

# **Nightwalker**

the story of a renaissance  
(working title)

## **Part One: St Agnes And the Bear**

(working title)

*(first draft, before completion&review, version 2.1*

*changes since 2.0: chapters 2 and 3 completely rewritten, intro added, foreword changed into afterword,  
placed at the end and rewritten)*

by Matt Horinek



*Barren rocks and sand, our wooden sculpture hands  
Held like a timber hitch, held candles to the sun  
Both faint and fading fast, they walked on,  
windward, kept time with a pocketmouse  
Mouths kept mostly shut*

author known

*Alright then, sit down and listen. Do you know, if you look at my face, there's nothing? Like you pressed it in clay - here, that's my face. And you won't see beneath my skin, 'cause I won't let you cut me up. But when you hear my story, my face will change. This here, darker red, and deeper shadows, over here. And you're gonna feel all chilly. And you know why? It's because morning will turn to noon, and noon will turn to night, and the night brings long, long shadows, and numbness in your feet, and it turns dark red, and then just dark, and then you'll know it's time for bed.*

author unknown

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## Fireflies

It's been two years now. Or, the way she sees it - two firefly seasons ago. Because that's what she remembers. After the world had died, and the gunshots went quiet, and the smoke disappeared, and the murder parties left, and mother and Niki took off - one of the few last remnants of life in the big city - all the fireflies came out that night.

And to Niki, it felt like they're moving to a new dimension, or universe. An afterlife or something. Two backpacks, two pairs of walking shoes, or the closest thing to it. Two blankets. Leaving the stench behind, its sources now invisible in the darkness: rotting bodies, blocked sewers, heaps of food that went off thrown out on the patios. Walking out in the open country, pitch black just like the city, but it smelt fresh, with rebirth and life, and all the way up to the horizon, it was covered with fireflies.

They must have been like guiding lights or something, Niki thought, because around that time, she got a dream that kept coming back, and an urge to go north. She had to go north. She just had to. But the thing with fireflies is, they don't guide you anywhere. They just fly like mad bullets in slow motion, in curves and circles, and then they fall in the grass. And, for months and seasons since that night, mother and Niki were just like fireflies. Until, well, until Volkov happened.

## Chapter One

*in which good fortune is earned and a cat receives dinner.*

Edward Willoughby Jr. was lying on a wooden floor, looking at the ceiling above him. Unlike the walls, which were white, the ceiling was painted dark blue, and Willoughby remembered a similar ceiling he saw in a magazine once, taken at the home of a provincial jazz composer, somewhere in a forgotten country in the heart of a distant continent. Willoughby cherished the memory; back then, he was a child of maybe eleven, and before he was swayed by other interests, his eponymous father bought him a guitar, a semi-hollow Gibson 335, and young Edward dreamt of becoming a famous blues guitarist one day. Looking at the magazine page, he would imagine that's how you play the "blue" notes - by looking at the blue ceiling above. He was never allowed to paint his ceiling blue, and when he finally could, the idea had long been forgotten, until now.

The floor he was lying on was made of solid pine and oiled, not varnished, so it was warm to the touch, and the warmth was aided by a couple of table legs burning in the fireplace nearby. Somehow, Edward Willoughby's memories take a similar pattern now; touching the floor, he remembers he always wanted a simple floor made of pine, it was his late wife who insisted on varnished oak - a more stylish option, and twice as expensive. The walls, on the other hand, remind him of his childhood again, and the winters spent at a secluded chalet in the mountains. Many years into the marriage, he desperately wished he had a time machine, and was transported somewhere into the past, before wallpaper was invented and, sadly as it were, before his wife became a woman.

It could be said, with very little exaggeration, that the room looked like a compilation of his childhood dreams. A place you want to spend your life in, and die in, peacefully. However, Edward Willoughby Jr. was not lying on the floor because he wanted to rest, or dream of his past. He was lying on the floor because there was a gaping hole in his left leg, a few inches above the knee. Suffered when the leg collided with the head of a makeshift spear. Now, a few days after the unfortunate incident, the skin around the wound had turned black and the edges of the hole felt numb to the touch. Willoughby thought maybe this was a good sign. This, and the sweating and the fever - perhaps it meant his body was fighting the infection.

The attackers hadn't bothered to finish him off, once they found out he was not carrying anything of use, and he had discovered this deserted house by accident, having crawled and limped down the gravel road for a mile or so. There was plenty of rainwater in the tank in the garden, and there were even some turnips on the surrounding patches, still defiant against the onslaught of weeds. If only he had some pills against the fever, and something to treat and dress the wound with. And maybe some more table legs, to feed the fire.

Willoughby starts when the door creaks. A flashlight beam flickers across the room.

"Hello? Here, I'm... Could you help me? Sir, madam?"

Perhaps, this is another of his lucky chances. A figure jumps in, and holding the flashlight like a weapon, he quickly checks all the corners of the room. It is a he - the dying light of the fireplace illuminates a beard and a swathe of greying hair. An olive-colored raincoat, and heavy boots, held in one piece by a length of antenna wire.

"Sir, I'm wounded. I need some antibod...antibiotics, or anything really, just to..."

The figure draws near, takes his backpack off one shoulder and starts fishing in it.

"Good lord, thank..."

The next thing that happened was also the last thing he was ever going to feel. The sensation of a heavy boot, colliding with his skull. Edward Willoughby Jr. lost consciousness almost immediately, and the last flicker of an image that his mind registered was the blue ceiling, one that makes you play blue notes when you look at it.

The set of false teeth, one he had procured from the corpse of an elderly lady, became loose as a result of the impact - they never really fit, anyway. Travelling deeper into his mouth, they blocked his windpipe. His lungs made a few futile attempts to draw air and then stopped.

It may have been an act of mercy. There was the man's leg, half black and eaten by sepsis. His sweaty forehead, the hallucinating stare. The trippy language that went back to a time when people still asked for things. God knows what went on inside his head. He had maybe hours to live, and they wouldn't be pretty. Mercy, a cute excuse. But no -- Volkov just needed the corpse to shut up. He had to search the place, fast,

no distractions. Niki's outside, alone, tied to a fence pole. He never took her inside the houses. An image is worth a thousand words and sometimes, a few words are enough.

When he's out, he unties her and they go on walking along the gravel road. Niki has a collar around her neck, one that used to guard a bicycle against thieves, in an era when bicycles were still a thing. The core wire is covered with a sturdy rubber sheath, and its two ends meet in a combination lock. There are ten thousand possible combinations, so whatever it is that Niki tries to do all day long - good luck with that. Volkov attached a thin metal chain to the exposed end of the wire, and it runs for a good ten feet, with the other end tied to his belt. The bottom of the chain clinks on the gravel, like dull, voiceless wind chimes.

Just before they've reached the forest, Niki suddenly trips and lands on all fours, breathing heavily. Volkov comes to check on her, and when he's level with her legs, she springs sideways. Something flashes in her hand as she flies past and aims at Volkov's neck. A pocket knife. He intercepts her arm and she quickly pulls it back. Falling on her side, she curls up and jumps again. This time, there's no slashing movement. Flying head first, arms close to her chest, she swings the knife at the last moment, now from her left hand, stabbing at his torso. Volkov makes a clumsy move sideways, losing some balance, and the blade rips a few threads from his jacket. A short push to the back of Niki's head, and she hits the ground, forehead first. Blood drips on the limestone, and she doesn't jump again. Instead, she growls and screams and stabs into the gravel. She gets tired much later than Volkov does.

"Too slow," he shouts above the sounds. "Good thing with the left hand." And then: "Get up."

Half the slope is a mature forest, with no undergrowth, but then there's a large clearing surrounded by brambles and a tall rock in the back.

He ties the end of the chain around the trunk of a dying tree, sprawled against the rock, and fastens it with a padlock, not taking his eyes off her for a single moment. Then he instructs her to lie down on her back, feet first, stretching the chain.

Man, she hates this part. Every time. As she lies down, the chain and her body have to form a line.

"Woof," she whispers, to herself. Volkov places his backpack a bit further away from her feet, marking the spot where he's going to make a fire.

"We're set," he says and goes off to get some firewood.

Niki watched his every move. They were precise, lightning fast. A bundle of branches, brought in no time. Stones arranged in a circle. A bunch of dry grass, slender sticks all around it. Thicker branches on top. A forking pole next to the fire, buried in the ground, a live, thick sapling placed in the fork, held down by stones on one end. The cooking pot on the other. Opening the backpack with a single, measured snap. Two fingers. She watches him, fascinated, like an eagle is fascinated with his prey, the short, hopping moves of a rabbit down below. Niki is the eagle, and it's up to her to find the right moment, to plummet and strike.

She does all that while reading a book. She's pulled it from beneath her jacket, and it's the first time Volkov has seen this.

"What you reading?"

"Not talking to you."

He's now walking around the clearing. Six tall tent pegs, a couple yards apart, pressed into the soil and then hammered in with a stone.

"There's dinner. You better be talking." Volkov never knew how to handle kids, but he was learning fast. Back in the center of the clearing now, he reaches into his backpack and takes out a ball of fishing line. And the squeaker.

Niki gives him that look, of ultimate disdain. She hasn't mastered it yet, but she's trying.

"It's about Eve. And St Agnes. By..." She turns the cover to learn the name again. "John Keats."

"Uh-uh. Show me." She recoils from him, holding up the book like a reliquary.

"It's my book of spells. One more inch, and I turn you to stone."

"Stone, you say," Volkov says with a laugh.

"Yes, or a toad."

"Go ahead then. Turn me to stone."

"Later."

He's now stretching the fishing line between the sticks, in a kind of semi-circle, with the squeaker at the far end. He called it the squeaker, because it squeaked. It was a kid's toy he'd found in one of the houses, a few weeks back. When you pulled it apart, it made this annoying, high-pitched noise.

"This a good place to sleep. Why." Niki can sense a test question, and her mind starts racing. Test questions were their meeting ground. She'd hate to admit it, but they were useful, in a way.

"The bushes," she says after a while. "They make a noise when someone's coming through."

"Nah. You make more noise than the bushes. And we've got the squeaker for that. Try again." Man, was she dumb. Of course, the squeaker. Volkov made her train him for it, a couple weeks back. She was supposed to pull it apart whenever he fell asleep. She kind of enjoyed that. So now, he was like a mother who can hear her child cry at the far end of the hall, above all the sounds in the house. Maybe Volkov told her that, but she can't remember.

"It's...the fire." she says at last. "The bushes hide the fire. Noone can see us."

"Good." Volkov has now lit the fire, put some water in the pot and thrown in half a bag of chickpeas.

"So, what are they doing. Right now." He nods to her book.

"It's Madeleine. She's getting undressed. I think."

"Why. You think." Was that another test question? Whatever it was, Niki's mind is on it.

"She...I think she has a warm sleeping bag."

"Yeah." Volkov chuckles. "Sure she does. What if she got in, all clothes on."

"She'd get all sweaty and freeze in the morning."

"Good."

"What's for dinner?" She glances at the pot. "Chickpeas with...chickpeas?" Their last meal was last night, and between that and now, there was just tree resin, the almighty forest chewing gum.

"Actually..."

A meat can lands at her feet. She holds it in her hands, like an offering. From beneath Volkov's backpack, Tabby meows with anticipation.

"Where'd you get it?"

"Fake chimney door. Next to the fireplace. And some bandages, antibiotics and...stuff. Poor dying fucker wasn't smart enough to find it." Also, there was an old couple upstairs who kicked the bucket together. They swallowed a bottle of pills each and then cuddled up in bed, like lovers on a honeymoon. So now they are reduced to rotten half-skeletons, drifting apart as their tissues shrink. There was a time, not long ago, when an image like this came in a Niki-friendly version, with guiding fireflies, good elves, and a unicorn shitting a rainbow. He tried that only once. She inspects the writing on the meat can, done in felt tip pen.

"Go in peace?" she says. That's what's written on the can.

"You leave something behind before you die," Volkov says, stirring the chickpeas in the pot with a branch.

"And you hide it."

"Like you're still one foot among the living."

"A ghost."

"Yes, like a ghost."

When the can is opened, they feed Tabby first. Tabby is a test cat. This is how you make a test cat: catch a feral cat, cut off its hind legs and tie a long enough piece of cloth around its neck. This way, it won't run away or scratch you and when you attach it to your backpack, it will always shit and piss downwards. You need a test cat so your food doesn't kill you, or make you shit your insides out. And so they feed Tabby a spoonful from the can and then watch him for much longer than Niki feels necessary. There is no meowing, no spasms, and Tabby seems content, by test cat standards. After an eternity, Volkov hands Niki a spoon and empties half the can into a plastic bowl, adding boiled chickpeas on top. If he went by size or weight, she would get a quarter. If he knew, and went by all those inside her, she'd get everything. A quarter for the rage she needs to feed, a quarter for the lethargy she must nourish into slumber. A quarter for the journey north, whose picture in her head needs fresh, bright colors. A quarter for her will and patience, a pair of weaklings. No quarter left for sleep, her greatest enemy. No quarter left for Niki's ghosts.

## Chapter Two

*which talks of those who walk while you sleep, and gives an anatomy of ghosts. Also, the night makes a brief appearance.*

Yeah, sure. Like she's gonna stay when he says stay. So, she's climbing the face of the rock above the camp. Of course she figured out the bicycle lock, many days back. And not just that. She can sense the changes in his breathing. Slow, and the chest rising higher, that means deep sleep. Shallow, fast - that's light sleep. She always waits for the deep sleep.

At night, the eagle can plummet and strike, but she never does. It would be so easy to put out that spark called Volkov. Knives or rocks, they plummet, just like that. It's called gravity. And all she needs is the weight of her body to go with it. Perhaps, she just likes to watch him sleep, defenseless, as she's standing above him, a knife in her hand. Maybe, she's never killed in cold blood. Perhaps, she's tuned in with his rhythm, his urgency, and in some way, he's the spark and she's the kindling; like they've made some kind of twisted pact. And then again, maybe she's just a dog on a leash by day, nightwalker after sunset, her blood boiling with a mock rebellion but content, after all. Or she's a chicken.

Yeah, no - she brushes the idea away. Chickens don't climb rocks when it's new moon. When she could slip and fall, break her neck and reveal she'd cracked the code - in that order. All this time, the two years after the end of the world, the night was hers. The day wasn't. And then, when Volkov happened, days and days back, she got a real chain around her neck, but in a way, it's always been there. People don't sleep in the day, or not much, anyway - so they've got all the time in the world to tell her what to do. Her mother. Eddie. Nathan. Even Pig - but Pig was scared of her. And even when they don't talk, they just scheme, quietly. Waiting for her to do something stupid, so they could tell her not to do that. She much preferred people when they were asleep.

For almost everyone else, it was the other way round. They couldn't stand Niki when she was asleep. As soon as she dozed off, hordes of fantastic creatures came to life inside her, screeching, croaking and wailing through her breath. She couldn't stand it either, so she always woke up, but not before one and the same dream played in her head. Doze off - screech - repeat. The two years made her who she was: a sleepless thing. A sicko. A nightwalker.

As she keeps climbing, there is not a single light that would illuminate her path. A dense, starless sky above, the promise of rain. Many yards below, fireflies scattered on the grass, or flying low. In the pitch black, there is no sense of distance or perspective, and it looks like a clear night sky opened up below Niki; a vibrant one, and ever-changing.

This part of the climb is easy, by her standards. She's got the image of the rock in her head, but now she only relies on her sense of touch. Two solid points - one foot, one hand. The other two assay the surface within their reach. Tenderly at first, like a new territory of skin, then some more pressure in a promising spot. Other nights, she'd walk further away, but now, she's right above the clearing. She can't let a single pebble fall off the rock. A large stone - maybe. She'd kinda enjoy that.

Niki wasn't special; not in any way she had discovered, or liked, or enjoyed. In fact, after the end of the world, many people went down with the nightwalker sickness, just like her. Or that's what she heard anyway. Yeah, so much stuff you get to hear. Nightwalkers are possessed. They scratch your eyes out when you sleep. By day one way, by night another. With moonlight, they turn into wolves. Hyenas. Jaguars, as big as a barn. Giant spiders with five eyes. Other animals that never existed. Screeching, croaking. Wailing, like the autumn wind in the pastures. Sneaking into your home. Invisible, dead quiet, just a little scratch on the doorframe. They'll eat your guts out, but the children always come first. Babies for dessert.

Hang a boulder round their neck, throw them in a lake and still they'd float. And when you tie them up and drench them in kerosene, they're a pain to burn down. Sure, Niki thought. She saw the last one alright. There were two things she, herself, believed. Just two. One, if she goes on like this, she'll become a lifeless thing. Like a zombie. That's what some people called them anyway, or that last stage or whatever. And the second thing, all nightwalkers gotta share the same dream that's coming back. They just have to. Why else would they all want to travel north, like her, and talk about the dead sea, and a mountain in the middle? She, Niki, she's never seen the sea. Dead or otherwise. Just in pictures, and later, in that dream. There was

a color with a name, which she forgot. Acure, or amber, or something. Kind of blue. That was the sea in pictures. But in her dream, it was grey. A thick kind of grey.

Volkov once said, or maybe he didn't, 'cause she can't remember, he said if one person believes in bullshit, it's just madness, but if many people believe the same shit, it's religion. If he really said that, then she kept her mouth shut, and quietly disagreed. It's madness all the same, she thought.

And also, she thought, she wasn't reli-gulous, but she was definitely going mad. Because, well, as a kid, she had to do all sorts of things, but she, herself, she didn't really feel like she had to. And now, she's got to go north. It's the second firefly season she's had to go north, and it's just getting worse. She'd never, ever keep a mirror splinter, or a pocket mirror. And she'd seen plenty, long before Volkov, as they went through abandoned houses. But if she kept them, and that's the third thing she believed, if she kept them, each of those splinters would show a different girl. The first splinter girl, her eyes were a shade of blue, a bit lighter than the sea in the pictures. The last one, her eyes were grey, like the dead sea. The first one, dirty blonde, the hair curling up at the tips, just around the shoulders. The last one, hardly blonde, just dirty, with hair all over the place. The first one, a full, round face, and a small nose that even Niki, a natural born hater of all things cute, would call just that. The last splinter girl, with cheeks caved in, baggy-eyed, her skin yellowish and coarse to the touch. Covered in smudges, and then little scars and cuts here and there, where a mischievous thorny branch sank its claws in. Whenever the two splinter girls met, in Niki's imagination, the first one screamed in horror.

And now, the real Niki takes her free hand off the rock and brushes through the mess of her hair, chasing out a bunch of spruce needles and wayward ants. They'd wash every few days, or whenever there was a settlement ahead. Volkov would tie her chain to a tree next to a stream, instruct her to wash everywhere, especially there and there, and then walk away. She'd always hate the cold water, taking it step by step, but she was one with the purpose of the procedure. Niki's got to look like a girl of fourteen, pretty and clean in all the right places. That was their niche in the market, Volkov said, or maybe he didn't, but she understood the concept, even though she had no idea what niche or market were. She kinda started the market, or the niche. And so, Niki has a price, and for Niki, they get the stuff they really need. Filtration tablets = one week without diarrhea. Geiger meter (for two Nikis) = no more radio-active water. Two liters of schnaps (also for two Nikis) = disinfection. Suuure. On her first go, Volkov got the thing. Now, he's a real opponent. He could cut Niki down.

*It's the...real deal, he said*, Niki thought as she stuck her hand in a crevasse and pulled herself up. *Like, for a frigging samurai. It's made of, what is it? Laquered.*

*Layered*, the night said.

*Layered. Layered steel*, Niki thought. And, he doesn't hold it like a spoon. He can actually fight. Every morning, Niki saw him do a *kata*. Which to her, really, was like a drunken dance. Volkov, cutting off imaginary heads, splitting open imaginary guts. Yeah yeah. Even she had to admit it at some point. It wasn't a dance at all. His moves were robotic, measured, fast.

*A formidable opponent*, she thought.

*Just don't*, the night said, with a smile. Yeah, sure. The confrontation was already in her head, playing in a loop. Volkov with a katana, her, with a branch. Or something like that. Funny she remembered Nathan now, who could really just wield a shovel. And he sucked at it. Or Eddie, earlier. The truck driver without a truck. Sure, he could hunt and trap rabbits, so he wasn't just all talk. But man, that talk was worse than anything. To him, mother was a can of salt that never runs out, and he knew all about everything, so, sure, he had an opinion about people who cry in their sleep and what to do to them, and so one morning, mother took Niki and they were gone; the trailer vanishing in a quiet, fluffy snowfall, and then came Nathan, with his two sons, who Niki called Pig and Weepy; and by that time, everyone was an empty can of salt, so they wouldn't protest her screaming at night, whenever she stayed in camp and dozed off by the fire. They just growled. She had to wear her hood pressed against her lips and pulled over her eyes, whenever they went through a settlement, because other people could get all sorts of ideas, and they didn't just growl. And Volkov, she remembered just now: man, he was sure as hell past growling. At night, he'd just stick a bunch of straw in his ear, and then turn around on his mattress, so his other ear was buried in his sleeping bag. He never bothered to make a sound.

If she ever liked a single thing about Volkov, it would have to be this one. He could suffer in silence. And she hoped that one day, she will also be able to suffer in silence. There was something cool about it. She didn't know what, or why, but in some totally mysterious way, it was cool.

Here comes a part Niki memorized when she observed the rock in daylight. There's a ledge she needs to climb onto, then cling to the rock, take three steps - no, three and a half - to the left, and then jump. If she gets it right, she lands on top of a boulder a few feet below. She'd hoped that the sky would clear out a little, so that she could see the contours of the rock underneath, but it didn't. So now, it's pitch black, and only three things remind her of existence: the dry face of the rock, still warm from the August sun, the firefly sky below, and the air she draws in her lungs.

She heaves her body onto the ledge, slips her left hand into a crack and swings around it. As her backside hits the rock, she's trying to find balance with her feet, hanging on that one arm. A puff of gravel flies off the edge and Niki curses, quietly. And then she finds her footing and stands up, cautiously. Both her hands are free now, smearing the rock with her cold sweat. Three steps to the left, or Niki's right. Three. And a half. She leans forward, ready to jump.

*I wouldn't do that*, the night says. Niki leans back, closes her eyes. Recalls that memory again. It's got to be right. It's got to. She bends her knees, finding herself on the edge of balance.

*Don't*, the night says. *One step to the right*. Niki's breathing heavily. And then, she straightens out her knees and moves further along the ledge.

*One more*, the night says. *And jump*.

Niki understands perspective. Somehow. In her own, wordless way of understanding. And still, she makes mistakes. So, what looked like three steps from down below was actually more like five. And she suddenly knew that, in the back of her head, the moment she half jumped, half fell into the pitch black.

*Now, that was a leap of faith*, the night says with a smile. Niki's lying on top of the boulder, curled up, drawing shallow breaths. Utterly amazed, at having sur... No! Blood boils in her veins now, fuelled by adrenaline. Raging, against herself. No, not having survived - that's not survival, that's stupidity! Survival, that's Volkov's six Ss. The six fundaments. Salt, shelter, safety. Socks, spirits, star. Yeah, that makes sense, at least. Not this, her, jumping off a frigging rock. Man, is she dumb.

*What are the last three?* the night inquires.

*You testing me now?* Niki snaps at her, still angry with herself.

*No.*

*Alright... Uhm, socks, that's like, dry socks. Keep your feet dry. Then spirits, like, be happy. Op-timistic. Man, I bet he can just snap his fingers and do that. And then, the north star. Because, well, we're going north.*

*Okay.*

When Niki calms down, she stands up and takes off her clothes. The dwarven army issue jacket, the sweat-marked shirt, the torn trousers. She hasn't worn panties in years. And this is how you meet the night; in the pitch black, it feels dense, tangible. You **feel** it with every square inch of your body. And then you spread out your arms, and that's when you two embrace each other.

Niki knew her ghosts would arrive, any moment now. First as tiny clouds of fog, somewhere at the edges of her vision, and then they'd grow larger, and materialize into two shapes: the twins. She'd much rather call them shadows, because on a bad day, that's what she thinks they really are. But, well, they do look like ghosts, after all.

What is a ghost, really? Niki contemplates the question, watching the two as they crouch in thin air, arms on their knees, **watching** her. Just creatures made of fog, **really**. And their limbs, they don't move, they regroup, like flocks of birds, but here, the birds must be tiny droplets of water. And when they pull a face, it's the droplets again, regrouping. But how do they talk? There must be something inside them, like, this fog condensed into real solid matter, like a clockwork mechanism, with the parts rubbing against each other, and it makes sounds. Man, it's real hard to describe a ghost, she thought. And, what's even more strange: when she closes her eyes, they're still there, like they could penetrate her eyelids. She's got to wait until daybreak. Climbing down is much harder; no way she's doing that now.

## Chapter Three

*in which some things are fixed, other things are broken and a cure is found. Also, a short recipe for blood pudding is revealed.*

Salt: they got salt plenty. Shelter: they don't need it now. Safety: yeah, they're safe alright. The wire, the squeaker, and Volkov, who's always super cautious when choosing a campsite. Dry socks: check. Good spirits: nah, not really. North star: invisible through the clouds.

Niki pokes in the ashes with a long stick. It's morning and she'd climbed down and put her collar on, good dog like. When Volkov wakes up, he murmurs a syllable, that's like, good morning, and goes off to get some firewood, then rekindles the fire, cleans the pot with a bunch of dry grass, pours in some water from a crumpled plastic bottle, sets it above the fire and throws in half a handful of dried mint leaves. Breakfast.

For Niki, every morning is worse than the previous one. Back with mother, and both Eddie and Nathan, time was lazy, they moved slowly or not at all, and she'd doze off many times during the day and then at night, a couple minutes at a time. But now, since Volkov happened, there's a weird tremor running through her body and it won't go away. Makes her all restless. Keeps her awake. And as she's sitting at the campfire now, with every breath that leaves her body, she falls into limbo. Limbo - that's her word. Or maybe it's not.

And so she doesn't notice Volkov's movements. Breathe in - Volkov's making tea. Breathe out - limbo. Breathe in - Volkov's dragging her by the collar to a nearby boulder.

Niki screams. The shock kicked her mind out of her body, so now it feels like someone's screaming in the distance. Volkov presses himself onto her, weighs her down. Pushes her head against the rock. In the corner of her eye, she sees a big stone in his right hand. Big as a fucking mountain. She's lost her voice.

Volkov pauses. "Hold still. Problem with the lock." And the stone comes crushing down, somewhere behind her head. A dull, metallic sound. Volkov stands up, observing his work.

"Problem solved," he says.

Niki jumps away, nearly breaking her neck as the chain stretches. She fumbles around it, finding the combination lock. Two dials are bent in, locked in one position forever.

"Wha...what did you do?" she croaks.

He tosses the stone across the clearing and walks towards the campfire. "You climb rocks at night," he murmurs over his back. "You could die. Now you won't climb rocks at night."

Niki's eyes widen. "How..." she coughs. "How do i get it off? Hey! How do I get it off? You piece of shit!" It's a war cry now, and a pebble nearly misses Volkov's head. Another one, and he deflects it with his arm. Walking towards Niki, in long strides, he wriggles a third stone from her clenched fist.

"Let...go!"

"You don't do that," he says. "If you do that, you hurt."

As he turns around and walks across the clearing, he half expects another stone to home in on his back, but it never does.

Later, they continue through the forest, tall spruce, loads of shade. After some time, she needs to rest. Breathe in, breathe out. Just a short respite on a grassy slope. There's an ant, running along Niki's trouser hose, confused. Meets with an equally confused spider, half way. They pass each other, like invisible beings. The ant has no carnal interest in the spider, and the favor is returned.

Volkov appears behing her back. "In my country, if something doesn't work, we hit it with a hammer." That was probably his attempt at a joke.

"Fuck you."

As they cross the ridge, they find themselves in a long, slender valley, and they spend much of the day walking along a thin, winding asphalt road lined with beeches and lime trees. In the two years, some trunks have fallen across the road, which is now covered with leaves, dry grass and a fine layer of compost. Still, the meandering clearing shows you where the road once was, and they feel the asphalt beneath their feet. Once in a long while, there's a car. Some windows are broken in and the paint is dusty, but it still shines when Niki runs her fingers across.

"Ten thousand," Volkov says around noon. They've walked in silence, him observing both hillsides for any sign of danger. Murmuring to himself, nodding his head. Niki, dragging her feet.

"There were ten thousand combinations on the lock."

"It was broken. The lock was broken, it just went off," Niki whispers.

"No, it didn't. You cracked the code. I'm not crossing the mountains before you tell me how you cracked the code." The air is dense and wet, and the bird song sounds the same, ever the same, just like in his childhood years back in Rostov.

"Maybe you counted and turned the dials," he says after a while. Niki's just quiet.

"But not during the day," Volkov continues. "I watched you. Turn the dials. During the day. You have no system. You don't touch the numbers. You just mess around."

Niki doesn't make a sound. "But in the night, you could do it." Very slowly, Volkov is making a point. "Two weeks. Maybe ten days. If you don't sleep. Because you don't. You don't sleep at night. You don't sleep at all." And that is Volkov's conclusion. The only conclusion he could think of, based on solid evidence. Niki doesn't even look at him.

