *The Bazaar*, because the store is always swarming with customers on big holidays like this one. I make myself some coffee and walk through the kitchen back door, down the shaky stairs, to the large basement, that is, my storage. I open the wide metal casket and take out the Christian religious items I don’t sell on other days and put them in a cardboard box.

–...*Let’s just say that this Saint Nicholas of yours is none other than my good friend and a god, Woden* – I smile to myself as I remember one of the stories Vit told me while I was staying in Vitt. My heart fills with pain and sorrow, reminiscing the days spent in Arkona. I sigh, realizing how much I miss those... those... - roll my eyes – gods... and how much I miss Alec. I shiver, remembering that The Big Night is only three days away, and I lean against the metal table, lost in thought, holding the cardboard box.

Someone slams the front door and I flinch. Scared and shocked, I run towards the store. A few steps away from the door, I freeze, feeling the heavy smell of perfume and tobacco as Phillip walks into the basement. He locks the doors behind him. I want to scream, but I just stand still. A shiver goes down my spine and I start breathing heavily. He stops right in front of me.

– Honey, I’m home! – he says in a shrill voice and grins, spreading his arms. – Did you miss me as much as I missed you?!

Abhorred, I realize he looks completely different. His face is rough and wrinkled. There are dark, rough spots on his forehead and his cheeks. Deep, dark circles around his eyes make his bright eyes even colder as he looks at me like a lunatic. He licks his cracked lips, showing his rotten teeth. He walks towards me again.

- So, Mr. Leroy has been keeping my side of the bed warm, huh?! – he shakes his head menacingly. – That’s why I came to take away what’s mine – he grins, distorting his face with a frown as he walks towards me with his arms spread out.

The moment he grabs me, struck by his unbearable stench, I finally move and start walking backwards. My limbs feel heavy and I open my eyes wide, nodding in disbelief. I try to ignore the smell of rotten meat that's burning my senses as I stare at Morana's dead eyes, swallowing me with their darkness behind Phillip's back.

Loud, shrill, unhuman voice comes from the far end of the room, making me look that way. I scream in shock, seeing two hunched, skinny naked creatures chortling. The sound of their voice is ear-piercing, unbearable.

Utterly confused, I watch these creatures that are unlike anything I've ever seen. Their bodies are covered in dark cracked scales, underneath which I can see raw red meat. Their arms are long and thin, with bent bony fingers and disgusting green slime between them. Instead of nails, they have thick claws extending from their fingers. Their legs are short, crooked, covered in wiry fur, with hooves instead of feet. Their heads are wide and ellipsoidal, with almost no neck, their eyes tiny and sunken and they have thin cracks instead of ears. Their noses are flat, almost merged with the cheeks, covered in scabs and dried-out snots. But what paralyzes me completely are their huge mouths, with four rows of sharp fangs and thin yellow tongues darting uncontrollably.

- What's the matter, bitch?! – Phillip's voice makes me focus on him again. – You don't need me anymore?! You don't want me?! – he yells in rage, making Morana laugh amusedly. She tilts her head and whispers in his ear:

– Darling – she says kittenishly – you're dear wife gladly replaced you with your filthy rich boss, and I hear he is a real beast – she says, piercing me with her black eyes. – The last time he fucked her, he almost killed her!

She frowns in disgust, leaning against his shoulder.

– If someone's dick should send her to her grave, it's yours! – she giggles and moves to the side, letting Phillips distorted figure jump at me.

He crosses the distance between us in two steps and knocks me to the ground. He lies on top of me, the weight of his body preventing me from moving. He starts kissing me and I scream loudly, managing to free my arms, and I begin to punch him as hard as I can.

Behind his back, the creatures that I now realize are the Navi's, laugh even harder.

– I told you she likes it rough! – Morana says haughtily.

Phillip grabs my both arms with his hand and slaps me so hard with the other I black out for a second. I feel blood running from my nose, down my lips. I regain my vision and strength and free my arms from his grip. I start punching him and sinking my nails into his face and eyes. He howls and covers his face with his hands for a moment.