"It is not healthy," he says after a while. "You will sleep at night. I will make you."

"I can't, okay?" Niki snaps at him, her eyes fixed on the road. "I'm sick, alright?"

"I will make you."

All is good, Volkov thought. As long as she's on a leash. And there's a remedy for everything. He'd found one in a house, a couple days back. He'll make her. Nightwalkers - yeah, right. Zombies. Bunch of cultist crap. He'd seen many kids like her, long before this. Running around, scavenging in a war zone. Some got a limb torn off, but still they'd hop around and keep trying. Death was a landmine away, but laziness is bad for business. Nightwalkers my ass, he thought. Boogeyman shit. Her eyes could be grey, or violet, or whatever. He was never much into colors. And back in the war, all the kids cried in their sleep. Something was off if they didn't. Niki's got a sleep disorder, but he's seen much worse. And she wants to go north. So what. In this world, directions don't matter. North it is.

Just before dusk, the valley opened up into a gracious lowland to the left, while the other range continued further on their right. There was a village a few hundred yards away. Volkov threw Niki into the bushes, crouched and took out his small binoculars. Flared his nostrils. Smoke. Manure. And, he'd seen a few figures. Work clothes. Shoes with a low profile. No sign of marauder or military outfits. He pulled on the chain and waited for Niki to stop cursing as she crawled out. Placed his index finger against his lips.

"Villagers," he whispered. "We want food. For salt. No work. Just in and out."

At a piece of leaf-covered ground behind the bushes, he took out their most priced possession: a large cocoa can filled with salt. Carefully, he pried open the lid, then took out a smaller can and over one of the edges, he slowly poured some salt into it from the bigger can. And then, he fastened the lid again, making sure it sits tight. Every few days, on a hot afternoon, he'd dry all their salt, spread out on his jacket. Wet salt was bad for business. And then the smaller can, he needed that. Not a plastic bag, that would look poor and desperate. A neat little can, for it doesn't give people ideas. He'd always take it out in town, like a pearl box off a vanity table.

As they set out towards the village, Niki keeps cursing, in her head. And that cursing comes in waves. Breathe in, lift up her leg. Curse. Breathe out, step into an abyss. Limp. Repeat. The first being they meet on the edge of the settlement is a boy, maybe her age. She hisses at him, like she imagines a zombie would, and he runs away, white-faced. A charred corpse is impaled on the remnants of a telegraph post, along the main road. Volkov ignores it, but Niki doesn't - she's seen something like that before. Kind of. She'd felt like limpo was gonna take over all of her, but now, her breathing rhythm changes into a waltz. One: breathe in; two: breathe out; three: nightwalker. She rolls back her lips, drags her feet on the dusty road. Yeah. Maybe if they drench her in kerosene like the others, and light a match, maybe that's gonna keep her awake. Though she seriously doubts it. Someone said it's better to burn out than fade away. Or they didn't. Who cares, really.

Soon, a group of villagers appeared behind them, keeping up with their pace, and another one could be seen further down the road. With their pitchforks, rakes, scythes and shovels, they looked just like any other village folk, setting out to turn hay. Or something of that sort.

"I smell trouble," Volkov said and pulled Niki closer. Both groups maintained their distance now, but the boldest villagers steered much closer. One of them looked directly in Niki's eyes, then scuttered away and from a safe spot, he shouted for everyone to hear:

"We've got another one!" And with that, the menacing silence was gone. Like everyone took a sigh of relief, happy they needn't keep pretending they're just wandering around with a farm tool on their shoulder for no reason.

"My goodness, another zombie?" a woman exhaled, almost jubilant.

"The kid! It's the kid!" the informer said, moving to a yet safer spot down the road.

"Man, do they spawn or what?"

"End of the road, kiddo."

It seemed like suddenly everyone had the courage to curse and spit and say nightwalker. And somehow, for a very short moment, Volkov imagined he would appease the crowd by talking, an idea enhanced by his living memory of Niki in other towns and settlements, cute and clean in all the right places. And thus, he made a short-lived attempt at diplomacy.

"Fuck off," he said. Some word combinations were better than others. "She's not a...whatever. Just tired. We're on the road."

"Course she is."

"Yeah, sure."

"Look at her eyes."

"Where's he going? Get away from her!"

And then at some point, there's really just one thing you do, in the face of religion, madness or both. Run.

Before Liliana stepped out of the door, she turned around one more time. She'd always do that. The thick walls of her house were made of stone, which turned the inside into an oasis of coolness on the hottest days of the year. Like a natural refrigerator, Liliana thought. Like a cave. And the tiny windows, they let in just a slither of sunlight, and all the sounds and voices outside felt like from another world. So when she opened the door, the world came in, scorching, immediate, with the sounds amplified and the heat wave hitting her all across her body, and she turned her back towards it, like when you're face to face with a forest fire.

In the far corner of the room, a bed covered with a heap of blankets. She squinted her eyes. They were still moving up and down, slightly. More to the center, close to the stove, a smaller bed.

"You're not asleep," Liliana said, and Tomi's head popped up from beneath the blankets. There's no way she could tell, just by looking at the bed, but mothers have a knack for those things. Tomi looked at her, noticing the axe in her hand.

"Mum."

"What, sweetie?"

"Bite it back. When it bites you." And, exposing two rows of white teeth, she clicked them. Once, twice. Lilana smiled.

"Sure I will. Get some sleep."

A couple days back, one of those nightwaker things came to their door begging for food, and Lilana's man took it upon himself to wrestle it away, with his bare hands. The thing bit into his neck and wouldn't let go, until Lilana smashed its head in with a shovel. The villagers burnt the body at an old telegraph post and her man went off to work in the fields, ignoring the wound. And now, a grave's already been dug for him.

It wasn't his impeding death that worried Liliana. It's what would come after. He was still breathing and already, men in the village would wink at her, look her over. Soon, the nighttime visits will come, wanted or not. That's how it works around here. If she fights back, it just hurts more. And if she fights to kill, she's done for. Noone kills a man who brings deer from the forest, and fells trees to keep the people warm in winter.

Liliana clutched her axe, nodded to Tomi and went out. She'll be the first to cut the thing down. And then, she'll hang the axe on her door, dried blood and all. The men won't just come in. They'll knock.

Volkov shot into a side street, dragging Niki behind him. Now, she's the closest you can get to a shopping trolley. Not really a burden, but not a running partner either. She waltzes behind him like a drunk or a sleepy kid who's lost all sense of direction. Meanwhile, an old man has blocked their path, holding up a weathered pitchfork. A moment later, he collapses into a picket fence. And Volkov is a magic cannonball - every hit makes him go faster. A glimpse of a woman in a front garden, holding a baby. One more look behind his shoulder: it's not a baby now, it's a garden machete.

Out of the village and on a goat herder's path, halfway up the hill, Volkov realized they'll never make it. Not with his backpack, or the kid. He threw his load down, stepped in front of Niki and drew his sword. The girl falls on her back, and now Volkov's drunken dance, the *kata*, suddenly makes sense. Half a

woman lands in front of her, her bowels splashing against Niki's ankles. Still holding an axe in her hand. White knuckles, white teeth, clicking. Once, twice. Niki's transfixed. That's how she imagines a zombie, herself. Half a skull, cut off at eye level - to her right. An arm holding a machete, left. None of that matters, just the two rows of white, immaculate teeth, as they click once again, then tremble and stay still. And further down the road, two old men turn around to flee, and Volkov slashes at them until they become blood pudding, with a side dish of clothing and bone. Everyone's retreating now; their faces red with rage but civilized by fear. Volkov never made a single sound.

They ran for hours. First, in the fading light of the sun, then in the slowly setting darkness. Niki's no longer a shopping trolley; the adrenaline in her veins pumps energy into her legs, the explosive kind: run, then rest, then run again. As she falls on her knees on a hillside, catching her breath, she realizes once again that everything is a slow process, almost unnoticeable: like the day changing into the night, and although it happens in tiny steps, or no steps at all, there still comes a point where you can't see anything, especially with the clouds over your head, and that's when Volkov takes out his small torch and lets out a thin beam between his fingers, scanning the landscape before them, setting direction and switching it off again, to save batteries.

He steered them to the west, knowing that if the villagers came looking for them, they'd head north. Long after midnight, they came across an old water service station. A utility shed on top, accessible by a single rusty ladder. Door broken in, stove in the corner. Floor covered with leaves and bird shit. Both burned well, giving them an illusion of comfort. And tea.

"You think you're a nightwalker," Volkov said as he stirred the burning mixture in the stove with his knife.

"Yes."

"Now you will tell me everything you know about nightwalkers."

Niki lay sprawled on her blanket. As the adrenaline wore off, her body felt aching, dead tired, but her mind did not. In another world, the one she hardly knew, the events of this day would make for an army of therapists and years of healing. Here, it just made her feel alive, and more awake than ever. And so she talked, in long sentences, for the first time in months, and told Volkov everything she knew or imagined about nightwalkers. And Volkov just nodded his head and served them tea.

Suddenly, Niki's senses felt numb. And the routine she'd practiced since the end of the world - forcing her eyelids up which, in turn, kept her mind floating on the edge of sleep - that routine was now failing her. Something was off. And then she saw a few white grains at the bottom of her cup. She jumped up, her legs trembling, giving way underneath her.

"What...what did you put in my tea?"

"Yeah," Volkov said.

"Are you..are you killing me?" He looked at her, raising one of his eyebrows.

"Yes. I kill a dozen people. I run for hours. To kill you. By tea." Just this once, Volkov's humor, or whatever it was, felt relaxing to her. He fished in the side pocket of his backpack and took out a small plastic bottle.

"Sleeping pills. Couple days back, old lady's room. Many bottles. Call it Volkov's signature zombie cure."

"Man," she said, as her legs failed her and she went down with a thud. She was asleep before her head hit the blanket.

Volkov felt smart for two reasons, and the second one was called duct tape. She won't cry in her sleep. That's one less thing to keep him awake.

## Chapter Four

*in which some things end and a return is planned.*

Tabby has become familiar with the expected. Slow, rocking movements, and a bit of grub here and there. Backpack-free time in the evenings, when he's allowed to roll over a few times and hope for the sight of a mouse. Mice laugh in Tabby's face. One was so bold that it came right up to him and licked his whiskers. Sometimes, Volkov gives him a taste of ultimate freedom, and takes away his cloak to wash it in the stream. Tabby has no hind legs, but ultimate freedom means he can use the front ones. Hiding them underneath his body, he waits for another bold mouse to come along. The whole continent must be riddled with mouse nests that communicate through intricate channels, and as a result of that, every mouse far and wide knows that Tabby is a helpless cat. Soon enough, another bold rodent comes to strike the cat's whiskers, in revenge for generations of ancestors subjected to terror and genocide. Tabby's hair lies still, so does his body. He looks resigned. One swift strike with the right paw, and the mouse is head to head with a helpless cat. Tabby tears it in two. He's got no time for games.

Even though Tabby is at home with the expected, he's not resigned to the unexpected. When Volkov put Niki to sleep and taped her mouth, Tabby rolled away from her and found a safe spot close to the stove. To him, she was a nighttime animal, so something was definitely off. He kept awake, watching her. When she started twitching and doing all those other things, he rolled over further, underneath the stove and then behind it. Things turned from unexpected to outright dangerous.

It wasn't the twitching that woke Volkov. It was the smell. Niki couldn't scream or wake up, and so her little body, trapped inside an ever-repeating dream, found other ways of releasing the pressure. He brought water from the stream beneath the water plant, undressed and washed her. Then, he washed all her clothes, using a bar of soap he'd never opened before, and hung them on the branches to dry. It was no use putting on her spare ones. He had removed the tape long before, but it was already too late. Every now and then, something oozed or sprayed from an orifice in her body, but her mouth was quiet, dead quiet. Save for the grinding teeth.

When she eventually woke up, with the sun setting over the treetops, numb and barely conscious, he fed her soup made from dried stock, one of their treasures. And then mint tea, and another sleeping pill. Half his mind knew something was wrong, but the other half was caught up in a weird mix of faith and fatalism, the chief ingredients of every household cure. When things got worse the following night, half his mind knew she was dying, but the other one made excuses. She's meant to fight it, it said. She needs to sleep. Whatever happens, it is meant to be.

With all that time on his hands, he managed to trap a rabbit, so there was rabbit stew the next day. And a pill. By that time, all his mind knew she was dying, and that thin veneer of faith on top began to wear off. What he thought was a cure was, in fact, a terrible miscalculation. It was clear the dream was a foreign force, like an aggressive tumor, and the body tried to fight it, by waking up. That's why nightwalkers couldn't sleep, that's why they became zombies, driven to madness by insomnia. But Niki - her body twisting in convulsions now - couldn't fight it by waking up.

When faith is lacking, it is sometimes replaced, or reinforced, by drink. Volkov took out another treasure of theirs - a two-liter plastic bottle he had bought for the price of two Nikis, pretending it was antiseptic. In the hallucinations incited by the liquor, he pictured killing her out of mercy, then being free. Going back to the pile of ashes that was his home, rebuilding it. No - first, digging in the ashes, for one remaining bottle of scotch. Sprawling on the rock, taking a gulp in the setting sun. Taking another one. That's what he's gonna do.

In a sober moment, he remembered the war. You haven't really seen war, not until you've witnessed children dying. A two-year-old girl died in Volkov's arms, as half an office building was taken down by an artillery shell. There's something mind-blowing about a kid who hasn't yet grasped the concept of death, making an exit. And then there were others, as old as Niki, but none of them died like her. Theirs were quick deaths, not long, protracted, painful ones. Two minutes, quick, shallow breaths, and they were gone, overcome by shock, so they didn't feel a thing. And they looked like rag dolls, not like casualties of war, but then they wrapped them in thick garbage bags like dark cocoons and piled them in a mass grave with the others. Soon, another doll will be ditched in a shallow grave, like a sick stray animal, nameless. He always called her Niki, in his mind. When speaking out loud, he'd call her kid.

He realized he never spoke much. Or asked her anything. It was his nature, not asking anything, but he could imagine a world where another Volkov talks to Niki. Where she came from, who she was, what Pokemon was her favorite. It felt like a story from another continent.

One more time, she woke up. With eyes closed, she scrambled about mechanically, like a drowsy machine, looking for the two things still vaguely familiar in this world - pills and water. When she found the first, she kept feeling for something to wash it down with. Volkov, busy with the stove, noticed her movements only then.

"Don't. You can't drink this."

"Why?" she croaked.

"You're underage."

"Under what?"

"Too young. You're too young."

"Too young for what," she said and took a long gulp from the plastic bottle.

In the next moment, her body stretched out like a bow, and Volkov caught the bottle just in time. She took a long, wheezing breath and was about to throw up, but the pill, enhanced by alcohol, was as sure and fast as a knockout punch.

In the following hours, her body was possessed by wild shivers, sweating through a blanket, then another one. Her breathing, once fast and shallow, was now erratic, and every time she drew in air, it was like she froze in time. As if, trapped forever inside a dream, she learnt to trap air and never let it go again. To Volkov, each of those times felt like the last one. He poured some water on her trembling lips, and she swallowed a bit, then some more, but not the way he knew her. It was like someone else took over her body and mind, and drank for her. Her teeth stopped grinding and she began talking in her sleep. "Pig, you're dead," she mumbled, and Volkov said, "You wish, you wish." And then, "You're going down," and, "Just kill me already", no more than echoes of words, and Volkov always answered the same thing, with growing tenderness.

The ever-repeating setting has suddenly changed. In Niki's mind, she's going down the rabbit hole that is her mind. She herself becomes a memory that descends into that hole, about to be buried or forgotten. Niki decides that she doesn't want to be a forgotten memory in her own mind. She tries to swim up. Long, wide strokes, which become more and more eager and desperate. She's swimming against the gravity of the rabbit hole. Every stroke brings her one foot up to the surface, while at the same time, she goes down two feet. However much she tries, she can only slow her fall. Then suddenly, four figures appear in the opening of the hole. She sees them as if they were right there, a few inches from her face. They do their usual thing. Mother is cursing the world. Nathan is nodding absent-mindedly. Pig is hypnotizing Niki's breasts and Weepy is playing with a wet stain in his crotch.

"Pig, you're dead," Niki says, but nobody seems to hear her. Now, mother is trying to reach for Niki. Everybody is. But as they extend their arms, their arms get shorter. In a moment, only their hands, their fingers come out of their shoulders. And those fingers start growing, and growing, until they cover the whole view and then, all four of them rise up, flapping their fingers, which have now become wings, and Niki rises with them, and soon, they all fly in formation. Across the plains, across a large glacial range which extends beyond the horizon. The air is crisp and the sun heats up the top of Niki's head. And then, Pig breaks formation. He soars and plummets, he parades his shiny feathers in the burning sun, for Niki to see. Too close, much too close to the sun.

"You're going down," Niki says. And down he goes. Feathers are peeling off, and soon, he's falling in a helpless spiral, towards a naked slope. His body smashes against it, his head breaks open like a watermelon. Niki remembers that image, she remembers it all too well. Suddenly, everybody is going down, smashing against the rock. First Nathan, Weepy after him. Mother goes last. Niki's left alone, carried on the wind. She flies fast, and their bodies are soon left in the far distance. And suddenly, the mountain range blocks the horizon, getting higher every second. She tries to fly up, but the mountains ascend much faster. She knows she won't make it, she will crash into a slope, her head splitting in two. She closes her eyes.

"Just kill me already," she says.

The next morning, Volkov discovers Niki lying on her back, eyes wide open. Nothing moves in the room, even the bird song has stopped. He notices Niki's chest rises a little. Slowly, she turns her head to him. It is a vacant stare, with a tinge of surprise. He readies his knife. Last night, he told himself many times what he

would do if she ever woke up again, and was a zombie. He went through the motions in his head. One quick stab in the neck, jugular vein, hug her and don't let her go.

"How do you feel," he asks. There is a long, long pause. He lifts the knife.

"I feel..." Niki whispers, through a mouth half stuck together by drool and snot. "I feel like dancing." Volkov plays with the knife in his hand, then throws her his end of the chain.

"Go dance," he says. She gets up on all fours, stands up and falls. Then she falls again. She's crouching now, shaking. She presses her hands on her belly. There's a reflex, common to all wakeful creatures. There's another one, common to all civilized ones. The next moment, she's out of the door, down the ladder and in the nearest bush, emptying herself.

For the remainder of the afternoon, Volkov watches Niki dance. Most of the time, he feels like an uninvited guest, so he crouches somewhere in the shadows while she rips grass with both hands and throws it in the air, then falls down forehead first and smells the earth. She takes a pine cone and throws it higher, and higher, and higher still. She observes an ant hill, fascinated, and then talks to every ant and instructs it on its path. Slowly, Volkov begins to wonder if the cure they found was a cure at all.

## Chapter Five

*which features lessons in linguistics and the arts of haggling and remembering*

"What are words?" asks Niki one night. Volkov murmurs a syllable in response. Every one of her questions brings back a random shard of a memory, like his mind was a junkyard full of splintered glass. And so now, Niki is Whitman's child, asking - what is the grass? Whitman cannot answer, and Volkov just waits. For every good philosopher, forming the right question takes time.

"How do you..do..make words?"

Niki was fine, more than fine. All she needed was one pill every night, so she'd break her habit, and numb down a little. If something wakes you up screaming for two years, you need something else to cushion the blow, like taking methadone instead of skag.

"No, I mean...what makes them."

He didn't know what happened, but the zombie cure now was sleeping pills and alcohol. He knew that much.

"What makes them what they are. Words."

He had his theories, of course. It seems like the hallucinations helped Niki break away from the routine, like in lucid dreaming - she was able to change her dream, she could gain power over it, just like it seized control over her.

"How.." Like her hallucinations took over her nightmares. Like her imagination could take over reality.

"How did words..come to be?"

And now, when she's learned to sleep, she wants a bedtime story. Volkov can't really ignore her all night, she's persistent, like the Little Prince. He rummages for glass shards in his memory, from Plato to Chomsky, assembles the poor lot together, then throws it all out. There's one thing he learnt in Rostov a long time ago: history is only as good as your imagination.

And so, Volkov tells a story. Words leave his mouth slowly, with a pause every now and then, and the story goes something like this:

In the beginning, the world was simple, and people talked in shrieks, and croaks, and gargles. And every one of these had to sound like the thing it described, so people could understand each other. And then, over centuries and centuries, the world got more and more complicated, and those sounds turned into words, because there were more and more things to talk about. But every word, every single one, had to sound exactly like the thing it meant, because otherwise it would be a terrible mess. And maybe today, people have learnt all the words by heart, and they don't need the sounds to tell them what they mean. But words, they change much more slowly than people do, so even now, every word still has a sound, and that sound has meaning.

Niki took it as a game, and Volkov took up the challenge, like there was a muscle inside him he hasn't flexed in a long while.

"Grass," she says.

"Grass....grass has two sounds. The first one is when you rip it from the ground. And the second one, it's dry grass in the wind."

"Rabbit."

"It's a hopping word. See how it sounds? Say it over and over."

"Rabbitrabbitrabbitrabbit."

"Front legs, hind legs. Get it?"

"Fire."

"That one is interesting. It tells you everything you need to know about fire. The first sound is when you blow into a bunch of sticks, okay? With a spark inside. And then, there's the sound of a big forest fire."

"Cut."

"You're cutting with a very sharp blade. Like a katana. So it's short, and the last sound, it's when the blade hits the cutting board."

"Volkov."

"Ah, now... it's a long gulp from a bottle. The sound it makes in your mouth."

"Niki." They both stopped dead in their tracks. There was a long pause.

"I never told you my name." Volkov is transfixed, but it doesn't really show, through the beard and hair and dirt.

"You didn't have to," he says. And then, after a while - "I don't know what Niki is."

"I know!" Niki cries jubilantly. "I know."

"What is it?"

"A squirrel."

"A squirrel?"

"A squirrel that's so fast you'll never catch it. And it hops in the grass and says 'Niki'."

Niki, Volkov repeats in his head, over and over. How could he know? Maybe, words were really just sounds, and each sound meant one thing, and she could be only one thing - Niki.

In the following weeks, more than ever before, Niki and Volkov became a walking pawn shop. She got her own backpack, and they'd trade pincers and knives for gas, antibiotics for dried beans, packs of razorblades for chickpeas, Niki for a gas cooker. Salt was the coin of that world, but you could get a bargain if you traded in something people needed. And, there was still some loot in the deserted houses along they way, and in satellite towns and the quiet suburbs. They never ventured deeper into cities; rumor had it they were overrun with gun-wielding gangs, and some of those guns still had a round or two left inside. And then there were rats, and leaking sewers, and rotting bodies on the sidewalk, and plague.

As they carried on, Niki noticed they never robbed anyone, or cheated anyone, or attacked anyone for profit. In spite of her rage, she somehow admired this about Volkov, the way you admire your opponent's skill before you give him the *coup de grâce*. He made the rules of right and wrong himself, and he stuck to them. Back in the old world, she remembered people who knew right from wrong, but then they would do something wrong and find excuses, and reasons, so that in the end, it looked right. Like mum's friend Latika, who would come to their house to weep, and who took all her husband's money, because he'd had an affair with *that bitch*. Niki didn't know what affair or bitch were, but it sounded sick. With Volkov, she felt her anger was somehow misplaced - one that bubbled up every now and then through the rabbit hole of her mind, her thirst for his blood. And yet, it felt so good, so right, and it was so much stronger than her.

They looted houses together now. She suddenly had energy to spend, and they divided the floors, with Niki racing up the stairs every time, so the top floor and attic were always hers, and this way, she beat Volkov to a stash once or twice; there was sometimes a fake wall, or a loose floorboard, and as she commanded the unseen treasure to show itself, her voice resonating through the house, Volkov pictured her in a tiny Nazi uniform, looking for Anne Frank's hideout, and his laughter resonated through the damp cellar, filled with excrement from a blocked sewer. Niki knew well to always take the top floors.

Their search had three distinct areas, one, the stuff they needed themselves, to prepare for the mountain crossing; dried food, good quality clothes and blankets, some climbing equipment. Two, good stuff they could sell and three, nostalgic junk. Some people would drool over items that gave them this singular, powerful jolt of nostalgia, and for that to happen, Volkov had to choose very carefully. Niki had really bad taste in this area, and he also noticed she had no attachment to the old world. Coming down the stairs, she would carry a bunch of stuff in her shirt and then throw it on the floor in front of him.

"That any good?" Once, she found a miracle, totally by accident; a pocket videogame which was a relic even then, and it was made in Volkov's homeland. He pressed the ON button and to his surprise, the game started. On a grey, unlit screen, groups of ever-moving black dots represented a cat whose job was to catch mice charging at her from four holes in the wall.

"Wanna play some?" He looked up, and she seemed unimpressed.

"No. I'm working." She saw someting in the corner of his eye, and sneered at him. "We are working." She took her work seriously indeed, just like this one time she was trying to understand the art of haggling. They were in a shopkeeper's storeroom, which they searched thoroughly, and now him and Volkov sat at the table while the shopkeeper's young assistant made them tea. He couldn't take his eyes off Niki, which didn't really go well with making tea, so he burned his hand, twice.

The two men talked in a language Niki didn't understand; it was a kind of code where every sentence made perfect sense, but underneath the surface, it carried a wholly different meaning. However, Niki could somehow sense the waves of unspoken words passing between them, and she could half ignore what was being said and replace it with tones and shades of meaning.

It was a jovial conversation, but the two were sizing each other up. To the shopkeeper, Volkov seemed like a smart guy playing dumb, and he looked relaxed, which bothered him; he would much prefer someone who's troubled or hungry, for desperate need generates profit. They talked about different items,

joked about their quality, exchanged wisecracks. They were trying to figure out what the other one really needed, so that they could create some headroom with a ridiculous price. That's as much as Niki gathered, while rocking on a wooden box, playing with her fingers and getting bored. Besides, she thought buying a Nike sweater just to show how dumb you were was - well, just dumb.

When the haggling finally brought the price to a reasonable level, with two groups of items on the floor, the shopkeeper made a recap and found something up his sleeve.

"So, you're giving me this junk, right, and I'm giving you this, almost for free, right, and I say, I'll be damned, five ounces of salt, and - this girl, for my apprentice here." Volkov frowns.

"Didn't know you were running a salt mine."

"Come on, look at him." The assistant is still transfixed, and a blob of drool has just detached from the corner of his mouth and landed on the floor. "I need him to do watches, and tiny machinery, you know, my eyesight's failing. How can he do fine repairs if he's never been with a woman?" Volkov frowns again, and then leans towards the shopkeeper, speaking in a low voice.

"You know, she's not really into it these days. And also, she's got the thing right now. The woman thing."

"I don't!" Niki shouts across the room, so loud both men jump up on their chairs. "By the way it's called a period, and I don't have it! And also, people call me a world class whore!" She's standing up now, fists clenched. Such utter disrespect for her profession! Volkov is now holding his mouth with both hands, and the shopkeeper is keeping his jaws together with such strength his lips look like he was giving a kiss, and they're both engaged in a straight face contest, but in the next moment, they burst out.

"What's so funny?" Niki shouts over their roaring laughter. "Tell me!" That only adds fuel to the fire, and the two are now bent over, slapping at the table and mooing and yee-hawing like cattle.

"Alright, Toby," the shopkeeper says when he can finally make a sentence, "you've got to find yourself a girl. Or try a dog. This one's out of your league."

The mood in the room lightens up, almost tangibly, and the men are no longer concerned about hitting a bargain.

"I'll take those as well," Volkov says, still laughing, and points to a pair of ice axes on the wall, with a length of rope attached. "They'll make a nice washing line." The shopkeeper knows this is what Volkov actually came here for, but like his customer, he no longer cares.

"No problem, sir, five ounces it is." He brings the scales, measures the salt and as he bids them goodbye, the corners of his mouth are still twitching.

Back in the woods, when the fire is lit, Volkov folds his jacket underneath his head, fishes in his backpack and takes out the videogame. A screeching sound announces that a new round has just started.

"You're kidding me," Niki says.

"Take your pills." Niki is detached, and he couldn't care less. This is his quiet time, and his piece of nostalgic junk. Level one. The first ten levels are designed for imbeciles. One mouse to the left, one to the right, moving in slow motion. The cat though, he's lightning fast.

Niki is a world class whore. Yeah. Bet she is. Things weren't always so upbeat, though. Volkov remembers the first time Niki got herself a customer. That was maybe a week after they'd left his place. They'd lived off of animal corpses and white maggots, grass and pine cones, nettle, mint and berries. They threw up more often than they ate, they shat water. No Geiger counter, no Tabby to test their food. Once or twice, yellow rain pissed from the sky, just a quick shower. It burned through their jackets, it scorched the land for miles. Eating was like flipping a coin. It felt like a downhill spiral, and when they got to the first town that had people in it, Volkov tried to pitch a few things he'd salvaged from his home. No luck. The scorching July sun baked the dusty road, drilled inside their weary skulls. And so they just sat down in the shade - the last comfort on Earth that was free.