– Are you crazy, you bitch?! – he shouts angrily and starts slapping me even harder.

- Let go of her right now! Alec's deep, roaring voice fills the room. His coldness and determination make Phillip freeze.

- Oh, finally! My dear brother has decided to show up and save his little bitch! – Morana almost sings and Alec just gives her a blank look.

He's wearing his shiny armor, with the symbol of sun and eight-ray *swastika* on his chest. Golden, sun-shaped fibulas hold his long bright red cape with royal purple lining. On his arms and legs he's wearing heavy guards with rubies. Eight, blood red rubies are lined up on his helmet with lowered visor and a symbol on the forehead, just like the one on the sword, with bright purple stone in the center.

- You??? – Phillip presses his lips together angrily. He drops me from his hands and runs towards him. – I'll kill you! – he shouts.

Alec just moves away and while Phillip is looking around to see where he's gone, he approaches me, taking me into his arms.

- Purple, I'm sorry... I, I couldn't come right away – he lifts me up. – I didn't know... I didn't sense... I was in isolated office because of work... - he says, his voice filled with guilt.

I nod, trying to tell him that everything's all right now, but he suddenly flinches, his eyes open wide, and stumbles to the side. He blinks rapidly, his arms go loose, and I slip to the ground.

-Alec!!! – I scream, ignoring the shrieking creatures and Morana's insolent laughter.

– Yaryl, are you all right? – I weep, trying to get a response.

He slowly sits up, gathering his strength. He struggles to bend his arm behind his back and from the part of his body protected only by heavy metal net, in the lumbar region, he pulls out a long spear with a painful sigh.

– Morana! – he yells so loudly, my blood turns to ice.

Holding the bloody spear in his hands, he turns to her, and she just shrugs innocently:

- Don't look at me! I didn't do it! – she squints maliciously – He took my weapon on his own – she points at Phillip – I just suggested where to aim! – she replies insolently.

The Navi's shriek again when Phillip throws another spear, but this one just flies by Alec's arm and he responds angrily by throwing the spear he was holding towards the Besomars and they both drop dead.

- What's the matter, my dear brother? – Morana asks sweetly. – You can't hurt your sister?!

Ignoring her completely, he moves towards me, dragging his left leg. He tries to tell me something, but she continues:

- Are you afraid, or you just don't want to kill the only person who could really satisfy you – she grins cynically.

He turns around angrily:

- Morana, I have no intention to play your little games! You know I won't attack Phillip, nor you – he says sharply. – Unless you challenge me – he looks at her with rage.

Morana just presses her lips together spitefully, forming two thin, crooked lines.

- Are you challenging me, Morana?! – Yaril yells loudly.

- Are you and Veles challenging me personally, or do you plan to continue ambushing me, like you always do? – his voice is getting more rough and penetrating.

- Have you finally decided to kill me?! – he shouts, boiling with rage, and she just quietly steps back.

Alec turns to me and nods, giving me a sweet, loving look, letting me know that everything is all right.

- No.. no... – Morana stutters quietly behind his back. Her unusually silent voice freezes him.

– No! We won't kill you, my brother! We know we mustn't – she talks loudly, in an ice cold voice.

Breathing heavily, Alec moves directly in front of me. He puts his hand on his sword.

- Maybe we can't and mustn't kill you now, but we can kill your only legacy! – she screams, causing the undefined creatures to fill the room with their shrieks and crawl towards us like vermin.

Turning to them, Yar pushes me to the ground, telling me to hide.

He quickly draws his sword, slaying everyone who comes near him. He takes a few steps forward at times, but immediately returns to me.

- Just duck, Purple! These bastards can't reach you!

Just as the horde of Navi's is getting ready for another attack, the doors to the warehouse explode open and Vuk storms in, holding two *Colts* and shooting everything that moves. Morana draws her sword and attacks Alec herself. I'm relieved, seeing Vuk's serious face, his determination to trample everyone in front of him without thinking twice. Encouraged by his intrepidity, I start looking around, searching for a weapon. I

notice one of the spears Phillip was holding before and crawl reaching for it, but Phillip suddenly attacks me from behind.

Putting his hands around my neck, he begins to strangle me. I struggle under his grip, trying to push him away. The pressure on the neck turns into piercing pain in the chest, caused by the lack of oxygen. Losing consciousness, I catch a glimpse of a broken arrowhead above my head, just within my reach. With the little strength I've got left, I reach out. I feel the blade under my fingers. I grab it and thrust it into Phillip's hands on my neck. The jab of the sharp metal through the bone and flesh of his hand makes him let go of me right away. Sudden inflow of air makes me cough, filling my aching lungs. I hit him in the chest with my elbow, as hard as I can, and he rolls off me in pain. The buzzing in my head and lungs feels like chains around my body. I stand up on my knees, my hands still on my throat. I try to breathe evenly. I turn to Alec and Vuk. I wail desperately, seeing Vuk's dead body being mangled by the Besomars. Yar is still bravely fighting back, although covered in wounds. Besides a handful of Navi's, only Morana's is still attacking him viciously. A happy thought goes through my head – we'll make it after all – but suddenly, Phillip pulls me again. He knocks me down on my back, sits on top of me with his hands holding a screwdriver high above my chest, and aims for my heart, blind with rage.

- Now you'll pay for everything, you bitch! – he hisses like a lunatic and swings.

-NOOO! – I hear Alec's mighty commanding roar.

Turning towards us, just as I sink the arrowhead into Phillip's throat, Alec throws his sword towards him. He drops the screwdriver he was holding, grabbing his throat, and falls on top of me wheezing. A split second later, Yaril's sword flies above his head, sticking into the wall.

- No! God, no! – I let out a scream as I look towards Yar, shoving Phillip's body away.

His face distorted with pain, spears and arrows thrusting into the cracks of his armor, he falls onto his knees. Noticing the frightened expression on my face, he tries to muster a smile, before he collapses with a terrific thud.

-Alec... – I whisper - ...A..A....Yaril... – I stutter, struggling to stand up. – Please, my love – I shout loudly, outvoicing the shrieks of the revolting creatures. – No, nooo! Get away from him! – I scream at two Navi's who are jumping on his body, trying to take off his helmet and pieces of armor. –Noooooo! – I shout, pushing them away from him.

- Enough! – a cold and scary man's voice fills the room, making everyone dead silent.

I try to understand whose voice that is and lift my head up, facing the grinning heads of the Navi's. I shiver, suddenly hearing faint heartbeat synchronized with mine.

–Yar... – I stutter, looking down at his lifeless body. A hard blow to the head sends me away, into the darkness. Falling next to Alec's body, I hear the horrible voice again.

- I want him alive!

The bright light is making me open my eyes. I can't. I can't move. I can't even frown. The light bothers me. It always has. I hear voices. Echoing from somewhere, unintelligible. I can't recognize, I can't discern, I can't understand anything they're saying. I just want them to turn off the lights. I want them to leave me in the warmth and comfort of my darkness.

Beyla?! I hear my daughter's cheerful laughter. Beyla! I open my eyes, but I see nothing. Once again, nothing but the heavy dark. The air is hot. Humid. I breathe heavily. I hear the distant sound of a trumpet. I sweat with the heavy moisture. I'm naked. I can't move. The sound of blues hurts my senses.

- I'll take care of him!

- Luka? – I recognize his voice.

– Hurry, there's not enough time!

- Luka?!

– They must never remember...

Simple, sparkly scent, the scent of purpure, the scent of my name, soothes my senses. I feel his soft hair under my fingers.

- Trust me... - he whispers persuasively before he enters me gently.

I sigh, sinking my nails into his back. I open my eyes and I'm happy to see the reddish shade of his hair.

- Trust me...