Everybody else in town enjoyed the same comfort, it seemed, save for a man who approached them. Fat guy in Hawaiian shirt. Straw hat, sunglasses too small for his face. His shape reeked of food, Volkov thought. Plenty of it.

"I saw you go into the shop over there," the man said, talking to Volkov but looking at Niki.

"Yeah," Volkov replied.

"And it got me thinking."

"Really."

"What kind of man puts a girl on a leash? Such a pretty thing." He had this broad, welcoming smile. Like a punchbag, Volkov thought.

"None of your business."

"Actually, speaking of business," the man said and lowered his voice. "How much?"

"How much what."

"How much for some fun with the girl."

"Piss off."

"Tut-tut. Chill, man." He took out a small can from his breast pocket, shook it. "Three cans like this. And, a warm meal in the local establishment, for both of you."

"Not interested," Volkov said. And then, Niki stood up.

"I'll go," she said.

"Shut up and sit down."

"I said I'll go."

"And I said sit down!"

"I'm not asking you," Niki said. "I'm telling you." She needn't have said that, really. Her face spoke louder than words. They just stared at each other, for a long time.

"Five cans like that," Volkov said at last. "Up front."

Time dragged on, it must've been half an hour already. And then, he notices some movement round the corner, a mere yard away from him. Like someone tiptoeing on sand. He scoops some dust in his right hand.

When the figure jumps, Volkov rolls on the ground, throws dust in the man's face. The next moment, he springs up and his feet hit the Hawaiian shirt in the gut. One more jump, a cracking sound. That was a forearm. The man's on his back, and Volkov picks up the weapon. That fucker had a katana. A real katana. What the fuck.

The tip's in the man's mouth now. He's shaking, wailing. No, not with pain, not yet. He's just afraid. Volkov quickly looks around. The street is deserted, not a hair moves in the scorching heat.

"Where is she."

"I...in my house," the man mumbles around the cold metal on his palate. Volkov moves it further down his throat.

"Is she alive."

"Yesh, yesh."

"Lead the way. You try something, I cut you down."

When he unlocked the door and they went in, Niki was standing in the middle of the living room, completely nude.

"Oh," she said. Volkov pushed the man into an armchair.

"Get your clothes," he snapped at Niki.

"The price just went double," he said, turning back to the armchair. The man gasped. "And I'm playing nice. So you play nice. You talked about dinner."

"Y...yes, we've got a canteen down the road."

"A canteen."

"Community dinner, every day."

"Good." Volkov wouldn't let him off, not until they were safely out of town. For all he knew, he could be running a small private army.

"It's your lucky day. You're having dinner with a lady. And with Volkov. An old friend from school who came to visit. Understood." The man nodded his head.

At the canteen, there were a few locals having an early dinner, and every now and then, one of them came up and asked the man if he was alright, and it was - yes, yes, look here, my old friend, Volkov, and his...err... - daughter, Volkov would add, and his left hand was resting on the katana handle, sheathed and tied to the side of his backpack, while he scooped the broth with his right.

An hour later, they were in the hills above the town, sitting down and digesting their first meal in a week. The salt would buy them food for another week, maybe more.

"I know, by the way," he says. "You asked him to do it. That was stupid."

"No, it wasn't," Niki replies. Bet she feels clever as fuck. Volkov realized it was about time to set some basic boundaries of operation here.

"You're a smart kid," he said.

"Uh-uh."

"So you won't do this again."

"Why?" she said, with the sweetest smile. In a leisurely manner, he patted the katana handle.

"Guess."

In the weeks to follow, they turned it into a business venture, of sorts, and it helped them bounce back up, until more scavenging opportunities came up. And now, much later, Volkov is still amazed. He feels like Niki could turn the most terrible things into a murder game, or just a game, or something to be proud of. Was it a kid's virtue, or a survival strategy? Or both? And how the hell would he know.

Level forty-five. Still not much of a challenge. The console is lined with bright red plastic, while the body's made of metal. Gold matte finish. That color, it really takes you back in time. It's the essence of nostalgic junk: a single flash of color or shape, and an uncomplicated residue of a place he'd once left.

That world was a complex one; it was filled with provincial ideas and petty politics, first world problems and fake news, taxes, indexes and discounts, mortgages and data plans, uppers, downers, supplements and phony treatments for made-up conditions, influencers, beauty vloggers and dog therapists, superfoods with zero nutritional value, veganism and twenty other -isms in a single segment of the evening news, pop starlets, toddler beauty queens and people dreaming about next generation cellphones at night, while wearing bracelets that told them when to eat, shit and fuck. After he'd left that world, it still came to him, through the two-watt speakers of a portable radio he had in the shed, next to the chopping block, and, in a much purer form, through the cable that brought him electricity from the valley below, dug underground and then concealed as grounding wire on one of the posts.

Volkov had built his kingdom from the leftovers of that world, erecting a modest house at a clearing surrounded by rocks on a mountain slope, a place no one would stumble upon unless they were lost or sleepwalking. That was a few years before the world had ended, and when it did, the apocalypse barely interrupted Volkov's afternoon nap. It was brought to him in two ways: the radio in the shed went quiet, and there was no more electricity. At long last, the world he wanted to avoid was no more. That afternoon, Volkov opened a bottle of scotch, took his armchair to the porch and for the rest of the day, two suns bathed his body, one from the outside, one from within, meeting somewhere in his bones, and he'd hardly ever felt so much at peace. And like that, he spent two winters in his kingdom, the best two years of his life, him looking down at the world from up there, and the world decomposing before his eyes. Until Niki came and burnt that kingdom to the ground.

She sits up, restless. The videogame keeps beeping and screeching. Even though the screen is barely visible in the light from the fire, Volkov has now reached level 56. She stands up abruptly and does a quick hand salute. That gets a smile from Volkov.

"What."

"Requesting permission to go up the hill, sit on the ground and do nothing."

Still smiling, he reaches into his pocket and then takes the padlock off the chain.

"Permission granted." She wraps the chain around her waist.

"Back by midnight," he adds.

"When's midnight?"

"I don't know."

"Okay."

The ghosts are sitting closer now, as the nights have grown colder. Maybe they just need to get used to it, Niki thinks. The cold. There's Misha, on her left, and Adri, the younger twin, on her right. In the past few weeks, Niki's felt more alive than in the last two firefly seasons. She can sleep, and doesn't have to keep her eyelids open. She can feel stuff around her in color. And her breathing is in two-four time, like a slow heartbeat, and it's not wakefulness and limpo, and her being alert every single minute. She breathes like normal people do, and she can forget about it, like normal people do. And then when you feel alive, your stories, both past and present, get somehow more alive, too. She noticed that. And the twins won't stop asking her. Over and over.

*So, like, how is it?* Misha says.

"I've told you."

*No you haven't,* Adri says.

"Last night."

*We forgot,* Adri retorts.

"The hell you did."

*Tell us again. We never..did that.* That was top grade emotional manipulation from Misha. Niki sneers at her, then she lets out a sigh.

*"Okay, what part."*

*Well all of it.*

*Without the...undressing part. That's kinda..*

*Obvious.*

*Yeah.*

"Man. Okay. Well you gotta be gentle. That kinda stops them from being rough, okay? So, you take it out, and it smells like..."

*A dead cat!*

*Weak old socks!*

*"Yeah, or worse."*

*Ewww!*

"So, they gotta wash it. Rule number one."

*Got it.*

"And then, you touch it, with the tip of your tongue. In the back. Where all the veins come in. That's the sweet spot."

*Man, what does it do?*

*"Kinda grows."*

*Like, what size? Elephant?*

*Goes through the roof!*

*"More like a popsicle."*

*Ugh.*

*Boring.*

"Now watch this. When it grows, they wanna do all sorts of shit, okay? Touch you, squeeze your boobs."

*Ewww.*

"Put it in."

*Yuck.*

"It kinda fits."

*Never!*

"So, you have to stay on top. And put it in your mouth, but don't bite on it. Like a popsicle, really. It hurts your teeth when it's cold. So, just your lips and your tongue. Maybe one bite, for fun, like."

*Bite it off!*

"Yeah, you wish. And then, when you do it right, they're like, in heaven, but that's not the whole thing. You get on top, you hold it in your hand and then you put it in. Real slow."

*Man.*

*What does it feel like?*

"You gotta be wet, and then it feels good. Like, a bit weird at first, but you get used to it."

*But...*

*But, how do you feel?*

"It like...tickles, down here."

*Your belly button?*

"Nah, lower. Just a bit. Here. And you want more, because...I don't know. And then, when you touch here, it feels even better."

*And then what?*

*Then what?*

"You gotta be careful, if they wanna bite you or someting. But, if you stroke them, real **gentle**, it calms them down. And then, watch out, just before they like, explode. They never watch out, so you do. Take it out, and let them spray over your boobs. It's like, thick, milky, someting. Smells bad."

*Man.*

"Hey...I, we gotta do this, okay? Like, someone younger."

*Twelve.*

*Meh, that's old. Ten?*

"I dunno. We just got to. And, we..."

*We make him wail like a puppy!*

*Down on his knees!*

"And then we take him to heaven." A sudden realization made Niki tremble all over, as she hid her face between her knees. Wetting them on the inside.

*Don't worry. We'll do it.*

*We will.*

## Chapter Six

*in which different types of death are examined and the value of art is put into question*

Some time after the world had ended, when people had fought over the last packet of Chinese soup in a corner shop and the gunfire had died down, when raiding parties roamed through towns and cities and Niki's ghosts became ghosts, it made sense, once again, for people to live together.

Some villages remained unchanged, some had picket fences built around them with dogs guarding the perimeter. There were parts of suburbs baricaded off, whole apartment blocks with inner gardens or courtyards, their ground floor windows filled with bricks and a single entrance with someone always on watch. Other towns and suburbs were abandoned, and those were a catalogue of death and rebirth, mostly death.

There was death dried and dusty. After two years, the corpses lying on roads and propped up against brick walls were nothing but clothing and bone, the colors of clothes washed out by the sun and rain. Some skulls still had hair, and they were held in place by dried muscle. If there was a hat, the corpse looked very much like a scarecrow, resting in the shade after a hard day's work in the fields.

There was death in compost. They saw a log cabin with a large spruce at the back, and it seemed the tree, its spirits boosted by human absence, grew its roots underneath one corner of the dwelling and lifted it up by almost two feet, tilting the cabin sideways, so that at some point, the thatched roof collapsed inwards, and whoever had died in there was already hollowed out by rats, and then squirrels brought in their winter stashes of nuts and cones, and ants, their scouting parties discovering this sweet spot of half-moist semi-darkness, began hauling in spruce needles, one by one, building two large hills over the spring, and then the rats came again, hollowing tunnels in the compost while avoiding both the ants and the squirrel stashes, setting up two warring rat nests, one beneath the floor and one in the former attic, while a robin red-breast discovered a cosy spot in the remnants of the roof, inviting his spouse to inspect that wondrous discovery, and soon the whole extended family came, setting up nests in the roof and between the logs, while all this time, the spruce tree, joyful and unrestrained, would lift the cabin further and further up until one day, many years later, it would collapse, smothering all life inside it, making a new, fruitful layer of compost for more rats and squirrels to dig in.

There was death on day one, as Niki remembers it when they walk along a deep swathe cut through the land, dead straight, some three yards across and running as far as the horizon, like a moon-sized giant played inter-planetary golf here, and it's as deep as they can see, with something red at the bottom, and even after two years, there's heat coming from within and the edges are charred, while Niki remembers similar swathes and holes in her city, shortly after Lia's birthday party ended with a *poof*, while her and the twins were safe at home, and she wants to reenact the afternoon before that, with all the sounds and colors, but not now, for fuck's sake, not now, not yet.

There was death unexpected. Some swathes were visible, others were not, and as they drew nearer to the dead sea, the goal of Niki's journey, at least metaphorically, the second kind was reportedly more and more common. They heard stories, and then one day, as they walked through a tall beech forest, Volkov noticed that Niki suddenly turned left, like she was walking around an invisible boulder, and at the same time, his Geiger meter went crazy. He stopped that very moment, which saved his life. He instructed Niki to walk backwards and then he tied her to a tree, just to be on the safe side, which was clever in a prophetic kind of way. By the time he was finished inspecting the invisible barrier, which was about three hours later, she became so restless she'd rather push him into it than wait another minute. It turned out the *breach* - that's what he named it - extended for about ten yards, and it was razor thin. Volkov knew - deep down, he knew, or thought he knew, that radiation doesn't behave this way. Until it does. It was coming from the ground in a razor thin sheet, it didn't spread, and it was so powerful it destroyed everything that went through it. Which kept Niki occupied for the first hour, as she threw cones at it, and every cone went *poof* and was no more; there wasn't even a real, full-bodied *poof* to go with it, more like a *p*, and that was that. There were things Niki knew about herself that she wouldn't share with Volkov, and others that she wouldn't tell anyone, but when Volkov asked her how she knew about the barrier, she couldn't even answer herself. She didn't feel anything, she just knew, and couldn't tell how.

Elsewhere, there was death sanctified. One morning, they happened across a church that attracted Volkov's attention. He wasn't much into churches, but this one had all the stained glass windows open, not broken into shreds like everywhere else. Just as they opened the door, they discovered why. There were bodies lined up on the floor where the benches once were, all nude, like churchgoers resting after a giant

orgy. The stench hit them, tidal wave-like, but before they turned around, something else attracted their attention. It was the priest, who had appeared from behind the altar and was now running down the aisle towards them, then shaking their hands, and thanking them, and thanking them, then showing them his little mausoleum, all this time talking about the poor starving souls who took poison together, and how he washes them every day, poor souls, resting with the three-personed God now, and he was interrupted only once, by a wheezing fart somewhere at the far wall, and Volkov thought, much better than someone's guts exploding. And the priest went on, about him rationing the pills, and how everything went according to plan, but then, killing oneself, that's a mortal sin, it's sinful, indeed, to end one's own life, it doesn't fare well with god, if you do it yourself. Volkov got the general idea alright. He wasn't afraid of committing mortal sin, he was just afraid. And his mausoleum was one big exercise in procrastination. Volkov asked to see the pills, and even though the writing was eroded by sweating fingers running over it, again and again, they were clearly Niki's evening medicine, at which point Volkov fished in his backpack and placed an orange pill in the priest's hand, and this, he says, totally painless, go on, open your mouth, I'll place it right there, under your tongue, and then face the altar, like that, you'll be seeing the choir in no time, angels, Peter, Paul and Lucian, saint Volkov, all of them - and he meant to motion Niki to turn around, but where should she turn, with death everywhere, and the next moment, the priest's head is in two. Niki just passes them, further into the church, and Volkov says to himself, has she grown numb, just like that?, but then he walks outside and lies on the grass, to rest, and is woken up by the church bell, fast and frantic, runs to the belfry and Niki wouldn't let go of the rope, crying, and the rope is at once her umbilical cord, with that single string going all the way to the north star and further to heaven, and when she lets go, she's just a rag doll and Volkov carries her on his shoulder, downstairs and out and further away, because weeping bells attract monsters.

Then there is creeping death. On one of their suburban treasure hunts, Niki found a book in the attic, one she'd had and left in one of their camps, but back then, she had thought of it as a book of magic spells. She had only ever used one spell, but it always worked, and now she was about to take the book and leave when the pile of rags in the middle of the room started moving towards her, and as she jumped up, her shoulder hit a bookshelf that collapsed backwards, hitting the floor with a thunder, which made Volkov curse from downstairs, but the pile of rags was still moving, she saw a pair of eyes, she saw a blade, and this time, she won't be a kid tied to a fence pole, she won't call Volkov for help, and she'll defend herself, against a creeping pile of rags, with magic. And thus, Niki began to read the spell:

"Saint Agnes Eve, argh bitter cheel it wus."

Niki noticed the pile of rags had stopped moving, and went on:

"The owl for, all shes feethers was, acorn,

the hare limpeed trem..trembling through the frozen grass"

The spell began to work, just like the book said - the pile began trembling.

"and silence, was the flak in wollen foe,

numb were the Batman's fingers, why he told his rosemary."

And at that moment, the pile of rags stretched out like a bow, exploded, turned on its back.

"I'll be damned!" it screamed. The spell had worked perfectly, Niki thought, proud of herself and her ways in the school of dark magic. Of course, the voice had Volkov running upstairs in a flash, naked katana in his hand.

"Who are you?" The man, Niki noticed just now, was white-haired and very, very thin.

"Who am I? This is my house. And this here was the worst reading of John Keats I've ever heard in my fucking life!" He got up, shaking, and threw his blade angrily into the corner.

"Tell you what, young boy," he turned to Volkov, raising his finger, "First, I wanted to eat her. Then, I just wanted to kill her. Now, I can't do either. Noone should have to die before they learn to read. Now, go to the living room, both of you. Kid, take the book."

"He's got..." Volkov started, looking at Niki.

"What did you say?" the old man croaked.

"He's got a real Vermeer downstairs."

"The book's magic," Niki replied.

"The boy knows something at least. Unlike you. Now go."

Downstairs, the old man staggered across the room, collapsed in his armchair and dozed off. Quietly, Volkov motioned Niki to come up to him and look at the painting. It was a view of a port, and a city

behind it, all detailed but quite dark, like a photograph you take against the sun, and she couldn't take her eyes off it, drawn in by the blue roofs that dissolved into blue treetops, the brick buildings and the calm waters. She had seen many photographs of ports and the sea, both as a child and then as a scavenger, postcards and cutouts sellotaped on peeling wallpaper and on fridge doors, but the water in the painting was somehow more watery than any water she had ever seen, in photographs or in real life, like someone could paint water from another world that's more real than this one.

"Vermeer," Volkov said. "It's not a copy."

When the old man woke up, he told them the story of his Vermeer, the most beautiful painting in the world. In the year after the world had ended, while Volkov did nothing at all in his place amongst the rocks, Niki's mother spread her legs for Eddie and Niki tried to keep her eyes open, the old man geared up, took his BB gun and set off across the whole continent in his Volkswagen Beetle, to get this one painting from a city gallery. He never gave up, not when his Beetle ended up in a ditch and he had to continue on foot, or when he was attacked by stray dogs, raiders or demented villagers, fending them off with his ridiculous weapon, when he had to survive winter in a bunker he dug for himself next to a pond, living off of fish and dry grass. And finally, when he made it to the gallery, nine months later, it was inhabited by squatters but the Vermeer was still there, though they had burned a lot of other paintings in the winter. Then, he wanted to stay in a village somewhere, but in the end, he thought he'd die at home, and took another ten months to get back.

Niki listened with her mouth open, and she saw a reflection of her own journey in the man's story, where the dead sea was the city, the mountain in the middle was the gallery and on top of it, there was another Vermeer. Volkov, on the other hand, felt both admiration and shame, the former for the old man, the latter for himself.

"Now, young boy," said the man when the story was over, "Go someplace else and play with yourself. We've got some reading to do."

"You won't eat her, will you."

"Not until she learns to read."

Hours later, Niki came out the front door and woke Volkov up.

"He fell asleep," she said. "And he's not breathing."

"Find me a shovel and some bubble wrap."

Two days after that, the Vermeer found its new home in the belfry of a church. The building was all granite and cement - made to outlast the god it was built for.

And then, there's death nameless.

"Go wash," Volkov says when he's lit the fire.

"No."

"You're all sweaty. Off you go." The stream was nearby, but it was getting cold. She knew the water would make her feel all warm and clean when tucked in her sleeping bag, but she hated that cold moment in the very beginning. She wasn't a jumper; she was a slow walker, her toes first, then her ankle, then the knee, and already her belly starts trembling and she has goosebumps all over.

"No. You're sweaty yourself."

"Don't worry about me. I said go wash." Slowly and ceremoniously, Niki takes out her book of spells.

"St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!

The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold,

The hare...the hare limped trembling..." Volkov interrupted her and continued, as another shard of memory swam up from his junkyard.

"The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass,

And silent was the flock in wooly fold,

Numb were the beadsman's fingers while he told his rosary. Yeah." Niki shut the book and thought for a moment, frowning. She came to the only possible conclusion.

"The spell doesn't work if you know it."

"No," Volkov said. "The spell doesn't work if you use it for stupid things. Now go and wash."

And then Niki is tucked in her sleeping bag, feeling all warm and clean.

"What is it about? You think." she asks. "The poem."

"Argh. Two lovers who run away together."

"From what?"

"Ah...from the cold, from old age, from stupidity."

"And the beadsman? Who is he?"

"A man who lives someone else's life. He recites other people's prayers so they could go to heaven. And then just like that..." Vokov snaps his fingers, "they die, and there's nothing, just a long, dark night."

"Not just the night," says Niki and immediately stops and covers her mouth, like she's just revealed a piece of sacred knowledge. Volkov thought he'd tiptoe around the subject, like when you meet a new type of crazy. And then he thought again.

"There's a long, dark night if noone remembers you," he says. "Then it's like you never existed." Niki's eyes widen as a quiet horror begins to creep inside her heart. She remembers the twins, her ghosts, and then she remembers all the lines she drew on the tin roof, one line for every schoolkid.

"Promise you will remember me," she whispers. "If I die first. And I'll remember you." Volkov observes her, quietly.

"You don't have to remember me, but I will," he says at last.

## Chapter Seven

*in which a toll is paid*

There was a mining town up ahead. Last vestige of civilisation before snow, rock and snow. The lithium mine had long been depleted, and the ghost town, wedged between two peaks, became a tourist resort for a while, with a cable car moving lazy hikers from one peak to another and back. Ghost town again after the end of the world, it was now military operation headquarters with a sideline in slave trade. So much Volkov gathered in the villages on the way. He hated the military.

You had to pass through it, every other route was madness. And there was one more thing Volkov had to do before they head into the mountains. He knew that if you need something, there's always a toll. That was not his concern; what bothered him was he didn't know the price.

Whenever he was in doubt or distress, Volkov ended up in a bar. Center of town, off the main road, beer with a reputation. The patrons were half military greens, half all sorts of shabby. Then three greens showed up at their table, the very moment his lips touched the foam for the first time. They were on cue like a seasoned jazz trio.

"Come with us."

"Says who."

"Come with us.."

"...or there'll be trouble." Volkov finished the man's sentence, speaking through foam he'd barely tasted.

"You trying to be funny?" They were three hulking mountains of flesh, and Volkov felt they'd just exhausted their range of vocabulary.

The commander's quarters were on the top floor of what once was a police station. The greens ushered them in and told Volkov to leave all his stuff at the door. As the commander rose up from his late lunch to greet the men, the corners of Niki's mouth began to twitch. Unlike the military in town, who were clad in all sorts of uniform, the commander had a full hiker's outfit. There were thin, water-repellent trousers with a zipper around the knees, so you could turn them into shorts. There was a fast-dry nylon shirt that's guaranteed to move sweat away from your body AND keep you warm. There was a jacket in shiny red and blue, with the words Gore-Tex running proudly across one of the pockets. On one of their pawn shop hunts, Niki found a set of these clothes in a stash, and Volkov threw them in the fire. She had to admit they burned quickly, and burned well.

The commander sat down at his desk and went on eating, and the smell of roast meat filled the room. Volkov grabbed two chairs from the corner and him and Niki sat across the table from the man, enjoying his meal in mockingly pious silence.

"She your daughter?" he spoke at last, without looking at them.

"Maybe," Volkov replied.

"Now, what kind of father keeps his daughter on a leash?"

"She's problematic." The commander impaled a chunk of meat on his fork and aimed it at Volkov, before putting it in his mouth.

"Now - where's her mother?" Volkov's answers are brief. There's no point in lying right now.

"I killed her." The sudden plot twist made the commander stop chewing, and for a few moments, he watched them with his mouth full.

"Now now, the plot thickens," he said when he cleared his mouth. "And I suppose you kept her as a plaything."

"No."

"You kept her because she makes salt for you."

"Maybe."

"Or maybe you kept her because you felt sorry for what you did."

"What is this, morality police?"

"Just answer the question."

"No. Sorry is not my thing."

"Whatever it is, you're going north. Across the mountains." He nodded to Volkov's backpack, with the two ice axes and rope tied to the side. "Like every nightwalker who's ever passed through town."

"We love hiking."

"Why not hike in the hills?"

"Nothing beats a mountain crossing. The air is crisp and the snow is clean."

The commander's face was as unchanging as the face of a rock, but Niki felt he was enjoying this, in a twisted sort of way. He nodded to Volkov, then to a window a few feet away.

"Look out there and tell me what you see." Volkov rose slowly, so his large frame loomed over the desk, like shadows in the setting sun. Then, he walked over to the window.

"Sun's shining."

"Anything else?"

"A forest."

"Behind that." Volkov turned around and sat back in his chair.

"There's smoke rising, behind the forest," he said. The commander had stopped eating by then. Words left his mouth, one by one, and they felt like dry footsteps on a gravel road.

"That smoke is coming from a town, just like this one. A nightwalker came back. Now the town is burned to the ground. Everyone dead."

"One nightwalker," Volkov said, slowly.

"Yes. Crossed the mountains, got what he wanted, came back, destroyed everything." The commander put away his plate, stood up and paced across the room. To Niki, it was at once comical and threatening. She felt lethal danger, she felt it rising slowly, like a tidal wave in the distance, and yet, it was delivered by a man in hiking clothes. To Volkov, the man was like a pitiful basement dweller reading their story in another world, trying to act out the lines in all seriousness while dressed in a bathrobe.

"We got reports from a village south of here, of a man wielding a katana, protecting a nightwalker kid. Killed ten people."

"Sounds bloody," Volkov said.

"Two mothers among them," the commander nodded, returning to the table. "Looks like your thing. Let's cut the crap, shall we."

"Can't wait," Volkov said. In fact, he felt much more at home with the crap. It felt less ominous than what was about to come.

"We could use a man like you. Three meals a day, new women shipped in every week. A prospective career in the military."

There was a very long pause, with Volkov looking straight in the commander's eyes. Niki felt something was looming over her, almost like shadows in the setting sun.

"I've already had that," Volkov said after a long while.

"Had what?"

"A prospective career in the military." Whether the commander was surprised or not, he didn't let it show.

"She's not getting out here alive and you know that," he said. Volkov stretched out his neck muscles, then his back, and with the right hand, he patted the place where his trouser hose covered his boot.

"I'm not letting her go. I made a promise," he said.

"I won't repeat my offer." Niki felt the air in the room getting dense.

"There's no offer," Volkov replied in a low voice. "There's a bet. Those three lapdogs at the door, they have guns. You're betting your life, saying they're loaded. I'm betting mine, and I say they're not."

And at that very moment, Niki spoke.

"I'm not a nightwalker. I'm not. I can prove that."

"Make that thing shut up," the commander said with a grunt.

"I am not a nightwalker," Niki repeated, louder. "Nightwalkers scream out when they sleep. Let me sleep here, make someone watch."

And then, one of the goons at the door spoke.

"She's right, boss." Volkov jerked his head towards the sound. Things were getting out of hand, and he was used to that, but he'd never get used to sudden injections of the bizarre into plain, understandable reality.

"Yea, she's right," another goon said. "If she can sleep, she's no nightwalker."

"She's a kid, boss," the third one added. The commander's face turned a shade of red.

"You've done kids, Franko. You done them well."

"Not like that, boss. Not like that."

There was a holding cell: a narrow cot covered with a blanket and a piss pot. Three guards on night watch. The commander took the key. They wouldn't touch Volkov now; unlike them, village brawlers who got

their hands on a uniform, he said he'd served in the army. They put his katana in another locked cell and let him sleep in the corridor.

The commander's words echoed in Volkov's head as he brewed tea on the gas cooker. 'If she makes a sound, you both die.' Niki's quiet when she takes her pills, but once or twice, she forgot. And then, she croaks and wails in her sleep. And she doesn't know that. Volkov crushes two pills with a spoon and adds them in the cup. The guards stand up abruptly when he appears round the corner.

"Relax. It's her evening tea." He turns to Niki. "Come on, drink." She gets up from the cot, stretches her arms, walks to the bars.

"No, I'm good," she says.

"Drink this." It's an intense whisper now. Niki draws closer. Unlike other times, there is a solid iron barrier between her and Volkov. She lowers her voice to a whisper.

"You said you made a promise. What promise?"

"I'm not telling you now. Drink this."

"What promise?"

"I said drink. If you don't drink this, we both die." Niki's breathing heavily. Then, she lowers her voice even more, and hisses in Volkov's face.

"This is not an offer. This is a bet. And I'm betting you won't make it alive." And with that, she turns around and walks back to her bunk.

Volkov can't sleep that night. Whenever he's dozing off, there's a sound that makes him jump up. Sometimes it's a creaking floorboard, or an owl in the distance, or a drunkard's lament in the street, or a woman's moaning in the barracks opposite. Other times, it's Niki smacking her lips, or letting out a sigh. He comes to check on her every time, and notices the guards are on full alert, then one time, he discovers why. It's not because of him, or the orders they got. Niki lies with her face to the wall, but sometimes, she turns around on her back and scratches her belly, lifting up her shirt. Then she moves her hand lower and moans, softly. Every sound sends shivers down Volkov's spine, and makes his head jerk, but there's room for one more thought: he's happy the key's with the commander now.