I'm hot! I can't breathe. Through the open window, I see the neon light of some night club, flickering annoyingly. Why am I suddenly in New Orleans? The sound of a motorcycle outvoices the blues. The sad moan of the trumpet pierces my temples. I think I'm going to throw up.

"There's a land of dreams where all children go. Where bunnies, little bunnies, draw on the walls..." My daughter's voice caresses my senses as she sings her favorite lullaby.

She's running through grass bespeckled with daisies and bright dandelions. She spreads her arms when she sees me. She giggles as the bright, soft curls fly around her face.

- Mommy, look! Look! – she opens her hands, filled with purple dust.

She purses her tiny lips as she blows it towards me. The microscopic particles fall into my eyes, nose, and throat. I lose my breath. I cannot breathe. I'm beginning to suffocate. Beyla looks at me, overcome with fear. I cannot breathe! My lungs begin to hurt. It feels like they're about to explode with unbearable pressure. I struggle to get some air.

I take a deep breath and jump off the bed. My eyes wide open, I breathe heavily, trying to pull myself together. My whole body aches.

- So, darling? Bad dreams, huh? – Morana clicks her tongue, coming from the other room, spreading her rotten smell.

I bend over in disgust and vomit next to the massive wooden bed.

Splash of icy cold water makes me regain consciousness. I shake my aching head, realizing Morana just doused me.

- It's time to wake up, Purple – she says as she moves to the side, making way for an old man with wrinkled face, long, ash gray hair tied into a ponytail, bristling beard, and lifeless, sunken eyes. He comes closer and greets me with a nod.

- It's an honor to meet you, Purple. I've heard so much about you and now I meet you at last! – he grins, showing his narrow, decayed teeth.

He's wearing a long black toga made of heavy velvet, with wide sleeves and three massive fibulas down the middle. The edges are embroidered with thick golden thread. The heavy copper collar looks as if it is glued to his neck, with upside-down eight-ray *swastika* on the side, matching the heavy copper guards on his wrists. His nails are black, sharp, and cut down the middle. He's got a dry, bumpy walking cane in his hand. He smells like death! That's the only way to describe the damp, thick smell of wet clay that spreads around him. I move my wet hair out of my face and carefully lean back in the bed. I'm trying to understand what's going on.

- You don't recognize me? – he asks me in a flat voice.

I nod in reply.

- I'm sure Jarovit mentioned me. – my blank look makes him sigh angrily.

- I'm Veles! The god of Nav! The underworld, the land of the deceased, and soon – he grins at Morana – soon, the land of all the living as well.

He bows theatrically and gets in my face with his foul breath.

I move my head to the side in disgust, and he grabs my chin with his bony hand, leaving painful marks of his nails on my skin. Spreading his nostrils, he breathes in the air around my lips and concludes disgustedly:

- Her whole body reeks of him! – he shouts angrily at Morana as he approaches her. – How come none of you have noticed it before?! How come you didn't – he taps his finger on her forehead – feel it when you were with her?!

- He left his scent on all of his whores! I felt it more on Ellen than I did on her! – she starts justifying herself, but he interrupts her with a short wave of hand:

– Enough! It doesn't matter anymore! Finally, everything is ready for the complete destruction of Jav! – he sweetly cocks his head at me. – Now that Jarovit has lost his only artifact, we can sit back and enjoy The Big Night and Svarog's awakening.

I remember I felt Alec's heart beating. And the fact that I'm still alive means that he's alive as well. I hope that he's found a way to get out of the warehouse.

- Yar will never let you wake up Svarog! – I shout angrily and try to jump at him. He just lightly swings his hand, throwing me across the room.

I let out a cry as my back hits the rough floor.

- Of course he won't let me! – he looks down at me as I struggle to get up. – I really have no desire to wake him. That's why Jarovit himself will do that for me! – he lifts his dry, bumpy cane up to his knees:

– Tonight he'll prove that he doesn't have the necessary power and strength to be a true leader of Jav! He has let his people down! He has failed his gods! He proved that he's not a worthy successor of Perun, letting himself give in to human urges! – he grins repulsively.

– That's not true! Yaril would never do anything to endanger Jav! – I shout.

- Luckily, only the three of us know that. And I'll make sure it stays that way! – he snaps his tiny teeth and bangs his cane against the ground. For a moment, I feel like I've lost consciousness.

Although I still feel dizzy, my mind is slowly getting clearer and I realize I'm surrounded by thick, heavy fog. I rub my eyes and look around, trying to figure out where I am.

Scared out of my wits, I jump up, hearing the sharp teeth of Besomars snapping behind my back.

Veles seems to float past me, his hand inviting me to follow him. Morana pushes me forward. Walking clumsily through the fog, I flinch as more and more freaks pop up and follow me.

Veles suddenly stops. All around us are thick clouds. Apart from the bony jaws of the Navi's, I see nothing and recognize nothing. Veles raises his both hands. He holds his right hand on his collar, and draws circles above his head with the left, holding his cane. With every circle he disperses some of the fog and the clouds and I begin to realize where we are.

A few steps away from me is the old hanging bridge, the one I've dreamed about my whole life, with Svanevit's temple on one side and the doors to Jav on the other. At the far end of the bridge, at the beginning of the sky of Jav, shackled in heavy chains, crucified between the two massive black oak posts, stands Alec.

The sight of his tortured body, bloody wounds under the battered armor, and his horrified expression as he lifts his head and looks at me, it tears my heart apart and I run towards him as tears run down my face.

Instead of stepping on the bridge, I feel my knees hit the ground as someone knocks me down. The hysteric laughter of the Navi's fills the air.

- Puprure, Purple, Purple – Morana slowly walks towards me and I carefully get up, crawling towards the bridge. She pulls my hair and knocks me down again.

– Where do you think you're going?! – she kicks me in the guts.

The blow knocks air out of my lungs and I cough, trying to breathe in. I look at Alec again and he pulls the chains with great force, looking at me all the while, and nods

comfortingly. I frown, trying to get up as his painful roar echoes across Arkona. I look at Yar in fear, seeing two arrows sticking out of his already wounded arms.

Laughing at his pain, Morana arrogantly puts down the bow. I gather all my strength and jump at her again, punching her as hard as I can. She stumbles and responds with a fierce blow that cuts my lip and blood comes gushing out of the wound. I fall at her feet and feel the pain cloud my mind. I just shake my head in disbelief, feeling the fresh, green smell of the forest in the air.

- Let her go! I told you that she's mine!

I move aside, seeing Luka get in Morana's face.

- Oh, she is! – she snaps at him, looking at me disgustedly. – I'm just letting her know that she shouldn't even think of crossing this bridge!

- Luka! What, what are you doing here?! – I stutter in disbelief. Although I'm fully aware of the truth, I still refuse to accept the only logical explanation.

-Oh, well yes... she doesn't know yet! – Morana raises her eyebrow viciously and looks at him and he just bows his head in shame.

- Luka figured it all out on time and joined the winning side... He told us the secret of the artifact, and the only condition was not to kill you – she rolls here dead fish eyes. – Luckily for you, Yaryl only uses the energy of the legacy on earth or in his immediate surroundings.

She turns towards the cliff, pointing at the landscape. – You have a beautiful view from here, don't you! – she mocks me, shooting another arrow at Alec and it ends up in his left thigh. He just flinches and his knees go weak, as if he's losing consciousness.

- He's finished! – Veles approaches them and smiles contently.

- How much time do we have until The Big Night? – he asks, looking at Alec's lifeless body.

- Less than an hour.

Morana stands beside him and he puts his hand on her shoulder.

– Get ready, my dear daughter! When he realizes that it's only my energy he's receiving, Svarog will wake up to see the world in chaos. His anger directed towards the people and gods of Jav will be immense!

– I'm more than ready! – she raises her head proudly. – I've been waiting for this my whole life! – she shoots another arrow that grazes against Alec's face. Luka looks away.