Then morning came, with bird song through the holes in the concrete, and Niki rose from the bunk, stretching her limbs.

"Haven't slept that well in a long time," she said with a yawn, nodding to the guards. One left to fetch the key, then came back.

"Boss says you're free to go," he said, unlocking the two cells. Volkov sheathed the katana and grabbed the end of Niki's chain. He noticed there was a smile in the corner of her mouth. Just this once, he felt like punching that smile.

Some rules never change, not even in this world, because they simply can't. If the basis of a free market economy is competition, its darkest counterpart is monopoly. More competition means lower prices. Then there is supply and demand, two joined cogs at the center of every single trade. When supply exceeds demand, prices go down, and when demand is greater than supply, they go up. Combine monopoly with a high demand, or desperate need, and prices go through the roof. The customer becomes a slave to the master of goods, or services.

There is a third rule. A skilled tradesman can always negotiate a reasonable price, which can't be said of the angry, sleepless and exhausted man Volkov now was. Perhaps, for one night, he experienced what being Niki once felt like, but it also meant he was in no mood for haggling.

The mechanic in front of him ran the only repair shop in town, and had the only diesel-powered workbench around. Also, it seemed he had recently discovered capitalism. He wore a tweed jacket on top of his overalls, and a bowtie. Given the fashion trends in the recent years, this wasn't even funny anymore.

"How may I be of service?" The hall smelt of burnt rubber and grease, and there was the sound of a bed creaking in rhythm, coming from the room directly behind the counter. Volkov drew closer and whispered his request into the mechanic's ear. The man nodded his head and straightened up.

"That will cost you." Suddenly, he was smug all over.

"How much?"

"Uhm, I feel like...I feel like this girl. One night."

"No, no, no. You're not getting the girl."

"That's my price."

"I said no."

"If you don't like my price, you can try someplace else." Volkov is speaking through his teeth now.

"Look, it's five seconds of your time. It costs you nothing."

"I'm afraid my offer is final."

"Five. Fucking. Seconds."

"Carlos!" the mechanic shouted over his shoulder. "Stop whatever you're doing and come here."

The creaking stopped and a man appeared in the doorway, full frontal, his dick standing erect like a flagpole. His upper body was twisted sideways, because otherwise he wouldn't fit through. His head was bent down for the same reason.

"Is there a problem?" he said. Volkov ground his teeth and backed off.

"No problem," he said. "No problem at all."

"No luck, ha?" Niki said when they were out in the street.

"I'm not getting blackmailed." He wanted to sound resolute, but it just felt weak. In fact, he didn't know what to do.

"It's like the fourth time this week."

"What?"

"You didn't want to sell me."

"We're doing just fine."

"Is that why we collect all that junk? So you don't have to sell me?"

"I said we're fine." Suddenly, the backpack felt too heavy for Volkov. He put it down and sat on a pile of logs. But Niki, she went on.

"You wanted something, and you didn't get it, because you didn't sell me. I make all the salt..."

"You don't."

"I did, and you used me to get stuff. Why'd you stop?" Volkov is breathing heavily now.

"Look..."

"Why'd you stop?" She's getting loud now. "And why'd you never take me yourself?"

"Look, maybe you forgot why you're wearing that fucking chain. It sure ain't there to keep you from running." He throws his end on the ground, but Niki ignores it.

"Why? Just tell me. You're getting all soft?" She's screaming now, and Volkov gets up.

"No," he says. He puts on his backpack and grabs the chain. "Let's go."

"Where are you going?"

The mechanic greets them with a sweet smile.

"So you've changed your mind, then?"

"Yes."

"Good. Carlos?" The creaking stopped once again. "Get me that room upstairs ready. And a bath."

"Sure thing, boss."

"You don't understand," Volkov said.

"What?"

"He asked me if I had a problem. And I said no. I changed my mind about that."

Fighting was forbidden everywhere but one place in town, and there was a sand pit fashioned for that purpose. It was off the main road, within the two remaining walls of a house, and Volkov had noticed it on their way in. Fights were official, betting was involved. Before they got there, half the town knew.

"That was stupid," Niki told Volkov along the way.

"Not as stupid as you sleeping all night."

"I didn't sleep."

"I know."

The odds favored Carlos heavily, or so Volkov heard until the referee approached them.

"No shirts, no shoes. It ain't over until I say it's over. Got it?" They both nodded their heads.

"What's in the pot?" the referee inquired.

"The kid," Volkov said. The mechanic approached them, just to make sure the wording was right.

"When he loses, I get the girl for one night."

"To do what?" The referee had to be explicit in the written contract.

"The fuck you think?"

"To play Monopoly," Volkov said, and even Carlos chuckled. The mechanic was fuming.

"To fuck her senseless. Okay? Write it down, like that."

"What's he getting?" the referee asked. "If he wins." The mechanic let out a long sigh, like the conversation had become pointless.

"I'm gonna do what he wants for free. Got it? Good." He waved his hand and left to sit in the shade.

When they faced off, Carlos leaned towards him. He stood a good five inches over Volkov, and had more than a few dozen extra pounds in muscular weight.

"I don't wanna hurt you," he said thoughtfully.

"You won't," Volkov replied.

There were no corners, just two garden chairs on opposite sides. When Volkov sat down to take off his shoes, Niki approached him from behind.

"He'll crush you," she whispered. Was that eager anticipation or fear in her voice? Volkov couldn't tell. After all, she was in the pot. It could have been both.

"He will crush me if I allow him to." Long time ago, he learnt to recognize different physiques, and he knew Carlos had the physique of a bodybuilder. Sure, there were genetics involved, but his shoulder blade muscles were ridiculous, just like his biceps and trapeze muscles.

"What do you want to do?" He knew bodybuilders were slow fighters with immense choking strength. Normally, he'd want to dance around him and wear him off, but he's not in the mood today. He's really not in the mood.

"Improvise," he said just before the bell rang.

Volkov stood still, in a *kumite* stance, moving up and down on his toes. As Carlos raced towards him, he knew it right away. Carlos wasn't a hitter, he was a grabber. When he moved to intercept Volkov's outstretched left, he pulled it back and shot a right at his nose, jumping away at the same time. He took his stance again. No way he's dancing today.

Carlos's bleeding nose made him more cautious now, and he approaches Volkov in a defense stance. Every time he gets close, Volkov lands a swift kick on his front knee, trying to distract him from protecting his upper body. One time, Carlos reaches for his foot, and Volkov makes a half-turn, landing a big right on his eye. The swelling grows fast and Carlos is getting nervous. Half the town bet on him, and now they cheer him forward.

"Fucking do something!" a man's voice rises above the others, reflecting the crowd's sentiment. Carlos charges a few times, trying to grab Volkov, and gets hit some more. And then once, he anticipates Volkov's sidestep. Or gets lucky. They both fall to the ground, and Carlos wins the jackpot. Somehow, he manages to get behind his opponent and put a chokehold on him.

Volkov knows he's done for, in a few seconds anyway. He resists every fighter's reflex to grab the choking arm. Five seconds, tops. He puts some rotation in his body and they both roll over, Carlos landing on his back. Four seconds. Volkov shifts a bit sideways, grabs his fist in his left hand and aims the elbow downwards. Three seconds. Carlos has a soft belly, but he takes the hit like nothing. Two seconds. One more hit, another one. The third hit allows some blood in Volkov's faltering brain. One more. Every hit has that sweet prize now, a bit of oxygenated blood. When Carlos finally lets go, Volkov is fully conscious. Springing up, he lands a thundering heel kick in that sweet spot in the center, right below the ribs. Carlos curls up and starts vomitting, but Volkov isn't done yet. Kneeling down, he hits the side of his face, over and over, like he wanted to bury it in the ground. When Carlos raises his hands, Volkov turns him on his back and lands hit after hit, like he wanted to obliterate that face. He had nothing against Carlos personally. He hadn't cared about the bet, or Niki being fucked senseless. Not before the fight started, or after. He just wanted to smash a face in.

The referee screams in his ear, too scared for his life to touch Volkov. One more hit.

"F'ksake stop!!" One more. And he stops. Covered in his opponent's blood and bits of vomit, he stands up and raises his arms in a V. The audience is frantic, and Volkov's voice rises over them, like a lion's roar over the savannah. And they roar with him, forgetting for a moment or two that just then, they'd lost all their salt in a sure bet.

When the noises die down, Volkov points his bloodied arm at the mechanic, who now looks like he's shat his overalls.

"Bring it here, and fast," he commands him, and the tweed jacket scatters away, bringing back a set of yard-long pliers. By that time, Volkov is surrounded by people, everybody wants to get that blood on their fingers, and touch the lion. He hears Niki's shriek over their voices, and separates the crowd with his arms.

"It's okay, it's okay. Let him do it." She nods her head and stands there, trembling, while a piece of cold metal rests against her neck, and then something snaps and the bicycle chain falls to the ground.

"Nice doing business with you," Volkov shouts after the retreating figure. The crowd is slowly dispersing, and nobody cares about Carlos. Volkov glances back, notes he is still breathing. Then he goes to fetch his stuff. Ever seen a lion licking his opponent's wounds?

Niki is too distraught to say a word, and Volkov barely notices her. He'd sort of cleaned himself with a towel and put on his clothes when a man approaches them. It's the commander, now in military greens. He'd been sitting in the shade all this time.

"Seems like I own the city now," he says with a smile, nodding to a large sack of salt at his feet.

"Good for you."

"Meet me at the gate when you're done. Got something to tell you."

"No can do. I need a drink."

"I'll wait."

"Good luck with that," says Volkov with a scoff, puts on his backpack and walks away. After two steps, he tugs at something, but it's no longer there. He stops and laughs, then carries on, laughing all the way.

When he enters the bar, all goes quiet. Volkov doesn't savor the moment, just like a lion doesn't celebrate being king of the jungle. It's a job and a reality, not a golden lottery ticket. Slowly, he walks up to the barman.

"I left a beer here last night." Guy's pouring the glass before Volkov finishes the sentence.

"And the girl?" he asks. Only then does Volkov notice Niki behind him.

"What do you want?" Her voice is quiet, like it was her and not Carlos lying in the pit.

"L..lemonade."

"What kind?" She looks across the words sketched out in chalk across an old schoolboard hanging above the bar.

"Elderflower."

Volkov remembered he'd left many more beers in the bar the previous night, so it wasn't before noon that he got up and decided to set off.

"One more thing I left here."

"A bottle of schnaps," the barman made an experienced guess. He went from fear to admiration to acceptance, the three stages that he knew very well.

"That will do." Niki had sipped her lemonade, then gone off to play with the cat by the stove. He had barely noticed her, his eyes buried in the depths of that ever-changing, sparkling universe. And the barman, having overcome fear, admiration and acceptance, realized once again that even the king of the jungle has to bow before him, the emperor in this palace.

"Just one. If you sign on that board over there. And do a hand print." He handed him a bottle of ink and a brush, and Volkov staggered towards the far wall. There was a man-sized piece of plywood with the words 'Hall of Champions' on top, and he scribbled 'VOLKOV' in big letters and printed his hand next to it. Only then did he realize how many came before him. Dozens of hands and scribbled names, some hands larger than life. All of them lions, kings of the jungle, their manes flying black and proud in their day, now defeated, greying, sick, forgotten or dead. He realized he should have savored the moment. You're king for a day, but an old man for a lifetime.

He had forgotten about the commander, so he was surprised to see him at the gate. His military greens blended in with the mouldy wall he was resting against, but now he got up and greeted them with a smile. He shook Volkov's hand and then he turned to Niki.

"Before you leave, I want to ask you something, and I want you to tell me the truth. Are you a nightwalker?"

"No," Volkov said.

"Yes," Niki replied.

"She's hallucinating, don't listen to her." The commander ignored him.

"Good. Then I want to show you something. Follow me."

"We're leaving," Volkov said resolutely, tugging at an invisible chain.

"We're not," said Niki and turned to follow the commander. He wanted to grab her, but something stopped him, like there was a chain around his neck, hardwired to a star. He followed them at a distance while Niki and the commander talked. Soon, they arrived at a clearing behind one of the buildings. There was a tall tree stump in the center, burnt black.

"I wanted to show you this." Niki began trembling, just a little. "When we came here, it was a cherry tree. We turned it into this. Last spring, there were new saplings springing out from the trunk and the roots. This spring, there may be nothing." He turned to Niki and lowered his body, crouching on the ground, so now Niki was taller than him.

"If you make it through the mountains, and if you come back... I just wanted to let you know what we did to people like you. There were women. Kids. If you come back, you decide. Maybe, we're not worth it anymore." He got up and motioned them to follow him back to the gate. It was only then that Niki stopped trembling. At the gate, the commander turned to Volkov.

"She's a clever kid. I'm not the commander you met last night, but I guess she already knows that." Volkov's mouth is wide open now.

"Yeah, yeah. We're twin brothers, and the only way to run this place is to alternate. Him one day, me the next. Guess it wasn't your lucky day."

"We were more than lucky," Volkov said. He'd already sobered up, and now he's fishing in his backpack. Then he lands a little bottle in the commander's hand.

"Want some new saplings on that cherry tree? Try this. Volkov's signature zombie cure." Then he chuckles. "No. Volkov's and Niki's cure. Got more schnaps in the bar?"

"Uh-uh," the commander nods his head. "What's this?"

"Sleeping pills. Two shots, two pills, let them sleep it off. See if it works." As they part their ways, the commander remembers one last thing. From his breast pocket, he produces a small object wrapped in colorful, crumpled plastic.

"For you," and he hands it to Niki. It's a chocolate bar. It rests on her outstretched hand, and suddenly she gets this stinging sensation in her eyes, and so she rubs them with her jacket sleeve. It's an uncomplicated residue of a world she'd once left behind. Volkov said that once. Or maybe he didn't. It doesn't matter. Now it's her piece of nostalgic junk.

## Chapter Eight

*in which some questions are answered and we witness several distinct effects of schnaps, namely in music, oratory, keeping a calm mind and preventing infection*

The mining town was the last vestige of civilisation, but not the last vestige of humanity. As Niki and Volkov walked up the road, the snow cracking underneath their feet, one last bit of open, flat scenery lay bare before them, a mountain lake and a long, concrete bridge running across it, with a cabin at the far end. The bridge, an architectonic wonder on its own, was now covered with ice that ran all the way down to the surface of the lake, creating wondrous shapes, the kinds you see in caverns, as the icy cones, once sharp, became one with the icy surface, their spikes mellowed, turning into pillars - changelings with every coming spring and winter.

At the bridge opening, Volkov took out his mattress and sat down.

"Tea," he said.

"We just left," Niki said, and he didn't say anything in response. He brewed them tea. Then, they drank in silence, one he intended to break.

"We're not crossing that bridge," he said.

"There's another way?"

"No." Again, they drank in silence. And then, they just sat, having no more tea to drink.

"I want you to tell me something," Volkov said at last. Niki just stared at him. He sat there and rubbed his fingers, like every time he had to make more than two sentences at once.

"You know, sometimes things don't make much sense. Like the radiation thing, the...*breach*. Or the commander. He was right, you're a clever kid. But you couldn't know, you just couldn't. Or the lock on that chain. You counted the numbers?" Niki was quiet.

"Tell me." He felt something had broken inside her, like a pair of cogs got jammed but the machinery kept going. He noticed she shifted further away from him.

"No," she said. Something told her there was no point in lying, like Volkov had made up his mind already anyway.

"I knew you didn't. It's not like you. Then how did you open it?" Niki answers very slowly, cautious around every word.

"Sometimes, I can see shapes. Or colors around people."

"Like the commander was a different color?"

"Yes."

"And the lock?"

"I saw some shapes, and then...I touched the lock, and found the right shapes." It was some time before Volkov spoke again.

"Sounds like bollocks. Supernatural bullshit. You know why I asked you? I just feel that...sometimes you get lucky, and sometimes, you trust your luck, or that bullshit. And because of that, you get suicidal. Like when you think a poem is a magic spell. Or like back in my house. You can't be suicidal in the mountains." Niki watched him for a long time, resisting an urge she's always had, and then failing to resist it. It's something she's always wanted to do, been afraid to do, and maybe now, there was no point in waiting.

"Test me," she said. And after a while: "Test me. Four numbers."

"No. And you shouldn't believe in nonsense." Now, the urge was even stronger, an urge to prove herself.

"You said you made a promise. Back in town. You didn't want to tell me. If I guess the numbers, you will tell me." She was right, Volkov didn't want to talk about it. For a moment, he felt like a character in a story, being pushed towards a sweet deal he could not resist.

"Bloody hell," he said, spitting on the ground. "Okay then. Four numbers." He thought of four digits, like on a combination lock, materialized them in his head. They were 9-4-7-9. Niki grabbed a stick and started drawing in the snow.

First, she drew two circles, and two vertical lines between them, like this:

o | | o

Then, she looked around, and changed the second line to a katana, held in a defensive stance by Volkov's hand. She erased the first line and replaced it with the drawing of a chair. And finally she added a tail, to the bottom of each circle, so now it looked like this:

She was about to turn to Volkov, but at the last moment, she said:

"Wait. The katana is cutting through something." And she added a horizontal line:

q ↗ 7 q

"This is it," she said, looking at Volkov.

"This could be anything," Volkov said.

"No. This was...around your head."

"Say the numbers. I want the numbers." Somehow, in a rare fit of pride, Niki felt like a schoolkid forced to do addition when he can already calculate in four dimensions.

"Circle with a tail, like this. It must be a nine. Chair...chair, that's a four. And this, this looks like seven. It's 9-4-7-9."

"Bullshit. You got lucky," Volkov said.

He had to tell her. It wasn't pretty, but he had to. Volkov keeps his promises. They're designed for the weak; for people too afraid of their inner drives, and if he followed his inner drive, he'd keep his mouth shut. Or he'd tell a lie, with angels, and good elves, and unicorns shitting a rainbow. It never worked, but he would do it. Even now, when he half expects her to know if he's lying. He half expects her to get lucky.

Her mother didn't die right away, she talked. First she asked about her daughter, and finding out she was still alive, she asked Volkov to finish her off.

Niki's hands begin to shiver, and she hides them in the sleeves of her jacket. She wants to cry out, and banish those words into the land of lies, but she knows they wouldn't fit in.

Volkov remembered he nodded his head and then stopped. The moment wasn't fit for rational thought, but he realized it anyway. The mother's dying wish was to see her daughter dead. But maybe, she meant it as an act of mercy, like you put down a stray dog that's hurt. Like she didn't want her daughter to suffer.

She's a nightwalker, the mother whispered, in bloody bubbles. At that time, Volkov didn't know what it meant. And she asked him to make a promise. Either kill her, or take her where she wants to go.

Make a choice, Volkov thought. Not like Buridan's donkey, no - make a choice now. Still, he took days. After he'd turned the woman around and chopped at the back of her neck. Act of mercy. After he'd dug three holes in the clearing, started digging a fourth, then stopped. He hoped the girl wouldn't make it through the night. Then the next. He hated choices.

Something was building up inside Niki. A critical mass.

"And you promised," she whispered.

"Yes."

"Anything else?"

"Before she died...she said she loved you very much." He tried, Volkov did. You had to give him that.

"Fucking liar." Niki jumped up and disappeared into the forest. Thoughtfully, slowly, he lit the gas cooker and put the kettle on. Then, he brewed tea. He poured some tea into a single cup. He waited, for a few minutes, then he added schnaps. He drank. All this time, there were screams coming from the forest, there were the sounds of cracking branches and trees falling and rocks being thrown, all this interrupted by long periods of silence. He poured himself another cup, added schnaps again, and drank. There was only one sun bathing his body now, coming from within and dissolving in his bones. And that sun was a dead star.

She came much later, her sleeves torn and her arms bloodied.

"Tea," Volkov said when she sat down. He filled her cup and added schnaps. She drank. Then she signalled she wanted more, and he made her more. He wanted to talk, but the whole situation made him as mute as a fish.

There are two things common to all hermits, and generally to all people living alone - they are cautious, and they do not seek company. Niki and Volkov had already crossed the bridge towards the cabin and the light inside beckoned them. They had covered but a short distance that afternoon, but the twists and turns of the day set weariness in their bones. And also, Niki's arms had to be washed and treated, and her sleeves

needed stitching. Volkov noticed a half-concealed bear trap on the footpath and motioned Niki to walk around it, then knocked on the door. In no time, there was a shotgun barrel pressed against his belly.

The man wielding it was older than Volkov, so much Niki gathered from the color of his beard, for he had no hair. He looked them over, noticed the greyness in Niki's eyes and asked what her name was.

"St Agnes," Niki replied, with a sad smile and a bow. The man's eyes lit up, and then he squinted at Volkov.

"Got schnaps?" he croaked. Volkov raised his left hand, wrapped firmly around the bottle neck.

"And salt?" Volkov nodded. The man noticed Niki's bloodied arms.

"You fought a bear or what?"

"Something like that," Volkov said.

"St Agnes and the bear," he murmurs, then walks backwards and waves at them to come in.

They sat in old, weathered armchairs around the fireplace and Niki was busy rubbing schnaps - just a little bit, there, Volkov said - in the cuts in her forearms, then stitching up the sleeves of her army issue winter jacket. They'd once found it in a ransacked warehouse and she remembered Volkov telling her, with a straight face, that there must be a secret battalion of dwarves somewhere, wearing those jackets. It fit Niki perfectly.

The men drank schnaps and talked about places she had long forgotten, and never visited. Now, she thought, these places must have new names, or no names at all. After a while, Volkov spotted a guitar in the corner of the room, brought it back and played a few songs from his homeland. Niki sensed nostalgia in them, and regret, weariness and old age, but she also felt that for Volkov, it was an act. Like he sang about, dunno, maybe a friend or a wife he once left, and he could mimic their tone of voice, and their words, but he couldn't put any emotion into them.

They talk between the songs, in voices that change ever so slightly, with every glass of schnaps. Niki learns that the man has lived here for much of his life, and the four wives that came and went always took the children with them, spreading far and wide. The man believes all his kids inherited that wonderful trait - baldness at a young age - and it would be a blast to see them all together now.

Later, they talk about the goal of Niki's journey. It looks like all nightwalkers call the mountain by the same name - Zen mountain. Niki recollects the name, but she doesn't know where she got it. Also, people have all sorts of ideas about what's on top of the mountain. Volkov can't stop laughing as the man recounts these bizarre feats of imagination, and Niki realizes she's also smiling. They say there's a roast pig over a fire, and whatever piece you eat, it grows back up. There's a time machine. A wishing well - and it gives you the one thing you want the most. Twenty-seven virgins who never age. A large hall with bottomless caskets of mead. A tree bearing fruit that grants immortality. And for Niki, there's a Vermeer. A port you can walk into, and a sea more watery than any sea in the world.

Later still, the man takes out a bottle of his own and they talk about the end of the world. The man hears stories, from people in town, from nightwalkers who pass through here and never come back, and if they do, they just rage and kill and conquer, but not here - and noone can agree what happened when the end of the world came. Niki remembers Volkov once said that information is the most fragile resource. Or maybe he didn't say that. She also realizes nobody seems to have really seen it - the end of the world. Nobody talks about the black holes in the ground, holes that buried whole streets, whole apartment blocks. Maybe, Niki thinks, her memories are as crumpled and withered as everybody else's, and the disappearing streets are just another false memory, like something she has seen while in fact, she hasn't.

Volkov, however, knows exactly what happened, then, and before that. The world flipped, he says. Then, and then many times before that, every time the human race did something unspeakable.

"Like in the war," he says. "There were millions, going, like that." He snaps his fingers. "And the whole world just...watched. And they ate their little sardines from a can, and played Pokemon. Did fuck all. And then came the flip." He explains that every flip brings chaos into the world. Like it was some sort of compensation. Chaos - breaches, and swathes, and dreams that are like viruses, and suicide cults, and dead seas and mountains that are nothing but a mirage, an Atlantis that never existed, and he rambles on and on, and the old man listens and then says - what a load of horseshit. Niki believes there are monsters underground, but nobody really asks her opinion.

Much later, she is curled up on a mattress, eyes closed, with a sleeping pill she spat out and covered with her hair, and the men keep talking, in lower voices now.

"You been in the war?"

"Uh-uh."

"Volunteer batallion," Volkov added, to clear things out. He spoke slowly, and every now and then, a stray hiccup cut a sentence in half. "The enemy were useless, just a bu...bunch of inbreds. They made...one good offensive, one. In the whole fucking war."

"I remember!" The old man caught a bunch of imaginary hair on his skull, frowning, trying to squeeze out the memory.

"It was...led by a woman," Volkov said. Suddenly, the man's eyes opened wide, and he shot his arms out in the air.

"Lieutenant Irina Volkova!" he exclaimed, slapping his forehead. And then he stopped, his hand over his head, staring at Volkov.

"Was she..." he whispered, but Volkov was already in a place of his own.

"For once, they didn't hi...hide behind, artillery fire. Or tanks, no no no. They just...charged. Like in the old days. A fucking wave. They over..overpowered us. Most men...they escaped. Some, died. They were closing in, no rounds left, so I hid. I hid in a cesspool. In a garden. Pulled the cover, over me. Drow...drowning in those fumes, in some poor dead fucker's shit. And then I heard..."

"Her voice," the old man said.

"Her voice," Volkov said, like he didn't hear him. "Shouting orders over my head. And at that mo...moment, I knew." The shot glass is now small and fragile in Volkov's hand. "I knew I didn't join the war, because it was the rye...the right thing to do. I joined, the war, because, I was...running. And so I did that. All over again. I ran. Another country. Built a house. And then..."

"End of the world."

"Yeah," Volkov said, having woken up to the present moment.

"How did you get her on your back?" the old man nods towards Niki.

"Long story."

"Long night."

The old man leaned over the fire, balancing on one foot like he was on a tightrope, and soon, another log brought the embers back to life. It was a long story, sure, but Volkov told it anyway.

A while before dawn, the bald man remembers something as he is looking into the fire.

"There was a song I liked. A bear and a fox walk across the mountains, dying of hunger. The bear has a vision of St Agnes, and then he throws himself off a cliff so the fox could feed on him and live. I just wonder, which one of you is the bear, and which one of you is the fox." He notices Volkov has dozed off in the armchair.

Niki is the last one to fall asleep. She believes she is a fox, but she would really like to be a bear. She can walk through a mind. Two minds. And, when she becomes a bear, when she throws herself off a cliff, who's gonna walk through her mind? Who's gonna make her into a ghost? So she could live on, in fog, but her mind still there, in thin air, amongst the droplets, joking, and serene. And alive. Noone can. Only her. So she has to live. Would the ghosts die with her? And, if she became a ghost, would they travel with her? And if...

## Chapter Nine

*where an avalanche is met with magic and ghosts give out a warning*

Every mountain, when seen from a distance, seems easy to climb, every mountain range seems easy to cross. Volkov knew that, and he had hoarded food, and the best equipment they could find, but still, they were pitifully under-equipped for what they were about to face. It had taken them months to collect all their gear, and by then, late summer had changed into late autumn, the second worst season for a crossing.

Soon after they'd left the old man's cabin the next morning, Volkov's hangover making him curse and spit and drag his feet, they saw the bridge was a sign of what was about to come. It was formed - Niki discovered while both men were still asleep - by a mountain spring that somehow changed its course and poured onto the bridge and then over it. The mountains behind it, however, defied all reason. It seemed that, just like spruce trees lifting up cabins, they were rejuvenated by human absence, and winter took hold of them, never to let go. In some places, trees were fighting a losing battle against the ever-thickening cover of snow, and those pinned against the rocks seemed to be dying in vain hope of a spring that would never come, like there was no solstice, and no virgin sacrifices to bring back the sun. The few roads and footpaths had long disappeared.

On their first climb, Volkov unwrapped the two ice axes and taught Niki how to break her fall if she slips and slides down. They did the drill in different positions until she could do it reasonably well. The axes were connected by ten yards of rope, and the idea was that Volkov climbs first, leaning forward, Niki right behind him, and whenever she slips, she lets out a shout and he buries his axe in the snow. This way, they stand a better chance of staying on the slope.

"What if you fall?" Niki asks, and she half expects him to say *I won't*, like with everything else. Long, long time ago, she unlearned the habit of scratching the surface of every mind, for it robbed her of surprises. Volkov ponders the idea for a while.

"This is a very good question," he says at last, like he's never thought of it before. "Now, you never climb behind me, but a bit to the side. Like this. And when I fall, you bury the axe in the snow, like this, and you save me. Let's practice." A moment later, Volkov slips and falls, and lets out a piercing, desperate cry, throwing his legs and arms in the air, while Niki buries her axe in the snow, just like he told her, and soon enough, both of them are sliding down the slope, and now it's Niki screaming her lungs out, while Volkov's laughter resonates through the mountains, and then he turns around and lands his axe deep underneath him.

Wind-beaten, slippery slopes alternate with areas of deep snow, in mountain saddles, leeward sides, in the shallow valleys and the disappearing woodland. They use their snowshoes in those places, and Niki looks like a midget walking on a tightrope. Good thing Volkov doesn't see her, because in areas like these, he keeps watching the slopes for signs of a coming avalanche.

Long before dusk, they would start looking for a place to sleep. Volkov always looked for an area with deep snow, beneath a rocky summit. Niki would have loved to spend the night on the peak rather than beneath it; that's how she imagined wolves howling at night, and that's where she'd often talk to it: the night. On top of rocks, and trees, and roofs, and summits. Before nightfall, they'd dig in the snow and build it around them, so there was some kind of semi-igloo on the slope, protecting them from all sides but for a small hole in the side, big enough for one Volkov and two Nikis. One of those nights, she crept out, just boots, shirt and a blanket, and climbed on top of the summit above, one ice axe in each hand.

They are restless tonight. Every now and then, one of them does a pirouette, turning around quickly, and the drops of fog disperse into a cloud before they form the ghost again. For a very short moment, that which spins at the center of that cloud is just pure, fogless air.

"Are you cold?" Niki asks.

*Been warmer*, Misha says.

*Me too*, Adri nods her head. *Really tho, look at you. Just a blanket, and a nekkid butt?*

*Nekkid butt!* Misha echoes her sister.

"Nah, I'm fine."

*Soon, you won't be*, Misha says.

*You won't be, soon*, Adri whispers. *Look at them muntins there.* Niki can see them now, moonlit, rising into the clouds and over, like in her dream when she crashed into the rock.

*We tried to cross them.*

*We did.*

"The hell you did," Niki says.

*We couldn't, Misha says. They were too...*

*Uphilly*, Adri says.

"Of course you couldn't. Ghosts can't...what the hell? Ghosts don't climb. Or anything."

*We. Can. Do. Anything*, the twins hiss in unison.

"The muntins, tho. You can't."

*Ewrythin, but the muntins*, Adri says after a pause. And Niki goes for the jugular.

"You're dead. You can't even wipe your own butt." Somehow, the night hugs them all, and calms them down.

*Bunch of deadlings, you*, she says.

When Niki slips back into her sleeping bag, her nekkid butt feels half frozen. She wishes that sometimes, the night's hug was a warm and cuddly one, but it never is.

Even when Niki walks like a drunken midget, the journey is a monotonous creep forward. Not so much on the first day, but more so on the second and later on, a bit like a time she now barely remembers, one step forward, lift your foot and balance on the edge of sleep, but now it's snow. And it's like that for her especially: unlike any other hiker or hopeful mountaineer, she's not here for the scenery. Other scenes and sceneries surface in her mind, and she tells herself, not this one, not yet, and then she remembers the afternoon she spent with the twins, before the end of the world.

They were in a shopping mall, the twins and her, and mother behind them, she'd call her mum back then. It was Lia's birthday, and a shopping list was made, by the three of them, two yards long, and it included five rocking ponies, chocolate cake, as large as the sun, and about two tonnes of sprinkling, oozing and shiny things that could be eaten and hung up at the same time.

"Remember the cake!" Niki shouts out to mum, just before they disappear in the aisles. And then: "Chocolate!" Half her head turns up behind the stacks of bottled ice tea, before the twins drag her out of sight. For days and hours, they walk along the aisles, trying on things and discarding them, sometimes just discarding them right away. Later, they spot a push scooter stand in the sports section. They wait, patiently, until the shop assistant turns around, and then they pinch one. It's bright yellow, with orange flames on the side. Niki's up front, Misha holding her hips and Adri in the back, steering the rear. On the second turn, with the assistant screaming behind them, the scooter changes shape. Niki grabs a can of air freshener while Adri pulls on the box of shelves, making it collapse behind them.

"And this, ladies and gentlemen, is a first class steam engine," Niki shouts out so everybody knows, and she puffs the air freshener, holding it upside down, as they race through the main aisle, with people jumping aside. When a security guard blocks their path, she lands the half-empty can on his head, and he stumbles and falls backwards.

"Yeah!" Niki shouts.

"Avalanche!" Volkov screams from a side aisle, climbing a spruce tree that was shipped in there for Christmas.

When they burst out of the mall and collapse into a parody bonsai tree, Niki notices mum's car. One door is open. They sprint and then hop in, and mum starts reversing, so Niki closes the door just in time. A security guard runs behind them. They can see him through the back and then he jumps in front of the car, waving his arms frantically. Mum lowers her side window and the guard walks around the front to talk to her, his face all red and fuming. A glance inside the car, and he can see three kids sitting mute and upright, like schoolgirl mummies.

"They your kids?" he shouts right in mum's face, and she doesn't wince, smiling back at him.

"No." And with that, the car propels forward.

"Avalanche!" Volkov screams from some other universe, and suddenly the car roof flies off and Niki sees a big snowy cloud rolling down the slope towards them, while Volkov shouts, "Fukcing climb! Now!" and then: "Turn around, your back towards it. Lean on the tree. Hold on to it!" And Niki wraps around the trunk with her arms and legs but doesn't turn around.

As the first snowflakes hit their eyes, Niki flips back, from the supermarket and from mum's car, and she starts shouting against the roar of the snow, like it was the kind of thing you do when a wall of ice hits your face:

"St Agnes Eve! A bitter chill! It was!" They're both holding on to the tops of hopeless trees, just a few yards above the ground, as the snowy mayhem rolls through and above them.

"Don't let go!" Volkov screams at the top of his lungs.

"The owl! For all its feeethers!" Niki answers.

"Was a-cold!" Volkov screams, as a wave of snow overpowers him.

"The hare! Limped! Through! The frozen! Grass!" they both scream through the snow.

"Silent! Flock! Wooly! Fold!" And still, their voices are heard through the cover.

"Batman's! Fingers! While he told! His rosary!" And the duo scream, scream, through the silence, for there is no more snow to roll, or fall.

## Chapter Ten

*in which a climb is attempted, a proper mountain borsch is served and some worlds flip*

It took them another five days to reach the *muntins* ahead, and every morning, they seemed larger, taking more and more of the horizon, until there was no horizon at all, just a steep wall of ice, rock and snow, reaching into the clouds and further, further up. When they looked back on that day, the terrain they had crossed looked like hills, like they hadn't gone through any mountains at all.

The five days had been hard for Niki. Maybe for Volkov as well, but he didn't say anything and she was too tired to look. Food they had plenty, or so they thought. At the bottom of Volkov's backpack, there was a large bag of barley, wheat and oats they had collected in the lowlands, day by day, grain by grain. Each grain stripped, seared in a pot and kept dry. A handful of these, when mixed with two handfuls of snow and boiled, made for a nutritious dinner. It wasn't tasty, but it did the job, even for Tabby. Food they had plenty. Keeping warm was the problem. With every climb, Niki's sweat bit into her shirt and her socks. The inside of her boots absorbed some of it, and each morning, her feet were met with a freezing sensation that didn't really go away. She'd change her socks every other night, then one evening, she hung up her shirt on the rope between the two ice axes, and wore a spare one. In the morning, the shirt was stiff. Folded in half, it opened like an old, creaky book. To Niki, it was suddenly an entirely different object, and she threw it up in the air, and then tossed it across the snow like a frisbee.

Volkov told her to crumple the shirt and she did, though it was hard. And when she shook it, flocks of tiny ice crystals broke off, and it almost looked like fog, like a ghost inhabited her shirt that night and she was chasing it out, piece by piece.

None of her clothes really dried completely, even when she chased ghosts out of them. Her feet felt cold, and so did her back, with every step. It's still good when it hurts, Volkov said. Tell me when it stops. And she didn't - she forced her feet, her whole self, into numbness, like a nightwalker, but this time, she disappeared into mum's house, her own room with a view of the twins' bedroom, and the tin roof, and there was pain plenty, and sharper than cold feet.

First, the wet shirt reminded her of the night she pissed herself, and she banished the memory immediately, as it made her collapse in the snow, and throw up. Volkov was concerned. Not this memory, not now. Volkov's mind may be a junkyard, but Niki's mind is a rabbit hole with many doors and windows in the sides, and chambers behind them. Walk in the right chambers, take it step by step, little by little, and fight the freezing sensation in her feet.

She remembered Lia's birthday which never happened. After they had come back from the supermarket, mum went off to make some arrangements and the twins and Niki played word games in the living room, with the curtains drawn and lights off, so it felt creepy, but it also felt good, in a cuddly kind of way.

It also felt long, though the time they spent together always passed quickly. However, this was a different kind of long, like when you're having a great time but you're expecting something and it doesn't come. At last, the light came on in the hall and mother called out to them. Their three heads appeared in the crack in the door, one above the other, like in a cartoon. She threw out her arms and they shot out of the room to get a hug.

Mum smelt of rum. Niki knew that smell. It had, like other smells, a time allocated for each part of day, and this was an evening smell, supposed to come around bedtime. Just that now, it was stronger, more immediate. When she went down on her knees and started crying, they realized something was wrong, terribly wrong. And when she got up and told them to hide in the bedroom, Niki broke off and burst out of the main door, mum screaming behind her, and ran and ran down the street, then the main street, and then an apartment block in front of her just sank into the ground.

Niki's numbness lasts only so long. Volkov isn't a great observer, but he's very good at routines. With every break now, he tells her to take off her mittens and rub her hands together, then take off her shoes and do the same with her feet. The latter is hilarious at first, because Niki looks like a crab turned on its back, but then it becomes another, boring routine.

Niki remembers the months after, as her mother slowly changed. If she had the wisdom and breadth of perspective, she'd know all mothers change when kids turn her age - from lovely friends to boring, slightly embarrassing aliens that serve you dinner. She didn't have the wisdom or the breadth of perspective. Also, everybody changed around that time.

Raiding the shops, days one and two. Niki only heard about it from mum, who'd go on raids in her SUV and then come back, with a hoard or empty-handed, smiling or bruised but still, smiling. The desperate

shop assistants would try to organize the customers, like the mall was a humanitarian aid convoy. Then, in one shop, someone took out a shotgun, and the word spread. And then the shop assistants gave up and began hoarding food themselves.

Mum often talked to the twins' grandma, and share a bit of food with her. Sometimes. At least at the beginning. From their conversations, Niki learnt that everything pretty much collapsed, like a house of cards. A job is only good when it pays, and even if it did, to most people, their family comes before their job. Few people came to wear a police uniform on the third day, the army dispersed and even in hospitals, terminally ill patients administered morphine shots themselves, after raiding the cabinet at the nurses' station. Others, if they could walk, took it through the canteen and then out, somewhere. If there was a place to go.

One week in, schools became temporary shelters for those who were afraid to stay in apartment blocks, which had turned into war zones or private gulags run by those who carried the authority of a loaded weapon. Others left their flats to get away from the foul smell of blocked sewers.

Those hiding in the schools, and banks, and administrative buildings were like sheep, waiting to be delivered, and hearded, and fed. Someone should come and sort things out, they said. And then someone came, or not, and the places became private gulags, or war zones.

Many people though, they tried to get away. Most roads and highways became clogged on day one, then fights broke out, cars burned. Mum didn't want to get away. She'd always tell Niki to barricade the front door when she left on a scavenging hunt. After a week, she came back with nothing many days in a row, and stopped smiling.

Everybody changed. Once, Niki went out into the street and she was chased into a tree by a man with a pitchfork. She hopped from branch to branch, like a squirrel, as the three blades cut into the leaves, a few inches from her side. Mum chased the man away with her voice. She could still do that, back then.

Everybody changed, Niki believed, except for her and the twins. They'd sit on the tin roof as the sun went down, and drew a line in the metal, for every schoolkid that was gone. Lia, Sumi, Ruslan, Ai-wei: disappeared as a birthday party sank to the ground. Iris - stabbed to death when stealing from a neighbor's cellar. Helen - got bit by a rat, died in a fever. Maki - beaten and stoned by a boy gang at a parking lot. Katya - drank water from a tap and coughed her insides out. Many more were gone, but they never heard of them.

As the story nears the night Niki pissed herself, she chases it out of her mind, and focuses on the freezing sensation in her boots, one step, then the next, ice axe in the snow, one more step. The pain has rhythm, it comes when expected. Such pain is good pain.

On day five, they reach the steep mountain range, extending into the clouds and beyond. They look back, then ahead, and Volkov knows they're in trouble.

"If we climb this, and another one, there's...there's St Bernard Pass." He knows they have no real climbing equipment, save for the two axes, some more rope, a few railroad spikes and butcher's hooks.

"They breed dogs in the pass," he says. "They carry caskets of brandy around on their necks. That's where we're going." Niki looks unimpressed; she senses the random urban legends and other nonsense Volkov is pumping into himself, to boost his spirits, and Volkov, in turn, senses her fear.

"Large, fluffy dogs," he says. No, that's no use. "Snow turkeys. Hunt them, roast them."

"Snow turkeys?"

"Yes. White feathers. They think they can hide in the snow, but they can't." Niki is still unimpressed.

It takes another half a day for them to reach the side of the mountain, and then the real climb begins, up a saddle that's also lost in the clouds, and they can only guess what's up there.

Every station is ten yards apart, and it involves a set of routine tasks. Volkov lands a spike in the hardened snow, hitting it with the back of his knife. Then, he attaches the end of their spare rope to his backpack and ties it around the spike. Niki holds on to one ice axe, he takes the other and climbs up, the axe in his right and a spike in his left. When the rope between the axes stretches, he lands the axe in the snow, plants the spike beside it, then another one and hangs a butcher's hook into each. Then, he shouts out to Niki. Using one hook as a pulley, he heaves up his backpack and hangs it on the other hook. Then, he pulls up hers. When he's grabbed it and hung it on the hook, he plants a third spike, ties the rope around it and Niki climbs up, using the rope and her ice axe. When she's reached Volkov's station, he climbs further up, and this goes on and on, ten yards at a time.

The wind is stronger up here, biting into their skin, and Niki is fully awake into the present moment, and concentrated. She knows that one clumsy move could mean a hook or spike lost, and they don't have many. And dropping a backpack, that would mean death as certain as one of them falling down. She knows that herself, even though Volkov tells her every single time she climbs up to him.

When night falls, they're still trapped on the slope, and Volkov realizes that starting the climb mid-day was a dumb idea. He noticed Niki slowed down as evening came, and went mute, save for the heavy breathing that came from the bottom of her lungs, and withdrawn, like Volkov wasn't even there. She's a nightwalker, so she can go without sleep, but her energy reserves aren't endless.

He puts on his headlamp and turns it on, for just a few seconds every time, to assess the terrain ahead. On their next change, he ties Niki's right hand to her ice axe, by the wrist, and she barely notices. He turns his head upwards, to look ahead. And then he sees it. He switched to that single, long-distance ray of light, and what he thought was a saddle ends in a large mass of rock, running straight up, as far as he can see. At the same moment, Niki moans beside him. Turning his head, he sees her hanging from the ice axe by the wrist.

"I can't..." He pulls her upwards.

"Spread your feet. Grab it, left hand."

"I can't feel..."

"Spread your feet, goddamnit!" A wave of ice crystals splashes against their faces, then another one. A gust of roaring wind hits them from the side. The rock above has disappeared, and he can barely see Niki below. He fumbles for the head lamp, turns the full beam on. Niki's but a shadow behind a wall of snow. The storm tears between them, and they're like two flies stuck to the front window of intercity speedrail.

"Twenty yards. Can you make it?" His words are carried away on the wind. Of course she can't - half alive. He can, on a suicide mission.

He hits the two railroad spikes, driving them as deep in the snow as he can. He adds two more, with two hooks, pushes the rope through all four and attaches his backpack underneath, one knot on each side, and Niki's backpack under that. Then he makes sure his ice axe is buried solid, and swings along the slope to get close to her. He can see her talking to him, but he can't hear a word.

"Up here. You will rest," he shouts in her face. One more spike, and a hook which becomes a pulley. Inch by inch, he heaves her upwards. She tries to hold on to something with her feet, but it's no use. When they're level with the backpack, he pats her back, makes a gesture and she climbs onto it.

"Rest! Rope, here! Under your shoulders!" He grabs the loose end, tying it to his waist, then frees the other axe and starts climbing.

"Rub your hands together! Move your feet!" He shouts from above. No way she could hear him. And still, he hears her voice, faintly, like it was coming from inside him and not from below.

*I will. Rub my hands...together. Can't...feel my feet.* He's got to be hallucinating, but he keeps shouting anyway.

"Take off your boots!"

*Cannot...lose my boots.*

"Take one, untie the shoelace, tie it to the other one. Take it off."

*Okay.*

"Rub your foot with your hands, until you feel it!"

*Okay.*

"Then the other one. Got it?"

*Yes.*

"Don't wriggle too much or you fall!"

*Got it.*

He keeps climbing up the slope. Some hallucinations are mild, some are mental. Others look useful. There may be ten yards of the rope around his waist, maybe less. When it stretches, he draws one more spike in the snow and ties the end around it. He hits the spike over and over. If something happens down below, Niki's life depends on that spike.

Up and up, one ice axe in each hand. A few yards more, and then the rock materializes before him. It looks like a huge wall of black, like a gate to hell, closed. He switches on the lamp, hoping to find something, anything. At that moment, the storm mellows down a little, and he can see a crevasse, right in front of him, leading onto a thin ledge, and then further above, there's a patch of flat snow between two rocks. To Volkov, that small patch shines into the night like a beacon, like a diamond, like the north star shines for Niki.

He buries one ice axe in a crack and makes sure it sits tight. On the downward climb, he discovers the rope with the axe extends a full yard below the spike. He ties the two ropes together and then shouts down below.

"How're you doing?"

"I'm good!" Niki shouts back, and they can hear each other now, for the storm has almost subsided.

"Can you climb?"

"Let's do it!"

"Okay! Hold the rope! Move onto the slope! Hold the rope with your feet! One hand! Unhook the backpack! Can you do it?"

"Yes!"

"Careful with the hooks!"

He climbs back up, waits for her to go past him and then pulls up their backpacks. He'll come for the spikes and hooks in the morning.

In the night, there was tea and some emergency reserves of schnaps. In the morning, there was a hearty breakfast of boiled barley, lentils and dried stock. Both Niki and Tabby asked for seconds. Before they hit the mountains, Volkov suggested mercy killing, but Niki was against it. And so, Volkov orchestrated a slower, more painful death for Tabby, involving frostbite, or maybe a lucky snap of a neck when they pulled their backpacks up the slope. By some weird twist of fate, Tabby survived it all. Just like them.

On the rocks, it was Niki leading the way. The black wall Volkov saw at night turned out to be more ragged in daylight. There were wide cracks in the stone, and ledges, and boulders large enough for them to rest on. Before the sun set, they crossed it sideways and ended up on a ridge, and there was enough sunlight left for Volkov to plan their next move. They go along the ridge, make a descent, then a long, moderate climb and there, that must be Saint Bernard Pass. He wouldn't shut up about it, Niki thought. Dogs carrying brandy. Snow turkeys.

Two days later, they reach the pass, and there are no snow turkeys. However, there is a two-storey log cabin, and the remnants of a cableway. They didn't expect a standing building so deep in the mountains. It'll allow them to dry their clothes, get warm - even if they have to burn the roof above their heads. Niki hasn't been warm in a long time. Volkov makes a customary knock on the door, and to their surprise, they hear the sound of cracking stairs and then a key turning in a lock.

A girl opens the door, flanked by two - Volkov guessed it - St Bernard dogs. No brandy.

"Welcome, travelers!" she sings in a high-pitched voice. She's in her late teens, maybe early twenties, and she's just given them the cutest smile.

"Come in, come in. Take off your backpacks, here, god, you must be cold! Here, lay your hands, here." There's a tile stove in the main room, and the outer shell is warm, the first real warmth they've felt in weeks.

"Oh gosh, my manners. We're so straightforward up here." She rubs her hand in her woolen sweater. "I'm Agnes. And this here is Rose and Goldie."

"Niki." She reacts first, though she's taken aback by the name, the one she likes to give. When she crouches to greet the dogs, they lick her hands. Their tongues are so large they can wrap around all her fingers.

"You taste good to them," Agnes giggles. "They don't always do that."

Volkov also introduces himself and shakes the girl's hand. He's more reserved, though he can't deny the warmth of the stove brought joy to his heart.

"Thank you, thank you very much. Tell me, Agnes, what kind of business are you running here?"

"Business?" she laughs and throws back her hair. "Oh my. No business in two years. There was no summer, no summer at all! Just snow, snow, snow! The cable rail went down. Would you believe it? Twenty people last year! Twenty!"

"You live alone?" Volkov inquires.

"No, not alone! My father's upstairs, but he's sick! I have to look after him. You know, I hoped, I really did, that some day, I could take Rose and Goldie down, you know, to a town, maybe see a movie show, you know? Like people do. But I can't leave my Dad here, and then the cable rail went down, oh my god, don't I just keep rambling? What about you, why have you come so far?"

"We're headed north," Volkov says.

"He's not much of a talker, is he?" Agnes turns to Niki and winks, and there's that smile again. "Where are you coming from?" Niki's warmed up already - to the stove, to the two large, spotted dogs, to Agnes.

"You know. End of the world, he kills my mum, we're headed for the dead sea, then we climb the mountain, and I kill him. The usual stuff."

"Oh my. End of the world? That sounds deep." And she sneezes into her sleeve.

"Bless you," Volkov says. Niki opens her eyes wide, for she never knew he had any manners.

"See?" Agnes continues. "Whenever I sneeze, that's something inside telling me I've got no manners. And I don't. You must be hungry, and I've just finished this amazing borsch, goddamnit, hope it hasn't burnt!" And she dances into the kitchen.

"I smell a fish," Volkov whispers.

"Is there a fish?" Niki inquires absent-mindedly, as she's rolling on the floor, one dog below her, one dog on top. "They really like me," she says.

The borsch really is amazing. It has real cabbage, real potatoes, and even a real sausage. Volkov hasn't tasted a sausage since last ice age, so he's the first one to ask for seconds. Damn it's good. Argh, he's going to rape the present perfect tense. He hasn't cooked a real meal since forever. This is a real meal.

Later, Agnes shows them where they can hang all their clothes, and unpack other wet stuff, and go to sleep. Volkov asks about a rare luxury - going to the latrine - while Niki stays with Agnes in the main room, fascinated by her whole being but also the fact that she doesn't give a damn about the end of the world.

The atmosphere mellows as Volkov leaves, and Agnes sprawls on the sofa in a posture that would be erotic in other settings, and here, it's just homely and relaxed. Niki watches the embers in the stove and rubs both dogs around their bellies.

"Five logs. Can you believe it?" Agnes says. "Five logs a day, look at the stove, it's Norwegian!"

"It's sweet," Niki says. "All of this. And you. It's like, I'm back. You know? Back at home. Just that, my home was never like that." Agnes giggles on the sofa.

"Come here, I'll show you something." As Niki draws near, she reaches into a basket and takes out a brown, shiny fruit and starts peeling it with a hunting knife. "Sweet chestnut. Have you ever had it?"

"No, what is it?" and Niki glances around her shoulder, eagerly.

Volkov walks towards the latrine like an old, grumpy bear. He hasn't seen one since he left his house, and now he's all choosy and he wishes there was toilet paper beside the toilet seat. And really, there's toilet paper, in a cute little hanger on the wall. He'd brought some tissues, for both of them, but Niki rarely shits. Neither does he. When he's made his dump, he looks down, switching on his head lamp. There's his shit, warm and steaming, among other people's shit. Most of it, he believes, is Agnes's shit. It looks just like his. It's funny how people's shit resembles each other. Then there is some waste coming down here from the kitchen sink. And then some bones. Large ones. Must be a moose. Or a bear. Then, the watery surface moves and a human skull swims up.

"Did you know," Agnes says as Niki bites on the sweet chestnut, "did you know I went to the place you're going to?" Niki is right behind her, the scent of the chestnut combining with Agnes's scent, a touch of almond, and sheep manure, and the stinging stench of sweat, and then dead fish, but the last thing feels especially welcoming to Niki. She draws even nearer.

"I went there, and I came back," Agnes says.

Quietly, Volkov gets to his backpack and takes out the katana. He's now got his mind straight, and he knows their business alright. The girl's the bait, the man upstairs does the job. Unlike Niki, he asked himself questions. They'd been dug up here for two years. Where does the sausage come from? The cabbage. That pretty smile, seemingly ignorant. Slowly, he walks up the stairs, and beckoned by a light, he enters a room on the left. It's a reading light, centered on a book, in an old man's hands.

"Tell me what you're doing here. And fast." There is no answer. Volkov propels the katana forward, hitting the reading light. And then he jumps back, his head smashing against the side of the door.

"Bloody hell," he says, and turns around to run down the stairs.

"What did you see?" Niki asks.

"I'll tell you, I will," Agnes says, in a low voice. "It's just...you smell so good." She turns the knife that cut the chestnuts and stabs behind her, with full force. The blade cuts through thin air. Niki's already on the

other side of the room. She's shaking all over, and holding her arms against a portal that once wanted to be a window, but now it's just two logs, bent against each other. A portal you can't walk into.

"Oh, a feely one," says Agnes. Rose and Goldie join her on each side as she walks across the room. They're not dogs anymore; now they're half skeletons, covered with patches of fur, and muscle and sinew. Their fleshless maws click.

"You're useless, you know? Oh my. Do you know how useless you are?" Agnes moves more slowly now, cautious. Niki has left the portal in the corner of the room and taken a step towards her.

"Could you believe it? Not just useless, but dumb. I don't know why I let you in, I really don't."

"This is not you," Niki says.

"But now, you can be useful, you know? Once in your life. Deep, isn't it?"

"It's not you." Niki's voice trembles and she sounds like she was stuck in a loop.

"Spoiled brat. Have you ever been to school? Tell me, can you recite us a poem? A requiem?"

"I'm done with poems," Niki says. It looks like a gust of wind brushed Agnes's hair, and then another one. She takes a step back, jerks her head to the side.

"What..." Niki watches her, breathing heavily now.

"What are you..." Agnes stumbles backwards and the dogs retreat with her.

"It's not you," Niki says. Goldie moans, and both dogs grow a bit of fur on the sides. Agnes drops the knife, holding her forehead with both hands.

"Not you," Niki whispers.

And then Volkov bursts into the room, and makes a jump to close the distance.

"Stop!" A scream, and Niki moves between him and Agnes, who has now collapsed on the sofa, crying. The dogs lick her hands and naked feet. They're back to full St Bernard, head to tail.

"Back off!" He had stopped, but was about to stab Agnes when she moved in, and the idea of stabbing Niki makes him shiver.

"You hurt?" he asks her.

"No."

"Tried to kill you?"

"Yes."

"She does that. Old man upstairs. Long dead. She kills people, eats them. Now, get out of the way."

"No."

"We're not safe. Nobody is. Out of the way. Now." Niki's shaking, same way when she left the portal. Only that now, her patience is spent.

"Back the fuck off!" she screams, her arms outstretched, and something makes Volkov jump back. It wasn't the scream. He's not scared of screaming kids.

"She's sick, okay?" Niki continues. Volkov assesses the situation. His mind is quick. On rare occasions.

"She flipped," he says.

"I guess..." Niki says.

"Like bipolar, just worse." Niki just stares at him, then fishes for the meaning on the surface of his mind. It takes her a while to put it back into words.

"Bi-polar."

"Yeah. Super sweet, then mental. Now, it's nervous breakdown." Agnes is still weeping, quietly now, and they both collapse in the two armchairs facing the sofa.

"Anything else?" Volkov asks.

"She said she went to the dead sea and back. But then...the dogs..."

"Turned into skeletons, I saw that." On rare occasions, Volkov's mind is like a razor, fresh out of the box. "She was bipolar when she went. Took the dogs with her. Now they've all become...this. You won't let me kill her, right?"

"Right." They went quiet, and there was just the cracking in the stove, and the sound of canine tongues rubbing against naked skin.

"We're still going to that place. Dead sea."

"Yes."

"Okay if I tie her up?"

"Okay."

"Let the dogs out?"

"Yes."

"Listen, I don't know what you did there. I don't want to know. But..." He pauses and looks at her. She's almost stopped shaking but she seems tired, dead tired. "Good stuff," he says at last, and he gets up to fetch the rope. Niki tries a smile.

Later, Volkov retreats to the guest room underneath the stairs, but Niki will stay with Agnes for the night. She needs to calm her down. Nobody can really feel any better when they're tied up in an empty room. And also, she is intrigued by the faint smell of dead fish, the one she sensed in Agnes when she was peeling the chestnut and Niki drew closer. She wants to take it in, before she falls asleep.

"Have a safe journey, travelers!" sings Agnes in a high-pitched voice as they leave in the morning. Niki's crouching in the snow as the dogs bid her goodbye, licking her face, and their tongues are larger than her cheeks.

"You really taste good, they can tell," Agnes giggles, and folds her hands into a heart.

"I know. You too," Niki says.

## Chapter Eleven

*in which we are taken back in time to witness some truly terrifying events*

From the pass, there is a descent and then a long valley, with frozen lakes covered in yards of snow, and then a mellow climb that brings them onto a ridge. It may take a day or two. A monotonous trudge through the thick cover, snowshoes on.