- Oh my God, Luka, what have you done?! – I punch him angrily in the chest. – What have you done?! Why, Luka? Why, Hazel?! He trusted you more than anyone!

Hysterical laughter spreads through the air again and he stops me in one quick move. Putting his hand on my mouth, he slams my back against his chest and pulls me forward, separating me from everyone.

- Be quiet! Be quiet! – he hisses into my ear – Be quiet! This is all because of you! You're alive only because I want you to spend every fucking day of your miserable life squirming with guilt!

I kick as hard as I can and step on his foot. He pushes me away and smashes me against the stone wall in front of the temple. Unbearable pain goes from my nape down my spine as the sharp rocks cut my head and my back. I fall onto my knees, holding a hand on my wounded nape. Tears come running down my face, mixing with the blood running from my nose and lip.

Although pain is cutting through my every muscle, every bone in my body, I cry because of pain of a different kind. The devastating, awful pain of betrayal.

- Luka, why?! – I ask, looking beyond his manic gaze, searching for the soft amber spark I loved so much.

- The one who endangers the entire world by killing a descendant of Slavic tribes for the love of pussy, cannot be my leader!

- What? What are you talking about?! – I stutter. – Whom did he kill?

- Stop it! – he slaps me. – Stop it! – he pulls me by the chin and gets in my face. – He killed Phillip because of you! He committed a sin just so you could be free!

- No!!- I whine – That's not true. He just tried to protect me. Phillip would have killed me. He had to protect his legacy...

- Kill you?! – he grins – Kill you, although you're wearing his fucking ring?!

- Luka, I haven't been wearing that ring since September! – I shout, realizing he's been away for the past few months.

- You're lying! – he grabs my arms – don't you lie to me!

- How would he know that Phillip attacked me with Morana and the Navi's? – I slowly get up. – How would he sense and know if I was wearing the ring?! How would he come to defend me?

He frowns, trying to understand what I'm telling him.

- You told me yourself that Morana would kill me in a second and neither he nor anyone else would notice if I was wearing the ring! That's why I stopped. So I could... - I hesitate – be with him.

- The Navi's and Morana attacked him because he broke the laws of Svarog by killing Phillip! He killed the only descendant of the Slavic tribe of Millintz! He had let his mind get clouded by his desire for you and your liberty! He didn't care about anybody else! Not Lada, not Vit, not the Ljutics, not the entire Jav! Not... - ne looks down in grief – not even me!

- Luka – I almost whisper. – Phillip did attack me by himself. But... all the time, Morana was there with the Besomars. She spurred him on, and as soon as Yaril came, Phillip first attacked him with Morana's spear, and after Alec didn't fight back, hordes of Navi's began to attack us... me. Then Vuk came – I sob.

- Luka... they killed and mangled Vuk.

He opens his mouth in shock.

- Luka... Alec had to defend us both from Morana and her freaks! He couldn't kill Phillip... I... I killed him! – I shudder at the sight of his dead body in my mind.

Hazel opens his eyes wide.

– But, Morana! Morana told me – he breathes heavily, curving his lips and looking at her.

- Luka, for heaven's sake... - I'm disgusted by the fact that he was with her – Luka, where have you been all this time?! – I ask angrily.

- It doesn't matter – he slaps me so hard, I black out and fall to the ground with my head pounding.

The buzzing in my head feels like my brain is being cut into pieces. Leaning on my arms, I slowly get up from the ground, wiping the blood and tears off my face against my shoulder. I have the feeling that everything around me is in slow motion. Every part of my body feels heavy and I barely move my limbs. I look at Luka again and see Morana caressing his cheek, smiling broadly. Looking down, he nods affirmatively and they both approach Veles who is still standing still at the very entrance to Svanevit's temple. Everything is dead silent. The shrieks of the Navi's and the sound of the howling wind are gone.