It seems to Volkov that he's shaken by the events of the previous night more than Niki is. She's warm now, and dry, and almost joyful, as she hops in the snow before him. Volkov, however, he has to live with the memories of the little details. The ones he missed, and then discovered in retrospect, in his mind. The meatgrinder next to the kitchen sink. The scent of freshly smoked meat from the pantry nearby. The ancient ice boxes planted in the snow, next to the front door. Whatever Agnes was, she wasn't just Jekyll and Hyde, helplessly switching between the two. She survived up there, precisely because she was Jekyll and Hyde. Did her Hyde do the whole job, all the chopping up, and disemboweling, and grinding and smoking, and sausage making? Did her Jekyll just find the pantry full, and thought it was a gift from a guardian angel?

Volkov doesn't know. What he does know - Niki warms up to people way too fast. And sometimes, she changes from kid to grown-up woman, then back to kid. Like she was a character and sometimes, she fell out of character. Like back there in the mining town, when she provoked him, about selling her and the salt, and she sounded like someone's nagging wife. That was not the Niki he knew. And yet, he knows she's not playing a character, it's her all along, and all those flips and changes come naturally. She's not even aware of them. This, and her lack of attachment to the relics of the old world - Volkov feels she's a new world child, half mysterious to him, like every new generation that comes along. And he, he belongs in the old world, and his flesh and bones will become compost, feeding new saplings. That, he believes, is the neverending cycle of life, the natural order.

Niki has Agnes's taste on her palate. It reminds her of nothing she knew. Ever. And yet, it brings her memories of contrast: other tastes, other people's sweat. Other memories of skin, of texture. Before her customers: no, she has no memories of them. None she wants to cherish, or fear. Before that. Bringing them back makes her tremble all over, but somehow, Niki feels the planets and other cogs in the universe have made a half turn, and she needs to put things into perspective, even when there's blood, and rage, and betrayal, and watermelon.

Pig had always hypnotized her breasts, ever since mother met Nathan and his two sons, sprawled in a ditch, and her and Niki had to come closer, because they weren't bothered to get up. Nathan even joked about it, which was probably his way of bringing the topic of romance on the table. Pig's stare was so penetrating Niki had to hide behind her mother. That's why she called him Pig.

Then one afternoon, weeks later, Pig joined her on her walk. She sensed a conversation in his mind, the one he had just before he left the camp, and now he was playing it over. Nathan says, be nice to her, son, and mother says what. Yes, that's all he had in his head. Not much. And then she brushed it away, distracted by a rare sight. Pig was picking flowers in the meadow: a quick, experienced snap at the stem, and then he brushed the petals with his fingertips. In no time, he brings her a colorful bouquet, tied with a blade of grass. And then he keeps talking, just random words and ideas that come up on that one-way road, but Niki senses an urge underneath, one that grows.

"Hey," she says, interrupting him. "Hey. I wanna walk alone."

"No you don't," Pig says, and it sounds resolute to him, and manly, like at night when Nathan tells mother where to turn and how to spread her legs. He gets hold of a thick branch, strains his muscles and breaks it off a dead tree. One snap with his left foot, and it's a handy club.

"I kill...a boar. For you."

"Off you go, then. Kill a boar." He couldn't kill a fly if he wanted to, but Niki just wants him gone.

"Later."

"Just go." She takes another step back. "Go." Pig frowns. It's not turning out the way he wanted. Not wanted, no: wants. His want is there, in front of him. Pluck it, pop it, fill it. He jumps. And then he's on top of her, pressing down on her throat with the branch. He fishes under her shirt.

"Muuum!" It's an instinct, it carries the word out, before Pig pushes on the branch with both hands. And the instinct says *help*, but Niki doesn't, she can't. Instead, she flies out of her body, down the slope and into the camp below. And suddenly, she can hear conversations, and see images, like she was there, in the camp, because that's where she wants to be right now.

Mother gets up at the sound of her daughter screaming, but Nathan pulls her naked body back onto him. "Let it be," he says. "She's got to learn, one day or another. You know first time's never pretty."

"But.." mother says.

"Let it be," Nathan repeats. And then he thrusts his member deep, and mother moans, and moans again. Niki doesn't want to be back in the camp. She doesn't want to be anywhere. As she goes limp, Pig lets go of the branch and tears her shirt up. At long last, he can see her breasts, exposed. Niki has a wide shoulder frame, so her breasts seem like they are one with her shoulders and her chest, coming up like two gracious hills, with wide brown areolas and pinkish nipples. Pig puts his left around her throat and then runs around her breasts with the tips of his fingers, like he was stroking a dandelion. The areolas run wild with goosebumps, the nipples harden. From the depths of his genetic memory, a stray neuron path tells him that's a good thing. His hand runs lower, pulling down her trousers. Gently, he touches her between the legs, then plunges his finger inside. It feels warm, wet. He hopes it's the right hole. He's not quite sure how many holes there are. Niki's pants are down to her heels now, and she feels something hard demanding entrance, then getting in. At that moment, it's like a thin plastic bag burst inside her.

"It feels good," Pig says. Niki's out of her body, but with nowhere to run to. And then she remembers a book she left in the camp, and that's where she can run to, there's a poem, two lines she couldn't quite read.

"St Agnes Eve, argh bitter cheel it wus," she whispers in Pig's ear, in a voice that's dead calm, because that's what she is - dead, and calm comes after the storm.

"The hare limpeed thru the froozen grass." She lies still, and still is her voice.

"St Agnes Eve, argh bitter cheel it wus, the hare limpeed thru the froozen grass." The hard thing inside her feels limp now, like the hare.

"St Agnes Eve, argh bitter cheel it wus, the hare limpeed thru the froozen grass." One more thrust, and Pig's slithering snake of a penis plugs out, like cork from a bottle. He cannot get it back in. His hand moves frantically around it. No use. He lets go of her throat and stands up, zipping up his trousers.

"Fucking weirdo!" He spits on the ground, then shoots down the path. Young birch trees, their branches rocking in the wind. Saying, *come back*, or waving him goodbye. The young sapling doesn't break in the wind; it bends and lives, and Niki's still lying with her legs apart, blood drying on her skin.

"The hare limpeed thru the froozen gras," she whispers.

And now, Niki remembers Agnes's taste on her palate, because it's gone. Just like every taste, every smell, every thrust and moan. All that's left is memories of taste, memories of smell, a sensation between her legs that's colorful, with pain or pleasure, and imagination brings it fresh, bright colors, like her journey north.

Niki wasn't quite the same when she got back to camp.

"Good girl," Nathan said as he patted her on the back, and she sensed some weird kind of pride in his mind. Pig was hiding in the tent and mother watched her, more detached than ever. Niki went off to sit behind a tree. Weepy lay beside her, behind that tree. Sleeping. And she was him for a while, a weepy - just for a little bit.

The next few weeks, she'd stay with them during the day, but she withdrew into her rabbit hole, not talking to anyone. Mother learnt to ignore her, so did everyone else. Save for Pig, he didn't. He would creep out after Niki, as night fell and she wandered off, on her nightwalker routine. Once, he got a kick in the groin. Other times, Niki would fend him off with a branch, peeled and sharpened, swinging it like a katana in the darkness, across his arms and legs. Sometimes, he would bring a weapon of his own, but the fight was always short. Her eyes were much better accustomed to the darkness than his. And then a few times, the night would hide her from him, casting a pitch black, impenetrable cloak around Niki. Pig would always go back to camp, and just like her now, he hardly ever talked, and Nathan came to believe the two lovebirds creep out every night, on a date, and he felt proud of his son, for at long last, he had become a man.

Niki lets her memories flow now, in spite of what's coming next. Many more weeks passed, and Pig would follow her less often now. Whenever he did, she had a long, pointed stick ready, and once in a while, she would recite two lines of that poem, the one that reminded him of his failing manhood. And she would laugh in his face. She sensed a different urge from him now; he still wanted to take her, yes, but now, there was a thirst for revenge. If he can't penetrate her like a man, he'll penetrate her with something else. They had many quiet, angry stick fights. Pig is cautious, he's afraid of pain. Maybe, he would overpower her, in

daylight. But it would hurt. She's not limp anymore, she fights back. And on the ground, she'd kick, and scratch, and bite. Still, he keeps trying.

The unlikely family travel in large circles, searching for food. It's hard to get by, especially when they end up in the wild, with no houses to raid. Weepy keeps crying when there's no food, and when they make nettle spinach, he even cries when eating. That's all they've got in the wild - nettle tea and nettle spinach. One day, they arrive in hilly country, far away from any town or village. There are utility poles running along the valley, which is now overgrown with tall grass, and the wires above, once buzzing with electricity, are dead quiet. It was Nathan's idea to follow the poles, because, he said, they must lead somewhere, and mother tells him off now, saying how utterly useless he is. They make camp, anyway, and when darkness falls, Niki does her nightwalker thing. The slopes are steep here, and soon enough, they change into clusters of rocks, a labyrinth of sorts. Niki loves that. In the two years, she has climbed many slopes, many rocks. On top, she feels closer to the night, and more at peace. She sensed Pig creeping behind her, but she lost him as soon as she got into the labyrinth. Now she's climbing alone, her path illuminated by the waning crescent of the moon. One of the rocky paths leads her above a clearing, and her sight, accustomed to the night, makes out the contours of a small house, at the far end, clinging to the face of a rock, and a shed beside it. She pushes her acute night sight to its limits, opening her eyes wide, like she was a cat hunting in darkness. The windows on the house have shutters drawn, and she can see no light. There is a vegetable patch on the side.

The next morning, she breaks her silence and tells them about the house. After all, they haven't had a good meal in weeks. Nathan asks her about a few details, then he straightens out, like a man of action.

"We wait till dusk, and then, we climb up there. And when it's dark, we raid the house." When they fall asleep around noon, she takes a walk in the rocks, the other slope, across from the valley. It's a mild climb, with only a handful of rocks on top, and when she walks around the other side of the hill, there is a ledge that runs into a space between two large boulders, and the place feels almost like a cavern, weathered stone on three sides and a sandy floor, and she's protected from the piercing sun by one of the boulders hanging overhead. She sits on the sand, propped up against the cool rock, and she dozes off. Then, she's woken up by her own voice, and again, and again. The few minutes of sleep in between, that's all she gets.

Suddenly, it's not her voice but a movement that wakes her up. There's a figure standing in the opening of the cave.

"There you are." Niki feels for her stick, then realizes she left it in camp. Pig lunges forward, pins her to the ground with his weight. Lifting his upper body, he grabs her by the throat and his other hand runs between her legs, tearing up her trousers.

"Show me how you missed me." Niki can't make a sound, and when Pig pushes two fingers in, she stretches like a bow. She's not out of her body, she's here and now, and it hurts. Pig unzips his trousers and watches his member, dangling helplessly from his hairy crotch.

"Oh well," he says, zipping himself up again. "You're gonna love this." From a side pocket, he pulls out a short, pointed stick. Niki musters all her strength and they roll over. She's on top now. He's dropped the stick, but he never let go of her throat. And now he hits her, in the ribs, in her belly. Tries to beat that shame back into her, deep into her bowels, beneath her bones. Bury that shame. Niki feels no shame, just pain. Clumsily, she raises her forearms to protect her face, and Pig's fist goes right through, breaking her nose. Blood splatters over her cheeks, over his shirt. She collapses onto him, and he pushes her away, jumping up. She's on all fours now, red dot dot dot dripping in the sand.

"Stop."

"Oh no. No no no." He picks up the stick from the ground. "I'll do you good and proper." And then, he looks down at his trousers. His member, invigorated by the fight, shameless now, is standing hard and proud, the nut protruding in between the buttons.

"Back off." She's lost her voice; now it's just dry blades of grass, rubbing against each other in the wind. Pig unbuttons his pants, lets them slide down to his knees. Freed from the prison, his member moves up and down, a metal spring set in motion. And Niki's standing up now.

"Back the fuck off!" It's not her voice that makes him jump back. Or the words, or the sight of her, bloodied, face twisted. It's not her arms, spread wide, the tips of her fingers bent like claws. He stumbles, as his knees are trapped in the trousers. And Niki, she leaps forward. Their bodies collide, she hits him with all her weight. He staggers onto the ledge, trying to keep his balance, like a broken tripod. One more clumsy step, and he falls off.

She runs to the edge and sees him fall, for an eternity. He's dead quiet, arms wide, an albatros sliding on the wind. And then he crashes into a rock. His head opens up like a watermelon.

Niki spends the afternoon sitting in the cave, propped up against the cool rock. She can't look down. Ever again. She can't stop shaking.

She comes down the hill at dusk. Nathan sees her across the valley and waves at her, frantically. She takes ages to get to them, like there was a foreign force pulling her away. He's fuming.

"Where is he?" he shouts.

"Went for a walk."

"Speak up!"

"Went for a walk." There's still enough light for him to see the bruises, and the blood Niki hasn't rubbed off, but he ignores it.

"Fucking idiot. We're going without him. You need a weapon. Here, catch!" And he throws her the pointed stick she had left in the camp.

"Now, lead the way. Let's go."

If this was to be a quiet approach, the trio behind her make as much noise as a steam engine. She remembers the boulder from which she observed the clearing, and leads them around it, taking a goat path that brings them through a host of thick spruce saplings and onto a flat ridge just outside the clearing. They all lie down behind the ridge and observe the house. Just like last night, the shutters are drawn and everything's dark and quiet.

Niki can see that Nathan is armed with a small shovel, mother is holding a lawn mower blade taped to a stick, and Weepy's got a pair of pliers. She couldn't care less. Nathan lays out his plan: when night falls, he's gonna run across to the house, and when he's at the door, they will follow.

Long minutes pass as shadows extend and then disappear. They're like a wolf pack lying in wait; no words are passed, no smiles, jokes, not a single touch. Like dull cogs in a machine, and Niki wishes for some kind of giant hammer, to land on that machine and disperse all the cogs, to four corners of the earth.

At long last, Nathan gives them a signal and then jumps over the ridge. After a few yards, he stumbles over something and falls to the ground, cursing, but he's back up in no time and keeps running. When he's halfway through, a bright light suddenly illuminates the clearing, but he runs and runs, like a moth towards a flame. Can't see anything now, blinded by the light, screaming, shovel above his head, and then something cuts off his voice as he collapses backwards. And it's mother screaming now, to fill the silence, to silence her fear, and she jumps over the ridge, Weepy behind her, Niki last, and as they run, Niki closes her eyes, and the pointed stick in her hands is no longer a weapon, it's an oar, and she's standing on a heavenly gondola, sliding, and when the oar hits the ground, she jumps up in the air, and there will be no more solid earth, not ever, and then something hits the side of her head, like a gust of wind, and she slides, and never lands.

...

For Volkov, these images are buried somewhere at the bottom of his junkyard. He's been to war, he's seen children die. He's killed men and women. Both before the end of the world and after. But he's never, never ever, had to finish off a child. It's a memory you never want to have, you never even want to think it. And yet there it is, to be brought up on demand. And so, Volkov doesn't ask for deliveries. The closest he got to it, in space an time, was when Niki asked him about her mother's dying words.

However, another kid was to be finished off, on that night or on the next one. Maybe. He knew he was able to do it, even if she was awake, screaming or pleading. When he makes a decision, he just does it, and bears the consequences later. There are no regrets, just consequences.

She had a wound in the side of her head. He checked her pulse, then dragged her to a cage he'd welded together years ago, for chickens he never got. Put a padlock on. He thought sometimes, decisions are as simple as flipping a coin. There must be a coin somewhere.

Heads - she lives, tails - she dies. He threw the coin in the air. Heads. Best out of three, he thought. Heads. Did he say best out of three? He meant, first to three. Heads. No, five. He has to be certain. He follows the coin more closely now, as it flies through the air. When it reaches the highest point, it makes a weird flip, like a foreign force pushed it, ever so slightly, or like the coin was glitchy, refusing to follow

the code of reality. Heads. Carefully, he places the coin on his thumb and throws it up, in fast rotation. There's that movement again. Heads. He gave up three flips later.

Don't give it a name if you want to kill it. Back in Rostov, his grandma would say that about rabbits. He's watching her now, and a host of names circle around his head. Some are discarded right away. Some he takes a bite at, or rolls them on his palate. Until he finds the only name that fits, the right name. Niki.

She opened her eyes some time before dawn. Gradually, she was able to make out shapes scattered on the clearing, then as dawn came, those shapes gained contours, and colors, and names. Then hours later, she saw him at the far end, digging up holes, then dragging the bodies into them and piling the dug-up dirt on top. He dug up a fourth hole, and even from the distance, she could see it's a shallow grave, like it was made for a stray dog.

Don't feed it before you kill it. That piece of grandma's wisdom made sense even then - it's a waste of food. At noon, he brought her a bowl of soup and pushed it through the bars as she recoiled to the other side of the cage.

"Pea soup," he said. The next moment, the hot liquid splashed against his legs. Talk about waste of food. In the morning, he'd been woken up by rattling sounds, as Niki heaved her body against the walls of the cage, over and over. And it went on and on. He thought food may give him a moment's pause. It did not.

## Chapter Twelve

*in which little lives end, ice is met with fire and a sleepy wanderer learns to fly*

A raven flies across the peaks. There are two black spots underneath, trudging through the snow. If they could fly with him, they'd cross the mountains in half a day - but they can't. One of the spots is Volkov, the other one is Niki. The raven isn't very much into names, but he's remembered Volkov and Niki. Also, there is Tabby, a small being with a spark inside. There are sparks inside all of them. Tabby shines the strongest, maybe because he does very little work. The two spots in the snow, however, their sparks are going out, by degrees. Sparks have colors, and to the raven at least, the amber color suggests that their stomachs are rumbling. He saw them the previous night, going through the last handful of boiled barley. Perhaps, they could smother the biggest spark, Tabby. And live for another day. Or maybe, the tiny spark, Niki, could eat the bigger, lousier spark, Volkov. The raven would like to see that.

The aquamarine blue tells the raven they are freezing. Blue is darkest at their feet. At some point, the sparks try an impossible climb, to make a shortcut. The raven wants to watch, so he lands on the peak above them. After half a day, they give up and climb down, which is far more dangerous than climbing up. However much he'd like to see one spark eating another, he'd also wish for all of them to have wings. Unfortunately, he cannot provide for that.

He watches them as they walk up a long valley towards a ridge, all day and all night. When a storm hits them in the face, the lousy spark unpacks a rare invention - an igloo-shaped mountaineering tent. They think they can hide there from the raven, but they can't. The raven doesn't mind storms, or tents.

The raven understands the general idea behind tents and sleeping bags. So now, he sees the lousy spark zipping two sleeping bags together, and then the two sparks conserve their body heat close together. However, their bottom is still aquamarine blue, and then the lousy spark suggests a change of positions, where they heat up their cold parts with the warmest parts of their bodies. Niki takes Volkov's feet between her breasts, and Volkov buries her feet in his chest. The raven thinks it's a clever idea. And a short-lived one. They need an outside source of energy to feel any warmer. They don't have that, since their cooking thing died. And they will die as well.

Then, a few things happen, and the raven is intrigued. These things are beyond his scope of wisdom or imagination. First, the lousy spark offers to murder the greatest spark, and the little spark protests. Instead, she offers him a tiny bar made of chocolate. And somehow, the act itself brings warmth to the lousy spark's body, though the raven knows this is impossible, for he hasn't eaten any of the chocolate, and there is no outside source of energy.

Then, the little spark does one thing she learned a long time ago in town. She curls up at the center of the lousy spark's body, and does something with her mouth. Both sparks feel sad afterwards, but it works. The little spark gets food, and the lousy spark feels blood running through every inch of his body. Somehow, they both feel warm and fed, even though the lousy spark just lost some food.

And then, the little spark does a weirder thing yet. It makes herself, and the big spark, think of fire. And the more they think of it, the more warmth flows through their bones. The raven flies nearer, and hears them talking.

"I said I want to take a piss," Niki says.

"And I said piss in the cage. And then you said, I wanna take a shit" Volkov answers.

"And you led me to the latrine. And I..."

"You knocked on the right wall. And again, and again. So I went round the corner."

"There was a loose board in the left wall."

"You weasly shit."

"And I ran to the shed."

"You took the lighter from the chopping block."

"Pulled down a barrel."

"You just waited for me to see this."

"I ran. Fuck."

"The whole thing exploded, and.."

"You'd fucking die, you stayed in the middle..."

"The whole fucking house burnt, the forest, and you were laughing."

"Best time, ever!" Niki laughs, even now. "And you didn't strangle me with the wire."

"Found a bicycle lock. There was no way back now."

The raven, he understands pretty much everything about bicycle locks, barrels of gasoline and lighters. What he does not understand is, why the two laugh about it. They must be hallucinating. There is no more aquamarine blue in their sparks, and to the raven, it defies all laws of this world.

The next morning, he sees them crawl out of the tent, and walk forward, rejuvenated. Still, he doesn't think they can make it. Even if they take the long climb, and arrive at the last ridge, how do they get down? They could fly, sure. The raven has seen them do many unbelievable things, but he doesn't think they can fly.

Before the last climb, the little spark falls on her face. She cannot go any further. She wants to sleep, and she knows sleep brings about the long sleep. She wants the long sleep. But then, she remembers one piece of her past, one that could wake her up. The raven cannot see much, just contours of images.

There is a house, two houses in fact. There is a flat tin roof, where the little spark and two girls sat in the afternoon. There is a bedroom window, facing another bedroom window across a garden. At night, a group of dark figures breaks into the other house. There are flashlight beams centered on an old lady. She gets cut down. The figures run upstairs, kick in the door to the bedroom. The little spark is watching from her bedroom window. Not just that. She is inside the girls' heads, as they are chopped up, lying in bed together. And the little spark fell to the floor, threw up and her pyjama pants got wet. That was all she could do, piss herself.

And the real little spark, here and now, she throws up in the snow. And she's pissed herself. The raven can sense those things. But then, she can walk for another half a day, freezing between her legs but walking.

Half a day, that's just half the climb. She falls on her face again. The lousy spark cannot pull her up, he is not even a spark anymore. And then, he sees some movement on the slope. A hole, and something runs away from it, across the snow, and the raven catches it in its beak. It's a snow rat. The hole, though. The lousy half-spark fixes it with his stare. He climbs the slope towards it, lands his arm deep, and fishes out a full handful of younglings. Meanwhile, the little spark is almost gone, but he walks back towards her, and feeds her the younglings, and the raven feels that to the little spark, they taste like gooseberries, as their tiny legs scratch against her palate and then they pop in her mouth, one after another.

It's late afternoon when they make it to the ridge. Volkov curses and falls to his knees. Far below, he can see flashes of dark green, through the cracks in the clouds. Gracious forests, grassy hills. And there is an impossible, steep descent, and it's the same for miles and miles, both left and right. It would take them days to walk along the ridge and find a downhill route. Another two days to get down. They don't have days, they have hours.

The raven sits on the snow a few yards away from them. He flaps his wings. Yes, they could fly, he ponders. The air is crisp and clean, and it's a wonderful view. Volkov watches the raven, then gets up abruptly. Niki's dozing off, but he's frantic now, jumping about and rubbing her face.

"Do you remember, hey. Hey. Do you remember your dream? Look at me." Niki opens her eyes. "How did you cross the mountains, in your dream?"

"I flew," she whispers.

"Yes. Yes. And, you're going to fly. You're going to fly." He's pure madness now, fussing about his backpack, throwing the contents on the snow, unraveling yards of paracord and rope, in a mad hurry.

She dozes off and then she's woken up again. Volkov's shaking her shoulders, wild-eyed.

"Give me your hand, like this, like this. Here." The paracord is shaking in his hands. He ties each of her wrists to the front poles of the tent he's put up again. Then, he runs the paracord around her thighs and ties it to the bottom of the poles. Finally, he takes the two ice axes, with the rope between, and runs the center of the rope around Niki's waist and ties it with a knot. Both axes now run about five yards from Niki's body.

He'd already tied their backpacks together, with Tabby in the rear, and now he attaches the ice axes to them, one on each side. Finally, he takes their spare rope and fastens his own body to the backpacks, at the waist and under the shoulders. Standing up now, he looks like a paratrooper, from some ancient time. He walks back towards Niki and rubs her face until her eyes open.

"Listen. You're going to fly. Your arms, here. You keep them stretched out, okay? You steer with them. Got it?" She feels Volkov's earnestness, his fear. One last jolt of adrenalin, and she's fully awake now. She nods her head.

"I lie on this," he taps on the backpacks, "and I steer with the axes. Got it?"

"Okay."

"It's got to work," Volkov says as he walks towards the edge and lies down. "It's got to."

The raven sees the lousy spark disappear over the edge, dragging the little spark behind him. He has seen many people jump off the edge, but none of the suicides were that complicated. He flies up.

The tent behind Niki blows up with air, and she lifts off the slope immediately. The blown-up tent slows down their descent, like a parachute. Volkov steers them around rocks and gorges, and whenever he feels they're picking up speed, he buries both ice axes in the snow for a short time. And thus, they slide gracefully down the slope.

The raven has seen a lot, but the time spent with Volkov and Niki was filled with impossible feats, with magic. And now, he found out the little spark can fly. He should have known.

## Chapter Thirteen

*in which a traveller is sold for garden produce, the source of which is put into question*

He hangs the bundle inside the tree, with Niki standing underneath, making sure it's not visible from any angle. It's a weird feeling, leaving something behind, knowing it's the last time you'll ever see it. He's grown fond of his winter jacket. It saw him through hunger, exhaustion, fear, madness and near-death. The feelings he can attach to these lousy words are fleeting, distant. But the jacket feels like an old friend. Objects can conserve memories - he knows that now, looking at the torn garment. Only for the wearer, though, or holder, owner. Could they do it for someone else? He'd almost want Niki to climb up, touch the jacket and tell him what happens in her head. She can feel all sorts of things, or believes she can. No way. He'll keep her prying fingers and mind off his clothes. Memories, they're just your own, and when they die with you, someone else will wear your jacket, free of memories. That's the natural cycle. In the life of jackets.

Their last two days began with a smooth descent into paradise. Then, a big fire, and they treated frostbite with lotion and bandages. Niki got frostburns between her legs and Volkov had to turn around. And then she said fkin help me and he did. A flock of sheep on the pasture nearby, a limping one got cut down at the neck. And silent was the flock in wooly fold. Volkov drank and drank, from that wound in the neck. After the landing, they just lay on the ground and ate grass, and threw up, and ate grass again. Best meal of their life - grilled lamb. Two days and they can walk again. One more night, and they'll be like new.

In the morning, he hit her head with a flying stick. She didn't catch it, because she only opened one eye.

"One hand," Volkov says, poking her left arm. "You hold it in one hand."

"You're using both hands!"

"You will practice with one hand."

"It's heavy!"

"I know. Now try to hit me."

She's not entirely new to the world of sticks. Pig, though, he was never a real challenge. And these are just a yard long, and not pointed - there's a bulk of moss and grass tied at each end. Hitting him from the side doesn't work, straightforward stabs don't work either. She tries to dance. Volkov is like a luscious fruit, and she's like the fox reaching for the grapes. Always a bit short of her goal.

"Been a long time since you tried to kill me. That was clever. Watch it, one hand. I said one hand." Niki scoffs at him, and lets one hand off the stick.

"You carried my food...and you could climb."

"Clever. You're not going soft on me, are you?"

"What's with your..voice? Say it like Volkov." He laughed. Yes, his voice went up and down, it was almost playful, ever since their marvellous descent.

"You're not going soft on me. Are you."

"I'm not."

"We still got a deal."

"Yes." There was a gravity to her voice, whenever they talked about it. Like the occasion required a mood; perhaps a candle, a few rose petals, an ornate dagger.

"That's a deal you keep breaking since day one."

"Sorry. Couldn't...help it." She keeps trying to hit him, all this time, then spins a few times and gets a slash on the ribs. And then once, she flies forward, letting the pole fall behind her back, and then she turns around, catches it mid-flight and buries it in Volkov's stomach.

"Good stuff," he says as she leans on the pole, breathing heavily. "Now it's gonna hurt." He comes forward, slashing at her from every conceivable angle. Niki retreats, gets hit, falls on the grass, gets up. He's not aware what she's doing until it's too late. One more roll on the ground, and she unsheathes the katana, from the side of his backpack.

"Now it's gonna hurt."

"Put it down. Now." Too late. She's got lost in the fight, drunken by the sudden knowledge that she can hit his flesh, in a fair duel. With a swing, his stick is in two. He could always back off, and run away into the forest. Yeah, right. You don't run from your nemesis. He dodges her slashes, empty-handed. Then, he reads into her stabbing movement, takes her by the wrist and wriggles the katana out of her hand. Off it flies, across the meadow. He lies on his side, her underneath.

"The fuck you did there."

Volkov, you silly old cunt. What d'you think she did there? Same thing she's been doing since she woke up in that cage. It was you, overwhelmed by a sense of touch in your fingers, by breathing, by warmth, by the descent, the miracle of it, by the sight of trees and the taste of fresh blood, the ancient wonder of fire, the smell of moist, breathing, snowless earth, the sound of dry drass in the wind, by birds and weary insects and that sensation when you run your hand over a patch of bright green moss. For a while there, you felt a hope for life. He hangs the bundle on a thick, live branch at the center of the spruce tree. You silly old cunt, he says to himself, once again.