I look at Alec. At the end of his strength, he's still trying to free himself, his face one of a martyr. I scream in desire to help him. Stop them! I'm not sure how much time is left, but I know I must hurry. I must reach him. I must join him as his legacy. I struggle to stand up. My legs feel as if they're made of lead. I spur myself on, making myself move and step on the bridge. Although I hear nothing, I realize that everyone around me is laughing at my efforts to do something.

Luka approaches me and grabs my hand. He pulls me and lifts me off the ground. I can barely stand. He pulls me forward. Towards the cliff. Towards the bridge. He presses me against his body while I fight with all the strength I've got left to free myself from his grip.

I turn my head to the side in disgust because Morana is coming closer.

I feel the icy touch of dead lips kissing my cheek.

– Actually, Hazel, our deal is off! Kill her as soon as Jerovit dies! – she orders him calmly, without moving a single muscle in her face.

Lightning tears the sky and the thunder shakes the ground beneath our feet.

– It has begun! – Morana says as she approaches Veles. He looks like he's in some sort of trance, holding his hands up in the air.

Luka loosens his grip and I try to wriggle free. Once again I hear the thunder, followed by the blinding lightning that separates in two above our heads, causing the stones to collapse on both sides.

- Puprure - Luka gently pulls me in. – Listen to me carefully – he says in his soft, familiar voice. – We haven't got enough time.

Again, the thunder, followed by the lightning, this time forming three sharp rays, and causing strong wind to rise, carrying sand.

- At the sound of the fifth thunder, move towards Yar as fast as you can! I'll protect you with my body! They can't step on the bridge, so they'll try to shoot you – he says quickly.

A strong gust of wind shakes the bridge, blowing away a couple of boards.

I turn to Luka once again and recognize his sweet, kind look. The look that always soothed and comforted me, the look that cheered me up so many times and told me that he loved me.

His eyes fill with tears.

- Purple, you know that better than anyone... I made many mistakes. But this time... I really screwed up this time... fuck! – he says quietly.

The ground is shaking again. Through the howling wind, I hear Morana telling him to return right away.

– I'll make it! I can reach him! Everything will be all right! – my lips shiver as I try to smile.

–No, it won't. At least for me it won't – he says calmly and puts his hands on my face. – Go to him and try to tell him... - a terrific bang cuts the sky with four sharp rays. –

Purple, tell him that you're not the only legacy! – he says quickly, trying to outvoice the deafening noise of the tumbling rocks and howling wind.

The sky begins to descend and everything around us goes dark. The wind feels like a whip on our faces. Pushing me away, he leans against the bridge that shakes more and more with every new gust of wind. Arrows coming from behind him thrust into his leg and shoulder. His face is paralyzed with pain as he reaches out and pulls out one of the arrows. I hold onto the thick rope as tight as I can.

- Purer legacy than you! – he cries out in pain and arches his back as a new set of arrows pierce his body. – He must know that, so he could direct that energy towards him... Yar will know...

Shaking, he reaches out for my hand, pulling it closer to his lips. He gives it a bloody kiss mixed with tears. He chokes as another arrow hits his neck. Gasping for air, he pulls out the arrow and shows me with his hand that I must go right away.

- Who?! – I clumsily walk backwards and ask him in a weepy voice:

- Who? Where is... the legacy?

He gives me his beautiful boyish smile. With his soft lips and white teeth. He blinks with his long eyelashes, as if he's winking. As if he's saying goodbye.

- God-given! – he yells and spreads out his arms as he turns around and faces the temple.

He tilts his head back as a rain of arrows thrusts into his chest. He falls with a thud, right in front of my feet.

I scream desperately. I bend over, wailing, falling onto my knees and grabbing his still warm hand, trying to pull him closer. I try as hard as I can, but I can't make him move an inch. He's too heavy. I look in front of me. Veles is still in trance, with his hands raised, while Morana and the Navi's are slowly getting closer.