Later that day, they arrive at a village. It feels homely, in a cuddly kind of way, as if the end of the world never happened. No ruins, no corpses impaled on signposts. Still, as they walk down the main street, Volkov feels cautious. The last time him and Niki walked through a village, it wasn't pretty. However, everybody they meet says hello, or nods their head. When he asks about supplies, an old lady feeding her rabbits directs them to the mayor, just over there, outside the pub. Big table.

There are three men at the table, and their handshakes are firm and warm. There's the mayor, homely dignity all over, then a local teacher, a rare sight for Volkov, and lastly, a man in a torn shirt and a sailor's cap, speaking in a thick accent.

"What's the currency here?" Volkov asks as he takes out his little can of salt. Looking at the beers in front of them, he wants one, and they could use a dinner.

"There's no currency here, son," the mayor says. It feels weird, in a cultist kind of way.

"We'd like a beer, elderflower lemonade and something to eat."

"Aye, I dun dae th'bar toni'e," says the man in the torn shirt.

"Just tell Moran," the mayor says, nodding his head towards the bar.

They're asked about their journey here, and even though Volkov wants to keep it short, he's interrupted by Niki every now and then - she wants to add a detail, or a story - and he can't help bragging about the mountain crossing, and their descent. Just a bit. A young lad joins their table, sitting across from Niki, all quiet, and listens to their stories. Niki saw him earlier, looking at her, ever since they sat down, and something in that look stopped her from scratching the surface of his mind. Now his eyes are down to the table.

"We're looking for supplies." Volkov went down to business. "There's Niki, if someone's interested. Or we can pay." The mayor straightened out in his chair.

"We don't appreciate that kinda stuff around here." Volkov feels he's just stepped into a pile of crap.

"Selling kids for sex," he adds. Niki comes to their rescue.

"You don't understand. He doesn't sell me, I sell myself." The mayor glares at her, with a weird combination of compassion and disdain.

"Does it make you feel good?"

"Yes. Yes it does. It's my job, I'm good at it." The mayor resists an urge to be patronizing. They're their guests, after all. Instead, he asks a series of uncomfortable questions, and soon enough, he finds himself engaged in a battle of wits with Niki.

"Do you want to do it?"

"I earn my salt," Niki says. "Like, when you sell something that someone wants." She doesn't know much about anything, but she feels she knows a lot about her work, and she's intrigued. It's the first time someone asked about it.

"Selling your body is not the same, is it?"

"I don't...sell my body!" Niki laughs. "I don't just lie down and wait. That's...disrespectful! There's...there are so many things I can do! And it makes people happy, like...like beer! It makes you happy, right?"

"But you feel used afterwards. Don't you?"

"Used?" Niki chews the word in her mouth. "I'd feel used if they didn't pay me."

"Look, you should give your body for free, to your man. You give it to many men, you're just a whore."

"I am a whore!"

"That you are." He got carried away quickly. That was patronizing indeed, and when Volkov moves, Niki catches his arm. Turning to her, he can see a tear run down her cheek, and her voice is trembling, just slightly.

"Somebody once took me. For free. And he paid, with his life. I didn't want that. But he paid. So don't tell me about going for free. Ever again." She doesn't break down. She bites her tongue, and the weight of

the argument makes the mayor shut up. The young lad opposite moves his hand to wipe one of her tears, and she doesn't wince or anything, like she expected that.

It takes a while before Volkov realizes his mouth is wide open. He clicks his teeth, and breaks the uncomfortable silence.

"Say, there's no currency. How do you run business here." The teacher hurries to answer the question, and help Volkov break the spell.

"You see, it's the same, all over the country. The idea is that every person does their share, and if we all work together, we satisfy everybody's needs. There is even a surplus, for travelers like you."

"Nothing's for free though," Volkov says.

"Indeed it is."

"Say we want barley, beans, lentils, a large sack of each. Smoked bacon, some gas."

"You could do some work," the mayor says.

"Now we're talking. What kind of work." The mayor ruminates for a bit.

"Dig a drainage route, from the cesspool in the back, down the hill. And then there's an old couple, over there, last house on the left. Plow their garden, plant some garlic in the back."

"How long the ditch, how deep."

"Twenty yards, two feet."

"The garden?"

"Ten by ten."

"It will be done. By tomorrow night."

"Do you have two shovels?" Niki asks.

"Look, kid. Maybe you can help around the kitchen here, but really, just take a rest."

"I earn my salt," Niki says. Somehow, the lad opposite musters his courage. Volkov noticed he's been fidgeting on the bench ever since he sat down on it.

"I'm Tobias," and he offers Niki a handshake.

"Niki."

"Say what, can I get you a drink?" Niki looks straight in his face and Volkov can see she's tightened up.

"What kind of drink?"

"Maybe..schnaps?" She nods her head, and he's about to jump up, to carry out the order.

"How many schnaps before you take me out and sleep with me?" Tightened up. She's in her work mode. Volkov buries his laughter in a gulp of beer.

"No, I didn't...I don't..." The lad goes red in the face.

"Leave 'er be, lad. Shee's not yer type."

"You did," Niki says. "I just want to know..." and she swallows the question. "Okay. First, I don't drink schnaps."

"Right. She's underage," Volkov says. Not that anybody listens to him.

"And then, I don't go for three glasses of schnaps." Tobias lowers his eyes, going one more shade of red. And he jumps up, and he's gone down the street.

"You know," the mayor ponders after a while. "Shouldn't love be for free? No disrespect," and he raises his hands, giving Niki a cautious, sideways look. "But really. You know, boy meets girl, they fall in love, he gets her a flower, they have a kid. That sort of thing."

"Aye, in me dais, luv wis free. Gals wir eesy tho. Thee wen' wi' ye, cus thee luvved it. No' like th' yung todei, noo." He takes a sad gulp from his pint, then raises it and they all drink to that.

"Love, indeed, isn't something for something," the teacher postulates.

"You don't love because you want something in return," the mayor adds.

"Arr, ye wint big re'urns thir, me lads. Ye wint'eh luv bek."

"Yes," Volkov adds. "If there's no loving back, it's just addiction. Or madness."

"Aye."

"See," the teacher says, getting all educational now, "the beauty of love...that exquisite beauty of it, lies in you loving with all your heart, unconditionally."

"Then you're spoiling the other person," Volkov says.

"Aye. Let 'em be all manipulative, like."

"But that's the whole point. Not wanting anything."

"Naw. A' mi age? She sais like, A'll spred me legs, but aire the dishes dun?"

"See, nothing's for free," Volkov laughs. He notices Niki is smiling. And then Tobias runs up to them, and onto the table, he unloads what he's been holding in his shirt: there are large, reddish potatoes, good enough for two dinners, a cabbage, leek and some herbs. Everyone's surprised, but for Niki.

"You're disgracing yourself, son," the mayor says. Niki fishes for the meaning of the new word.

"No, he's disgracing me," she retorts. "This is definitely not enough." She's become quite good at this, Volkov thinks to himself. Tobias runs off again.

"Can't you just, I don't know, go with him, because you like him?" The mayor cannot let go of the idea.

"I like him. There's just the thing with the price." The mayor lets out a deep, frustrated sigh. "Did you teach her this?" he turns to Volkov.

"No, she's...she's self educated."

"Maybe it's all your fault. Look, tell me. Has she ever been in love?"

"Hunnert teemes, nine were troo, innit?"

"There was this girl in the mountains," Volkov says.

"Agnes," Niki adds.

"They got close."

"A girl?!" the mayor says. They just keep stepping into piles of crap, one after another.

"Yes, a girl," Niki says. "And a murderer. And, very sweet."

"A girl?" the mayor says. "Look, this is just...wrong. Sorry."

"Pile a' shite."

"It is abominable, indeed."

"Twoo gals cannit mek a family, aye? Ye need a gal and a lad, ta fick and hev kids, alrite?"

"No, they can't," Volkov says. "But love they can."

"Wis dat good fir?"

"For them, I guess."

"A gal shuuld mek a family, no? Hev a bunch o' kids, like."

"No."

"And ye, me lad, ye wir born fram whit, a fokin sheep?" He bangs his fists on the table, laughing.

"He grew in the uterus, and he was delivered through a woman's vagina," the teacher explains.

The wondrous cultural exchange is interrupted by Tobias, who runs up to the table once again. This time, he brings a lettuce, some beetroot, two stacks of onions, and a large sack of dry beans.

"Is this, by any chance, old Snarp's beetroot?" the mayor inquires.

"Aye, t'is Richi's oonions, reit thir."

"Alas, the beans seem to be my wife's." Tobias shoots them an angry look as Niki goes through the garden produce.

"Do I look like a cow to you?" she says at last. How can she keep a straight face, Volkov wonders. She's calm, composed. Not a single twitch. Tobias runs off.

Volkov feels he needs to steer the conversation in a completely new direction. Maybe this it too much for Niki, despite her being in her work mode.

"So, you get many nightwalkers coming through here?"

"Is that the technical name?" the teacher inquires.

"I don't know. People going to the dead sea."

"We just call them travelers," the mayor explains. "But they do come through here, yes."

"Any came back?"

"Some did."

"Did they...I don't know..kill people?" The man in the torn shirt laughs so hard his head hits the table.

"Kill?? Wee lad sed kill, like? Fucking hell, noo cunt kills a cunt in her, min."

"No, they were actually very...grateful. This one, you remember, Timmy? He brought us four deer from the forest. Four deer."

"Weird," Volkov says. "Beyond the mountains, they say they'd wiped out whole towns, like nothing."

"Weel, mibbe they hadd it cummin, no?" The sun is throwing long shadows now, and Niki's got her head resting in her palms, watching the mountain of vegetables before her. Soon enough, Tobias comes again, and unloads two large chops of luscious, smoked bacon, and a bag of dried meat. Niki opens the bag and takes the scent in.

"Is it weasel?" she inquires.

"Pork."

"Isn't that from your mother's pantry, son?" the mayor asks. The corners of his mouth are twitching and Volkov feels that at long last, he's warmed up to the conversation. Tobias though, he looks down on his feet.

"I'm doing it for a girl," he says.

"Fir a gal, me arse!"

"No, son. You're *buying* the girl for one night."

"Maybe I'll buy her for every night!" Tobias says, defiantly.

"If you buy her every night, you'll starve us all out in a week."

"I neither appreciate it, nor approve of it," the teacher chips in.

"Do as you see fit, son. You're an adult," the mayor says.

"Just...don't tell my mum."

"She'll find out herself, soon enough."

"Indeed she will, and you shall receive a beating with an exquisite instrument of torture, the wooden spoon."

"Aye, she'll beat ya senseless, me boy."

Volkov turns to Niki, whispering in her ear.

"One look at him, I know. He's not gonna last two minutes. In two minutes, you'll earn as much as I'll earn in a day."

"I'll take it slow," she whispers back.

"Two rules."

"I know." She turns to the boy.

"The price is right. Let's go somewhere nice. Do you have a candle? And maybe a mirror, this big?"

"We can't...burn a candle in there."

"Trust me. It's much better with a candle. And some rope."

"Don't burn down the haystack," the mayor says, but he's already talking to their backs as they walk away. In the street, Tobias takes Niki's hand.

"With the heat of passion, they will," Volkov says with a scoff. He watches the mountain of farm produce on the table, in quiet disbelief. And then, he begins stacking it in Niki's backpack.

Before night falls, Volkov learns a bit more about the goal of their journey. Here, beyond the mountains, people seem to know much more about the dead sea, though they still pass on wild stories about what's on top of Zen mountain. The sea, though, they say it's a living organism. The call it the dead sea, simply because people die in it. Near impossible to cross: it can sense life, and it kills you in a hundred different ways.

"Tis crool, bu' joos. Like'eh three-pirsoned god." More cruel than just, it seems to Volkov, from what they say. It burns you to ashes in a single flash, it squishes you with gravity, it turns your insides into mash, or makes them explode.

"How do you cross it, then?"

"Ye tek rabbi' feet, oan a'strin. An' ye throo them in front o' ye."

"Rabbit feet, on a string?"

"Aye. Thir's liv in 'em feet alreit. Ye moov fast tho. See changes al'eh teim. An' ye need miny feet." Already, it sounds more dangerous than crossing the mountains. Far more dangerous than that.

In the morning, Niki and Volkov meet behind the pub, holding a shovel each.

"Hard night?"

"I earn my salt," she says with a smile.

"Two rules alright?"

"Always." Volkov smiles on the inside. Two rules alright. He taught her, long ago. They're coarse, and simple, and effective. Wash the dick, cum on tits. There's rhythm to it. All you need, really.

"I appreciate what you said yesterday. About going for free." They're resting on the side of the ditch, and a shadow runs across Niki's face.

"There's a lot of stuff we don't know about each other," he says after a while. "Let's keep it that way." Niki nods her head.

Around noon, Tobias joins them with another shovel. Just like that, without a word. Volkov observes him, his body language. Seems like a good kid. He doesn't fuss around Niki, or try to win her affection, no. He's just quietly grateful.

Soon enough, his mom comes to the ditch, red in the face, wooden spoon in her hand. And then she watches him for a long time, hands at her hips. He's just digging, looking into the ground. Finally, she lets out a sigh and waves her hand.

"Lunch ready," she says, turning around.

"I'll come when I'm finished," he says.

Six hands do more work than two, so in the early afternoon, their job is done. Volkov collects his supplies and they're set to go. The mayor and the man in the torn shirt come to bid them goodbye.

"Take care of yourselves over there," the mayor says. "The desert is rough, but the dead sea is worse. There's people around it. Bad people. Avoid them."

"Thank you. We will," Volkov says. Tobias draws close to Niki, his eyes on the ground.

"Is there any chance, like?" he says, and Niki gives him a long hug.

"Keep your pantry full," she says.

"Aye, his pantry 'ere is full alreit!"

"Not *that* pantry," Niki says with a laugh, all ringing and warm, and then they turn around and leave. When they've climbed the hill, there's still a solitary figure in the street, waving a hand. Niki waves back, and sends out a kiss on the warm afternoon air.

## Chapter Fourteen

*in which political systems are discussed, eyes are counted and the sea sends out a greeting*

It was a narrow strip of land they were about to cross, towards the desert. Four days' walk, maybe five. It was a land of mellow, grass-covered hills, of spruce forests that offered a cold shade, and buzzed with insects that never knew there was an end of the world. The anomalies, or *breaches*, were more frequent here, but they were all fenced off, and fashioned with big warning signs - an enterprise which was either taken up by the locals themselves, in a trial-and-error fashion, or, more likely, in collaboration with nightwalkers who went through here or came back. Volkov assumed that all nightwalkers could sense those things, not just her. And Niki would always pick up a cone and throw it over the fence, and it went *poof*, or just *p*.

It was a land of graciously open, broad valleys, of villages that smelt of manure and broth, from afar. It was a land of no currency, a land for everyone. In villages, they would go house to house, and ask for rabbit feet, so they could cross the dead sea. At first, Volkov thought the man was pulling their leg, but he quickly found out they weren't the first people to ask for rabbit feet. And still, unlike their cat, the rabbits here weren't legless creatures, hopelessly wallowing in hay. They hopped and multiplied, and when slain and eaten, their limbs were hung on linen strings from the crossbeam in the stable, like chops of Turkish delight.

Niki would carry the load in her backpack. As a result, she smelt like a carcass, but a proud one: the carrier of rabbit feet. She grew eager with anticipation, of what was about to come, and at the same time, Volkov slowed his pace, and in every village, he found a pub, and spent a good part of the afternoon peering into six glasses of beer, one by one. Like this was his favorite part of their story, one he'd hate to leave behind too early.

On their way, they learnt more and more about the dead sea, but nothing about Zen mountain. Noone talked about it, like the mountain wasn't even there, or like it was a mirror, Volkov thought, and only Alice could pass through. The sea, however, it seemed to grow fiercer as they neared the desert before them. You can't swim in it, of course. You can only drown. People said it was a giant organism, that it changed shape, color and texture, and it changed everything that stepped in it. As they heard stories here and there, in two moments, first it was Niki and then Volkov, they wanted to say *I told you!*, but they kept it to themselves. There were monsters underneath the sea, someone said, and Niki opened her mouth, but then she quickly bowed her head and looked at her knees. They're *zlukhs*, someone else said, and Volkov asked why. Well, that's the sound they make when they pop out of the sea, just before they kill you - and Volkov turned to Niki, because he remembered his story about words, but then he quickly turned his head and frowned at the beer before him. And all this time, they heard about the sea being just, and being cruel, and Volkov thought, yeah, just like some wretched Old Testament god, and had another beer.

"This place is like paradise," Niki said one afternoon, and she didn't mean that particular village; just like him, she must have realized how different this place was, compared to their land beyond the mountains.

"Paradise my ass," Volkov said.

"It's funny... You feel safe. You know?"

"Maybe too safe."

"You can't be too safe."

"You can't be too rich for sure," Volkov replied with a laugh. After a casual stroll and four beers, he felt like having some fun, and an exchange with Niki seemed like fun.

"Of course you can!" Niki shot back, immediately. "You can't make more salt than you can carry. You couldn't walk if you had too much!" Volkov thought about banks, but then he realized Niki was maybe twelve when the world had ended. For her, money must have grown in cash machines. Maybe he could start with the Knights Templar, the world's first bankers. That was a pretty, stained glass shard that just swam up from his junkyard. Hard work, though. He was sure Niki couldn't imagine institutions, only people, individuals.

"Well, a long time ago, people would take their money and..."

"Salt! I'm talking about salt! Not munies. Salt!" She was dead serious now.

"Well....you could leave it with someone."

"Ha! Stupid! He'll run away with it!" Volkov realized, much faster than anyone before, that he could only win a battle of wits with Niki if he thought like her.

"If you bury him in that salt, so much he can't get up, then he won't leave," he said.

"True," Niki said, nodding her head, accepting defeat. "But," she raised her finger, "if you bury the man in salt, so much salt he can't get up - what would you need the man for?" No, Volkov can't win a battle of wits with Niki. Not in this world, not on her terms, not after four beers.

"So, you can't be too safe," she repeated an earlier point.

"Not now, no. Maybe in ten years. So, everyone does their share, right?" Niki nods her head.

"Maybe you wanna do something else," Volkov continues. "I don't know. Paint. Write. Live in a fucking cave. Maybe you don't like the whole idea. Tell you what. I'd rather be a fucking hobo over the mountains...than a fat farmer here."

"I could be a fat farmer," Niki said, closing her eyes. "What's a hobo?"

"Look, in my country..."

"Don't talk about your country!" Dead serious, again. Today, she's a tough nut to crack, but he'll get to the bottom of this, he will.

"Tell you what. You...you force people to do something, and that means you have power. Power....power corrupts people. Always."

"Like...nightwalkers? When they come back?"

"Everybody...every time. All the time."

"Didn't...corrupt you."

"I never had any power."

"You had power, over me. When I was in the cage." Niki seldom goes back to that day, but she feels relaxed now.

"What power?" Volkov hits the beer glass on the table. "What, the power to kill you? And what's that good for. Let you live? Even worse. That's not power, that's, slavery. You're a slave to a bad choice."

"What's a hobo?"

"Argh."

"What's a hobo?"

"It's just a dead word. It's...someone who just, wanders around. No home."

"Like us."

"Dead word."

"What's a dead word?"

"It's a word that noone uses anymore. Come on. You know dead words. Give me one. Look: vegan." Niki grows silent.

"Happy hours. Social capital. Newsreel. Vibe. Financial crisis."

"No."

"Banner ads. Clickbait titles. Microwave dinner."

"No!"

"Bloody Star wars! Mosquito repellent! Ariel Vega!"

"Fucking stop!!!" She's standing up now, screaming in his face, and all the patrons at the bar have frozen still, and so have all the people in the street, and maybe it was for all the stuff that Volkov said, or for Niki screaming, or both. Niki sat down immediately, but she couldn't take her eyes off Volkov. And all the patrons went back to their beers, like when you hear the first thunder in a storm and the air grows dense, but there's still time to take a gulp of your brew.

*We don't know stuff about each other, keep it that way*, she whispered to herself, and so loud was her inner voice that Volkov almost heard it; "Okay," he said, nodding his head. And she went on, like he knew she would.

"You know sometimes I... I read a bit, from a book. When we went through houses. You know? Little...bookshelves in the attic. With stickers. Of bunnies. And the books were...from another world." She swallowed hard, and then turned her head away from Volkov and wiped her face with her sleeve.

"And...I imagined there's someone, in that world...reading about me. A joke, right?" Her voice was trembling.

"No. No, it's not," Volkov said.

"And...I knew he wouldn't like it here. He wouldn't. But I would. I would like it over there. But you can't...you can't travel...between worlds. You can't." She hid her face in the palms of her hands, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Right," Volkov said.

At that moment, Niki looked more fragile than ever. Locked up in a cage, half dead, she was less fragile than that. Up in the mountains, with piss down her pants and half dead, she was less fragile than that. He didn't know regret, but Niki did. He had little pieces of nostalgic junk, but she had a maddening nostalgia that was buried somewhere, and she wanted nothing to do with it. The art of remembering, Volkov thought, was as important as the art of forgetting.

And he knew Niki was right: nobody would like it here. In this commie paradise, maybe. For a bit. Not anywhere else. The bad shoes that hurt with every step, and you get used to it, and you keep the sole in place with antenna wire. The choice of drinking radioactive water or your own piss. The days without food, when they left his house. Eating rotting leftovers from a feast that real hunters left behind - bears, wolves, pumas. Tree resin for chewing gum. The choice of selling Niki, or shitting yourself inside out. No, her choice of selling herself. The bad spell of rain that burns through a raincoat. The urge to move on, when all that feels alive is your bones. No, nobody would like it in here.

Yes, this was his favorite part of their story, he thought the next day, peering into the third glass of beer. And then he remembered Niki's reader from another world, with their story on his or her lap. Would this be his favorite part? Would she want to leave it? Ever? Would he read on, in eager anticipation of pain and of death, would she stay here, with Volkov and his beer? Readers, Volkov closed his train of thought, readers are malicious scum.

Later one afternoon, in the last village of their journey, one that was pressed into a slope, with rocks above and in the distance that concealed the desert, they noticed a man at the far end of a bench, but he had noticed them much earlier. Volkov touched Niki's forearm, jerking his head. The man had a large jug of water before him, and there was sweat running all over his shaved head and around his ears, like he was having a bad crash. The moment their eyes met, he stood up, took his jug and waddled towards them. He seemed drunk and anxiously sober at the same time.

"Fuck," Volkov whispered. The torn fishnet of a jumper hung from the man's bony shoulders, and when he spoke, he hugged his belly with both arms, and it felt like the arms rubbed against his spine, his protruding hip bones. Like he didn't belong in this land of plenty, of smoked bacon and broth.

"You. You're...going to the dead sea. You are."

"Maybe," Volkov growled. "Go, off you go."

"No, listen. The sea is gonna kill you. I've been there. Many times. With many...people. You, look...you have each other. You have enough. You don't..."

"We don't have each other. Now fuck off."

"You've been to the sea?" Niki asked.

"Yes. You have no idea. Look --" he turned to Volkov, who was now towering above him. "I was a guide. A...guide. I took people through."

"For a price," Volkov said. He'd sat down again. Words or threats don't work on the guy, but a quick punch will. He needn't be standing for that.

"You always pay. Here, with salt, with meat. There, with your own bones, your life. Listen.."

"Nothing's free, right?" Volkov scoffed.

"No. Nothing is. Look..."

"You got to the mountain," Niki said.

"Yes. Look..."

"Got to the top?" Niki said.

"No."

"You got to the foot of the mountain and you never went up to see what's up there," Volkov said.

"No. I'm... I'm good. Listen, there was a girl." The sudden pause almost surprised him. "A girl. Your age, maybe," he nodded to Niki. "And she, she had the saddest, sweetest smile. I thought, I always did, the sea...it likes people who...who've lost everything. Hope, direction. Purpose. She was...they always go first. You throw in the rabbit foot, but they go first. They always go first. And the girl, she...she stepped in. And the sea...ripped her in two. Tossed her like a rag doll. She didn't make a sound, not a single sound. She just... opened her mouth." He took a frantic gulp from his jug, arms shaking. "Don't go to the sea. Please. I'm begging you. Are you...both?" Volkov just sat staring at him.

"No," he said after a long while. "I'm the delivery man. She's the cargo."

"You're taking the child to her death."

"She's taking herself." Niki had been watching the man for some time now, carefully observing every droplet of sweat, every wrinkle, every twitch, and as he turned to her, she leaned over the table, and spoke in a slow whisper, like she had made up her mind.

"Look. If I don't go, I'll end up like you." Something in the man's eyes brought a rare sentiment from her rabbit hole. "I'm sorry." And with that, she got up and wandered off. Volkov watched her in quiet disbelief, then turned back to the man.

"Anyone came back?" he asked. The man buried his face in his hands.

"A few," he whispered, sobbing, lost in himself.

"Any advice?" There was a long pause, and it looked like the man won't speak again.

"Believe," he said at last. "Believe."

"I'm not good at that," Volkov said, turned to his drink and gave it his full, exquisite and unwavering attention.

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Before they reached the short, one-day climb that took them to the desert plateau, Volkov had managed to give their wardrobes a complete overhaul. It was, in part, due to his fondness of cutting things up, and stitching them together again, however clumsy that was. And thus, a torn shirt was sacrificed in the creation of two hoods that got attached to the collars of their jackets, with two strings - one tied the hood around your face, the other one kept the sand guard over the tip of your nose, with some insulation from a winter jacket sewn in, to tighten up the gaps. This way, you could breathe through a sand dune, Volkov said. Not that she was gonna try it unless she had to. Even Tabby got a hood of his own, albeit less intricate than theirs.

Sleeping well was of equal importance. Theirs was a good tent, with a high waterproof tub on the inside and a small ventilation mesh in the back that Volkov had now covered with two precious pieces of duct tape, so the only way air got in was through the gap between the outer tent and the ground. Volkov had long cut out the inner mesh ceiling and replaced it with four cords, so he could operate the outer tent from the inside, and using a little trick and a few spare pegs, he was now able to regulate ventilation on either side. That proved essential in the sandstorm on the first night. It hit them from one side; Volkov woke up with the first gusts of wind puffing sand through the gap. Once, their tent was a parachute; now it was a storm shelter, a concrete bunker in the sand, a fortress.

The storm wouldn't stop, and there was no use waiting. They packed up, tied up their jackets and hoods with every last button and string and cord. The tent came last.

The sand would clog and pierce their eyes if they left them open, so they were like two blind men walking in the rain, with no sense of direction. Counting and rhythm was all that mattered. One, two, one, three, one four, up to fifty. Then Volkov turned around, their foreheads stuck together and between their lips, he held a compass. The single luminescent arrow pointed north, and he motioned both of them so that the arrow went right through his chest bone, and that's how they kept direction.

To make matters worse, this was a land of dunes, of climbs and descents. The locals had told them the desert had never existed, it just happened, like the breaches, like everything else. Once, it was a fertile plateau, moments later, it was a sand mayhem. There was no water, no life, no nothing. Volkov knew Niki dreamt of the desert, long before she could know it was there. She dreamt of it as a kid, sleepwalking and nightwalking, as her mum and dad made peace amongst the blankets and the grass. In this landscape of the increasingly bizarre, this was just a little bump in the road.

On their second day, they came across a steep slope, and slid down as the sandstorm raged above them. And then, Volkov stopped. Or tried to - his boots were still sliding downwards, so were his arms, pressed elbow deep into the slope. Something was odd.

They'd moved ten, maybe twenty yards down the hill, and the storm was already too quiet. He looked left and right, trying to make out the curvature of the slope. When Niki was level with him, he pulled her close.

"It's a funnel," he whispered in her ear.

"What?"

"It's not a valley. It's a funnel."

"A what?" Down below, he noticed a circular opening.

"Press against the slope. Whole body. Like that." Suddenly, a gust of wind hit their backs. No, it was sand. Volkov looked down below. When you see a nightmare, don't keep staring. There's no time for that.

"Gimme your backpack. Now. You're lighter. Do what I said. Here, the rope." He threw the ice axe as high as he could. "Hold onto it. If it slides down, throw it again."

"What about you?"

"Get to the top, sit on the axe, throw down the rope."

"What if it's too short?" He knew it was too short already.

"Here. Stuff them under your jacket. Come on." He'd opened her backpack, and she managed to grab a few handfuls of rabbit feet, before he slid out of reach.

Niki had sensed lethal danger building up in Volkov's mind. She won't look down. When she leans onto the slope, the bony ends of the rabbit feet press into her breasts. She imagines she's a thief going up a rabbit hole. Like back in her dream: one foot up, two feet down. She'd been reliving that nightmare, but as she got into rhythm and pulled at the rope, ever so slightly, she felt she was going up, slowly but steadily.

Meanwhile, Volkov was moving in the opposite direction. He doesn't look down, either. There's no time to wonder what that thing is, but if he can kill it and live, he will. His combat mode kicks in. Turning on his back, he pulls a handheld from a belt pocket. It was a parting gift from the man at the bridge, and he carried it across the mountains, for no particular reason. Unscrew the cap, strike it against the igniter. The flare went down the hole. Call it the element of surprise. He's got three minutes. If he lives that long.