I know that they can't step on the bridge, but the stretched bows and arrows tell me that I must hurry. I try to pull Luka closer again. I can't, I won't leave him! Crying uncontrollably, I manage to pull him a few steps forward, after which I fall on my back. The pain that tears my heart and soul apart as I realize I have to give up and leave him, makes me cry even harder. I kneel next to his head, holding his head tight. I swing back and forth, stroking his hair, caressing his face. I somehow make myself let go of him gently and I cry as I close his eyes. I let the eyelids cover his dead eyes, still glistening with their amber beauty. I kiss both eyes for the last time.

- I will always love you – I whisper before I stand up and go running across the bridge, towards Alec.

The crack in the sky following the fifth thunder pushes me forward. Although my chest hits the boards, the gust of wind shakes the bridge, and my body slides to the side. I hold onto the rope hanging from the place where the board once was. I hang for a couple of seconds, trying to pull myself together. I realize that my body is too heavy for my arms and that I can't hold on much longer. A sudden blow of wind makes me swing and I loosen my grip in pain. Shiver goes down my spine when two arrows fly right next to me. I take a deep breath. I frown and gather all my strength, screaming with pain caused by the rope cutting my palms, and I manage to lift myself up onto the bridge. I breathe heavily and stand up somehow. I realize I'm in the middle of the bridge. I look at Alec and he raises his head. Above his right temple is a deep wound with gushing blood closing his eye. From the nose, across his cheek, up to his ear, there's a deep cut. I'm convinced he's trying to smile at me, but the terrific bang of the sixth thunder shakes us both.

One ray of the lightning hits the bridge and sets it on fire. Carried by the wind, the flame spreads quickly, stinging my eyes with heavy smoke, making me stick my face into my shoulder. Behind my back, I hear Morana's hysterical laughter and I look up, trying to see Alec through the thick gray smoke. I blink rapidly, feeling my eyes burn and I try to sharpen my vision and realize that his look is dull and blank as his eyes fill with lifeless dark, just like Veles's and Morana's.

- Noooo! – I shout as I let go of the ropes. I ignore the wind, the smell of fire, and the fiery arrows coming my way, and I run towards him as fast as I can.

- God-given! – I shout at the top of my lungs, although I'm not sure why.

I stumble and shout again:

- There's pure legacy! – I don't know why I'm shouting this, I just know I have to.

I feel I'm losing ground beneath my feet as the bridge begins to crack. I'm only a couple of steps away from him. I grab the edge of the bridge again as it shakes violently and everything around us goes tumbling down with deafening noise.

He no longer pays attention to me or anything around him.

– Please! I weep.

Feeling the heat of the flame behind my back, I know it's a matter of seconds before the bridge falls apart.

- Please, look at me! Please, it's not over yet! There's legacy! – I repeat feverishly. –God-given!

- Please, my love – I sob as I let go, stepping forward as I reach out for him.

The toes of my right foot touch the soft sky of Jav as he, still looking blankly into the distance, raises his shaky hand towards me.

Our fingertips touch for a second before the sky above us opens up, raging in blinding rays. Just a blink before his life flashed before his eyes, just a breath before I smiled at him sadly, I realize what Luka was trying to say.

- God-given... - I whisper as the massive explosion throws me away from him and into the abyss.

I fall softly through the clouds. Everything around me is dead quiet. I sink into the darkness. It is hot and damp. A sad tune rings in my head. He kisses me to the music, longingly, as if he'll never kiss me again. He touches me with lust, as if it's the last time we touch. He feels my fear and begs me to trust him. He loves me as if he's known me my entire life. He looks at me with his clear gray eyes, filled with pure, sincere glow. He's got a tattoo of a sun with an eight-ray *swastika* surrounded by oak leaves, reddish hair and deep, soft voice. He fills me with his scent of purpure and spring.

Beyla means god-given... - I whisper sadly, just before her ringing voice sends me off into the darkness.

Beyla, just like him, smells like spring...

ARKONA PURPURE

The trilogy

Book one : The Scent of Legacy

By Drina Steinebrg



Would you dare to explore the secret the origin
of our blood holds?