The opening was a shaft, and then a fall - maybe ten feet, like one story of a shelled house. He went down, katana first, then rolled on the floor and threw his backpack over the flare, as far as he could. Tabby's on top, meowing his lungs out. He might serve as a distraction.

His back is pressed against the wall. One blink of an eye, and there's a creaking, scuttering sound; thin, exoskeletal legs, the knees are scratching the ceiling, tearing off puffs of sand. The light of the flare is infernal, and so is the speed of that thing. He never noticed where it came from; it's now towering over his backpack. Its body is bloated yet disproportionately small, it crouches, then the head comes into view, the jaws, the dark fangs, all black like the maw of the night itself. And over it, five glowing eyes. Tabby hisses in that face. Volkov jumps.

The blade goes through one leg and gets stuck in the other. Never let go of the handle. Never. He gets thrown across the room, amongst screeching sounds. His back hits a wall, something cracks inside him. Falling on the ground, he rolls over just in time. Two front legs pierce the sand where he was a split second ago. He slashes behind his back, instinctively. The thing screeches again, and he's suddenly face to face with it. He guards with his left arm; his hand gets impaled on one of the fangs. Like a boxer, measuring the distance with his jab. He slashes against the face, two of the glowing spheres go out. The monster jerks its head backwards. One more slash. Two more eyes pour out of their sockets. The thing springs sideways, and it's gone, in one of the openings in the back wall.

Neutotoxin. He can feel the effects already. It's a weak variety, but he'll be immobile in a minute. How long till the flare goes out? He limps towards it, picks it up. Time to finish the job, before he passes out. He works his way towards the three openings in the back. There are six of them now. He's slowly losing his sense of touch, so he puts all his strength into holding onto that flare, and his sword. Must be the one in the center. One of them. He throws the flare and it goes in.

"One eye," he whispers. "Hey. One eye." Something creaks in response. He staggers inside, the dying light of the flare illuminating a circular room, with a receding ceiling, with bones and other rubble scattered on the floor. The thing is cowering in a niche to the left.

"There you are, One eye." He slashes at everything, like a drunken butcher, and he keeps slashing, until the last eye goes out. Then he collapses on the floor.

Niki had noticed the light, in her peripheral vision, and then she heard the sounds of the fight. All had gone quiet, long before she reached the top. And by the time she did, the storm had lost half its power. She sat on the ice axe and threw down the rope, even though she knew it was useless. She screamed and cried, in both words and sounds, she can't remember how long. It was useless, she knew it, but she did it nevertheless. She fell asleep, exhausted, in fetal position, and by the time morning came, her body got sanded in, save for the tip of her left shoulder. When she crawled out, she noticed the sun was shining, the skies were clear and the air was still.

Niki's throat was so dry she couldn't make a sound. She must have cried out all of her water the previous night. She took a measured gulp from an emergency bottle in her side pocket.

"Volkov." It was a faint sound. Didn't even make it to the far end of the funnel. In broad daylight, the thing looked huge.

"Volkov!" She could hear the echo now. Coming from a hundred yards across, and maybe fifty to the bottom.

"You fucking idiot!!" she cried.

"Hey." That was not an echo, and it came from down below. Suddenly, her mouth was wide open.

"You crazy piece of shit!" And she roared, and howled at the sun, like a wolf who chose the wrong part of the day.

"Mind your language."

For once, fire was more comforting than beer. To Volkov at least, as he sat next to it the following night. In a weak moment, after he had applied schnaps to the wound in his hand, which had long been dried up and disinfected by the sand, after he had tied up his broken ribs with his shirt and just before he applied a gulp of schnaps to his throat - he wished he was back home, amongst the charred rubble, with a bottle of Scotch in his hand, maybe even with the murderous kid by his side. Home. Perhaps, the man in the last village was right, and they had enough. He'd certainly had enough for one day.

For all he knew or cared, One eye was some giant, twisted version of an antlion, funnel spider or some other kind of vermin. When he woke up from his toxin-induced sleep, he gathered One eye's legs, or what was left of them. Combined with a length of paracord, they made for a pretty sturdy rope ladder. That's how he managed to climb the wall of the cave, get through the shaft and eventually climb up the funnel slope, dragging all their belongings behind him. Niki cursed some more, but mostly, she just howled.

They had managed to cross the remainder of the desert during the day, so before night fell, they arrived at a cluster of rocks in a mild slope overgrown with dead spruce and pine, and some withered shrubs, still alive. There were more clusters of rocks where the slope rose, and behind the ridge, there was a sharp descent, a strip of rocky beach with an ancient tree here and there, and then, there was the dead sea. Niki saw all of that in her dream. Volkov was happy to stay by the fire. He had had a large enough dose of crazy for one day, but not her - she wanted to climb the slope, and watch the sea in moonlight, and see the mountain at its center.

It was majestic. She didn't know the word, but if she did, that's what she would call it. As she sat down on a rock overlooking the sea, there was a thudding noise, reverberating through the ground and the rock and her bowels. Just one - like a deep, slow thunder, like a heartbeat that happens twice in a day.

"Hello there," Niki whispered in response. Unlike in the port of Delft, this sea gave no reflection, but she could still feel its sheer mass, through a different sense than the five senses she had. She believed it resembled pudding, or pea soup. Also, she imagined that the sea, the real sea, one she hasn't seen in her life but saw it on pictures and cutouts and on the Vermeer, she'd read about it and thought that it smelled of fish, or dead fish, but not like Agnes. It was, she imagined, like the smell of compost, but watery compost. Here, though, all the smells were fresh, as if the sea was playing with them, making them up. At one moment, Niki could sense the smell of roast meat, just like the one they felt in the commander's office beyond the mountains. Then, Pig's smell on her skin, and later, for a very brief moment, she could even smell Agnes.

The sea gave no reflection, but the mountain was a dark mass against the far horizon. It felt like it was close, ridiculously close. She even noticed a fire, somewhere in the middle of the slope, and there was also another fire, at the far end of the beach, to the right.

Sitting there, Niki remembered the man they met in the last village and in her head, she still carried the image of the girl torn in half, with more depth and color than necessary, and yet, she felt no fear settling in her bones. It was just like many times before, when she climbed rocks at night or felt she was gonna die - there was no fear, just a rush of blood to the head, and maybe it was a zombie thing, but now, it felt the same, and maybe, she was still a zombie, not on the surface but inside, she was like a zombie lemming walking off a cliff, she thought. And at that very moment, the night came. Ever since she could sleep again, she met them less often, the twins and the night, for they only appeared when darkness fell and when she was alone. First, there is a gentle touch - the slightest bump on the tip of her nose, and Niki closes her eyes, smiling. That's how the night would greet her when she was a kid: a bump in the nose, here I am. She spread her arms wide. There was a familiar sensation in her fingertips, a tiny bit of pressure, like she was touching a wall of fog, or water. Then her forearms felt the same, then her torso.

*Funny, the night said after a while. You never asked me who I was.*

*Why? Niki said.*

*People give me all sorts of names, but they never ask.*

*But I know who you are,* Niki said, with a smile in the corner of her mouth.

*Yes?*

*Of course. You're Eve. And I'm St Agnes.* Niki felt a bit of warmth on her cheek as they both smiled, and then, before she opened her eyes, she knew the twins were there, one on each side.

*You know what?*, Niki said immediately. She had a lot on her mind. *Tomorrow, we're gonna die.* She wouldn't tell Volkov. Ever.

*That's good,* Misha said.

*Good,* Adri added.

*You don't get it. It's the sea, it'll kill us.*

*Good,* Adri said again.

*Does it hurt?* Niki whispered, after a moment. There was a long pause.

*Just a bit,* Misha said.

*Just a sting,* Adri said. *And you'll be with us.*

*Look, she's hurting,* Misha said. *In her stomach.*

*In her bones,* Adri said.

*Her feet.*

*Between her legs.*

*We don't hurt.*

*No, we don't.*

*She has fantasies,* Misha said.

*She hopes for things.*

*We can't.*

*We don't.*

Niki lay there, curled up, with fists pressed against her forehead. It was no use, she could still hear them.

*You know...* she said when she sat back up. *I thought I could grow up. And show you everything. This whole world. And...learn to hunt. And fight, with a sword. And...* There was a weird tension rising from her stomach, and Niki swallowed hard and pressed it back in. *I just...I just wanna grow up.* Tears were running down her cheeks now, torrential, unstoppable.

*You won't,* Misha whispered.

*You won't,* Adri hissed.

*You won't,* the night rustled with the wind.

When Niki was gone down the hill and fast asleep, the night pondered some more.

*It's funny, you know,* the night said. *People go to the mountain because they can't get rid of a dream. But on top of the mountain, they want to find all the dreams that they have lost. Funny. Isn't it?* She spoke to the twins, but the twins weren't there; there was just a thin, foggy cloud passing through the shrubs.

## Chapter Fifteen

*in which the sea swallows its pride and the raven does something quite unexpected*

They'd descended the steep slope on the morning of the next day, wary of the encampment to the right. It was far enough; if they went to the left left and kept hidden in the shade of rocks for some time, they'd go unnoticed. Niki swallowed the urge to run to the sea, there and then, it was just like she imagined, thick as pudding, with slow ripples and waves that looked like someone was stirring a huge bowl of pea soup, and there were puffs of steam here and there. Also, the air above it seemed to vibrate, like the air above a stove, but thicker, much thicker. It felt like the sea was creating its own, warped version of reality, for when Niki crouched and looked through that air lens, the hills and the horizon in the far distance were suddenly upside down, and twisted into various shapes.

As they went around the head of a cliff and the encampment was safely out of sight, Niki ran out of the shrubs to inspect the sea more closely. The pulsating mass and the thick air above it seemed to be giving out heat, and even the stones that were close to the shore felt warm to the touch, but every now and then, a gust of wind blew ice crystals into her eyes, which reminded her of the snowstorm in the mountains.

Suddenly, a bass saxophone blew a single note in one of the ancient trees nearby. To Niki, it sounded like a steamboat horn, but Volkov knew the sound very well. A cello answered it, in a third, further down the beach, and a trombone went up an octave, more to their right. The bass sax now set a four-note rhythm, pumping in low sounds, while the cello added a fast melodic line. More instruments joined in from a distance - a violin, an upright bass, a pair of cymbals.

"What..." Niki was amazed, transfixed by the Sirens' song.

"It is..." to Volkov, it brought memories of the magnificent concert hall in Rostov, memories of sounds he had long forgotten. "It is a..."

"A tree orchestra," Niki said.

"Yes, a tree orchestra." He went down on his knees, overpowered by the sudden presence of music, while Niki just stared at the beach, mouth open.

The moment lasted only so long. Suddenly, Volkov jumped up, hitting his forehead with his fist.

"Stupid! Run! Run now! They're fucking sentinels!"

"What?"

"Spotters, for the encampment! Run!" It turned out, as Volkov realized, that music does not only convey emotion, it may also carry information. Sure, the people at the encampment could just be offering free tickets for their next open air concert, but luckily for the two, the idea never crossed their minds.

They ran further along the beach, hoping to find a path, climb up the slope and get lost amongst the rocks. However, there was just a uniform, steep mass of sandstone, extending as far as they could see. An army of two, they were stuck between cliffs and the sea at Thermopylae. And already, they could hear the horde behind them.

"The sea!" Niki cried. "We've got to go in. They won't follow us in there." Volkov nodded his head, and as they ran, they started throwing pebbles to their right. Primordial soup, Volkov thought for no reason. Most of the pebbles went *poof*, turned ablaze or just disappeared. He shot a quick glance behind his back. A group of maybe twenty men, all dressed in shades of black, has just passed the head of the cliff. They've got a minute, probably less. And then, one of the pebbles stayed on the surface. Volkov threw in a foot, and then he stepped in.

"I go first!"

"No you don't." The sea didn't tear him apart. It was but an inch deep, and the ground beneath was anything but solid, but it supported his weight. For now. He threw the foot again, two more steps. Niki followed him. He felt it was a narrow tunnel, with walls of raging, invisible magma just inches from his shoulders. Five steps in, they heard voices behind them.

"Whoah, nice ass!" A moment later: "Oh my. We've got a cutie. Finders keepers, *rebyata*. I've got a date."

That's when Volkov turned around as well. "This can't be real," he whispered.

They were all men, in suits that were once black, shirts that used to be white, now all torn, smudged, burnt. "You had a girl last week, Anton," one of the men said.

"Did I? But she was already dead."

"No, she was still breathing."

"Gentlemen, mind your manners." An old man with wild, greying hair, wearing nothing but a dinner jacket with a baton in the front pocket. "Please. Everybody had a girl last week." That's when the one they called Anton drew an old Makarov from his pocket and aimed it at Niki. Volkov felt her back suddenly pressed against him, her muscles twitching uncontrollably. The walls of magma felt much closer now.

"Come on now, hand her over. Can't wait to eat that pussy."

"Anton, watch your language," the old man said.

"Calf steak for me," someone shouted out.

"Smoked ribs, here."

"Left cheek."

"Be more specific."

"It's not loaded," Volkov said.

"Guess you need a little demonstration," Anton replied. "Besides, they're always better when they fight for their life."

A dry shot resonated through the cliffs. Niki jumped up, then fell backwards in Volkov's arms as her legs gave way. Slowly, Anton let go of the Makarov and looked down at his shirt, the tiny, mother-of-pearl buttons, not a single one missing, the faded beige hue, a mix of sweat and dirt, the dark stain forming at the center. The crowd watched in disbelief as his lifeless body fell to the ground.

When at long last, they turned around to leave, dragging the corpse behind them, the old man looked at them one more time, and then he tipped an imaginary hat.

"What just happened? What happened?" They were gone and she could talk again.

"The sea just shot the first violin of the Rostov philharmonic orchestra. That's what happened."

When they got far enough, it no longer felt like they were walking in a maze. A maze has a beginning, but here, all sense of beginning or end or direction was lost. Gone was the beach, gone were the cliffs behind it. Their Geiger was off the scale, all the time. Volkov had to turn the speaker off. To hell with it. The only unchanging image was the mountain, a grey mass. It just seemed farther away with every step, and their journey was winding at best. Early in the morning that day, Volkov observed the mountain from the rocks above the beach. The dead sea was scarcely larger than a lake, and the mountain - a gracious, grass-covered molehill with trees on top - was no more than four hundred yards away from the beach. Now, it seemed like miles.

Their skin could sense danger. Sometimes. Niki took off her shirt and wrapped it around her body, so her arms could feel heat, or cold, or gravity. Volkov did the same. That invisible tunnel of magma that he'd sensed earlier, turns out there were pockets of heat, and deadly cold, and other elements. Traps. Volkov put his backpack on his chest and turned Tabby around. He was a test cat, after all. Whenever he hissed, or the fur on his forehead stood on end, they knew he can sense something they can't. And Volkov, he would always throw the foot on the string, one step before him, then he pulled it back and threw it further, just a bit. With the tip of his boot, he would inspect the sea floor. Sometimes, there were gaps, gorges they had to jump across. It went like this for hours, and they began to feel they could beat the sea at its game. Until they couldn't.

It happened when Volkov jumped across a yard-wide gorge, inspected the area before him with the foot and made space for Niki to make the jump. As she sprang up, there was the sound of a hundred razors falling onto a concrete floor. It stopped her upper body in mid air, the book she carried underneath her jacket fell out and sank into the sea. She landed on all fours, panting. Volkov leaned over her. The side of her left hand was shaved to the bone. Blood spouted from the wound and ran between her fingers. He bandaged it with a piece of his shirt and she didn't resist, still in shock.

"Gonna disinfect it. With schnaps. Teeth together. It's gonna hurt. Don't cry." Maybe the sea reacted to sounds. You never know. As he poured schnaps over the wound, she screamed, curled up on the ground, trembling. Disoriented. She couldn't see for the tears in her eyes.

"I tried," she whispered. "I did." Volkov growled, but somehow, she felt his anger was not directed at her. Yes. Anger. Volkov was angry.

"Your book is gone," he growled again.

"Fuck." Somehow, it hurt more than her hand, they both knew it did. "They said the sea was just."

"And cruel. Like a fucked-up god." More than ever, Volkov felt trampled down, and manipulated by a malicious entity - more malicious than an avalanche, a sandstorm, a snowstorm, or an ancient god who opens the sea, and then lets it fall down over an army. An army of two.

"Maybe we deserve this," Niki said.

"Yea, maybe we all do." He wasn't mellowing down, quite the opposite. "I'll tell you one thing I know. No god that's just, not one on this bloody Earth, makes a kid part with her book."

"I could pray, I just dunno how."

"To hell. With prayer. Lemme tell you about gods. It's always the same. Loads of bronze age bullshit and a big fucking ego. Don't feed the ego. Show it who's boss." And so, moments later, Niki stood up and talked to the sea.

"You piece of shit! You hear me? You're a fucking coward! Now gimme back the book of spells. It's mine!"

"Feeling better?" She nods her head. And then, his eyes catch a glimpse of something behind her.

"Gotta be kidding me. Turn around." And there it was, swimming on the surface - Niki's book of spells.

"Well, that's how you manhandle a god," he said, chuckling into his beard.

Volkov had made up his mind. The sea was cruel, and hysterical. But most of all, it was vindictive. As they walked through a seemingly harmless patch of land, yellow fog started rising from the ground. Nobody told them they should stop breathing. The next moment, they are kneeling next to each other, throwing up in the moss. Yes, there is moss to throw up into. The puke is bright green. How do colors metabolize, this is the question that flashes through Volkov's mind. Their guts must be out by now. He thinks of something nice to say.

"You're getting good at this, you know?"

"What, puking?"

"No, living."

"Thank...you."

When the ordeal is over, they just lie in the moss, which has now turned into a pine needle floor.

Suddenly, Volkov knows Niki is going to talk about beer. And she does.

"If I ever get back from here, I wanna have a beer." Nah, of course she can't have a beer. She's underage.

"You can't. You're underage."

And then, he knows he's gonna hear a thunder underground, and yes, there's a thundering noise, heading in their direction. And then, a slimy, vermin-like creature is going to pop up from the sea bed. A giant, fat snake in layers of exoskeletal armor, with a pointed blade in the front, like a swordfish. And then, it pierces Niki's chest.

That's why, when the creature plugs out of the sea bed, Volkov jumps on top of her. He deflects the blade with both hands, and it lands in his shoulder. The horny jaw underneath it starts crushing his chest bone.

First, you kill the thing in front of you. And only then do you care about everyone else. That list of priorities is hardwired into everyone's brain. Not just that of a soldier or a survivor. Niki was silent underneath him, but he never noticed. His feet were sliding helplessly on the creature. Knife. Side pocket, right. It slid into his hand. A small opening in the armor, must be the eye. He stabbed into it, once, twice. The *zlukh* shivered. The other one. The sword came out of his shoulder as the creature turned over. And he kept stabbing, into the soft belly, anywhere that seemed soft, and out poured gushes of orange blood.

Something pressed against his shoulder, and it felt like another sword pierced him from the back. He turned around in a flash, with the knife high in the air.

"It's gone," Niki says. She was all bloodied, and he dropped the knife and grabbed her by the shoulders. No. No, it's good. All that blood was his. Not a scratch. He noticed something's dripping between his legs. He must have pissed himself. How funny is that, he thought. Reddish, kinda. That's not piss. And then his lights went out.

First thing he sees is her silhouette, crouching before him. Not the fabled ass, but her front. Loking at him. Focusing, that will be a problem there. The wound in his shoulder is bandaged up, with...yes, it's a piece of Niki's shirt. He raises his eyebrows, noticing that it's quite neat. Good work. There's an unmistakable odour of dried blood and schnaps.

"How long?"

"Hours." She keeps looking straight in his face. "Why did you do it?"

"That?" he croaks. "It would have killed you."

"No, not that. Everything. Why'd you go with me. I never asked, but...we could be dead in a minute. So I have to know."

"Midlife crisis," When he laughed, the dull pain in his shoulder shot right through his chest.

"What's a... be serious!"

"Okay. Truth is, I'm madly in love."

"I said be serious!" He took a deep breath. He knew few women in his life, and some became quite unbearable, for their habit of asking complex questions early in the morning.

"It was... It was the only thing that made sense."

"How?"

"Argh, come on."

"Tell me. Now." In the left side pocket on his trousers, he kept an emergency water bottle. He'd have preferred schnaps, but Niki must have hidden it in his backpack. Too far to reach. He looked around. The *zlukh*'s body's gotta have sunk back into the sea.

"Tell me."

"Look...you're forty. Something. Not you, him, anyone. Got it?" Niki nodded. "You've done...all your running. Hiding. Drinking, fucking. Fighting, building. All that crap. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Well then, nothing makes sense anymore. Until something does."

There was a long pause before Niki spoke again. "And the deal?"

"Yeah, the deal. Look, sometimes...you just wanna wait it out. Lie down, wait it out. Got it?"

"Yes."

"That's what would happen. You wouldn't last two days. You wouldn't spread your legs to get stuff."

"I don't!"

"You wouldn't cross the mountains. You wouldn't last all the way. Got it?" Niki just sighed. "If there wasn't that thought. Of killing me. Like it or not. Hatred, the most...potent emotion. Turns a person into one hell of a tough beast."

"I don't wanna be a beast."

"Too late for that."

"What made you...go on?"

"I dunno." A raven flew by and sat on a tree stump nearby.

"Tell me."

"You make a promise. Get it? And then you either keep it, or you're dead." There was tall green grass all around them when he first opened his eyes. Now, it had all dried up, into a rustling shade of yellow.

"We should make a move."

"No."

"The sea. It changes all the time."

"Here it doesn't." She glances upwards, then back at Volkov. "The sun hasn't moved in hours. And it's a summer sun, look. I'm not moving until it behaves like it should."

"To hell with the sun..." As he tried to get up, the wound in his left hand shot upwards, into the wound in his shoulder, and from there, to his broken ribs, growing in his center like a fiery supernova. That's when he lost consciousness again.

He woke up into the night. A red desert moon illuminated the patch of land, and the grass was now black, motionless. When he moved his fingers through it, it broke down into soot. He'd seen that grass before, when a white phosphorus bomb cleansed a whole city block of life. Niki's sitting a few yards away, cross-legged, hands resting on her knees. Her eyes are closed. Bathed in moonlight and sliced across by shadows, she looks like a bronze statue of the goddess Tara, graceful and serene.

The raven is still there, perched on the tree stump, and now in flies up and lands on top of Niki's head. And then slowly, her figure rises into thin air, a few feet above the ground. The shadow of the tree stump passes across the raven's beak, across Niki's body. When it stops, she stretches out her arms and moves them up and down, ever so slightly, like a migrating bird in its sleep. For a very short moment, her arms become raven's wings, and every flap of those wings brings her a little higher. And then, the raven begins plucking at the center of her forehead. Soon enough, there's blood flowing down her face, dripping between her legs. Volkov can't move.

"Leave her alone, you little..." The raven looks at Volkov, tilts its head. Starts plucking again.

"Niki, wake up. Hey. Wake up." Volkov himself is lost between sleep and the reality of the dead sea. *She's not Niki, stupid*, the raven croaks, somewhere inside his head.

"I'm a nightwalker," he hears Niki whisper. She folds her hands together and her and the raven float back to the ground. And then the moon is gone, and all goes to sleep.

The next morning, she looks and feels rejuvenated. Happy, almost. Of course she can't remember anything that happened the previous night. When Volkov tries to describe what he saw, she tells him something about silly dreams. And there's dried blood all over her face, and in the center of her forehead, a tiny black scab, like a blood bindi.

He could get up, at long last. The fiery supernova in his center was now nothing more than a red dwarf. Searing, razor sharp, but manageable. When noon passed, or when they decided it had, by their internal clocks, most of their rabbit feet were gone. The mountain seemed nearer now, but the sea had been playing games with them. Often, it would lead them to a dead end, and for even more thrill, it would barricade the way back, threatening to squish them with gravity or burn them to ashes, as the walls closed in on them. And then, at the very last moment, they'd discover a narrow passageway, one that would lead them to another dead end.

Other times, the sea would swallow the feet, in places which seemed perfectly safe, even to Tabby. Or the feet would explode, or turn to ash. Then, they were down to the last one. And the mountain seemed so close, yet so far away. It towered before them now, they could make out the beach, through the vibrating air above the sea. Twenty yards away, or less. Their fingertips were burnt, by invisible cinders, by frost, by acid, by frost again. Niki was on all fours, searching about with her hands. And then, Volkov threw the last foot one step in front of him. The sea broke it at the joint, then pulled the two bits apart, with the tendons cracking one by one. That's as far as they got, he thought. Unless... He laid down his backpack, casually, quietly. One more glance towards the beach. When he turned back, Tabby was gone.

"Give me the cat." She'd put on her jacket and now, she looked pregnant, with a very lively baby inside. "Come get it."

"It's the only way." He took hold of the jacket, ready to pull it apart, when all of a sudden, she grabbed his wrists and squeezed them, pried them away from her. He'd never known such force, from any man, let alone a kid.

"Let him be," she said. He pushed her and they ended up on the ground. She'd let go of his hands, and his left was now wrapped around her neck.

"Let me do it." His right reached underneath her jacket, but all he sensed was her naked belly, soft and raging hot.

"Are you gonna take me now?" She spat in his face. "Just press down on that hand. Feel how I fight for my life."

"Just...the cat."

"The cat's got legs." She pushed him away, folded her knees under her chin, in a flash, and kicked into his chest. It was meant to be a slight kick, a shove, a warning. She saw Volkov's body fly high above the sea, like a cannonball, and land on the beach, at the foot of the mountain.

His lights never went out. Both of his boots got swallowed by the sea and his feet were charred. He didn't care about that. He didn't care that half his ribs were broken in. What is it that Niki could do? That's what he cared about. The empty, withered rib cage, a few feet away from him, with all the other bones gone, he didn't care about that. Another one, up the hill, with the skull broken in though the chest bone. No, he didn't care about that, either. Wait, he did. No, not now. Niki's over there, and she's gonna die. That's what he cared about.

She stood up, threw her jacket off. Tabby is there, pressed to her breast. Volkov's backpack on one shoulder.

"Use the cat!" he croaks.

"To hell with it." Her voice is distorted, like it went through water and back.

"Let me through," Niki whispered. "I'm not killing the cat. Just because you want me to. You heartless piece of shit. Let me through now." And then, Volkov could see her clearly. A bronze statue of Tara, her skin and trousers ashen grey, and then sweat bringing the ashes down her skin, and blood, as a thousand razorblades falls on the cement floor and she walks forward, a stroll of faith, a cat on her breast, and she can take it all, as long as she can walk. And the sea, it opens before her, and it thaws like a toothless winter,

like the Red Sea, like the ice around Shackleton's wreck, hit by a warm current, and she limps, and staggers, and limps on.

When she's but a few steps away from the beach, an arrow hits Volkov in the side. The pain, searing, immediate, travels through his body like an earthquake. Everything goes black for a moment, and then Niki's standing above him.

"What... oh no." She deflects another arrow, with the side of her hand. "Schnaps. We need schnaps." She fishes in the backpack, looking around. A couple shooters behind that rock over there, a few more further up the slope. Fumbling for arrows now.

She pulls out half a foot of a bloodied, pointed stick, with Volkov growling underneath. When she pours schnaps into the wound, he curls up, panting. Another volley, out of rhythm, out of tune. He can't hear the arrows flying over their heads. She can.

Another one. Niki raises her arms and hits every arrow, at the right moment. Volkov has never seen anyone deflect an arrow. Not once.

"Take the sword," he whispers. "Now." A moment later, she stands up, naked sword in her hand. In his peripheral vision, he can see three ragged figures approaching them, circling them, with Niki standing above his body. He can see a sledgehammer, a rapier. A scythe. And Niki: a bloodied nemesis.

*Fight.* He thinks that, because he can't get the words past his lips. And Niki, she begins to dance. It's a wild, clumsy dance, but it is also the fastest swordfight he has ever seen. A moment later, the man with the sledgehammer is bending over, his guts flowing between his arms.

"Die! Die!!!" Niki keeps screaming, high on adrenaline, when they're already up the hill, pulling their fallen comrade behind them.

"The raven has spoken," one of them shouts back.

"Fuck the raven!!!" Niki screams, then she collapses on the ground. A little pile of intestines is lying right beside her, letting off warm vapor, and she looks like a piglet thrown out of her mother's womb, steaming fresh, all bloody and shaking.

## Chapter Sixteen

*in which dead words come to life and a traveler embarks on a journey*

Volkov had always imagined a quick death. A grenade, maybe. The shock wave rids him unconscious, the splinters tear his body into shreds. That's a pleasant, quick death. And he always said, reality would disappoint him. Like it did today. Of course he can get up. As long as Niki lends him a shoulder. She can do that now. He'd insisted on rubbing schnaps into the thousand cuts in her arms, her thighs and her belly, and she didn't resist, or scream. She'd replaced her scream with a hiss, but he felt the pain was still there, all the same. His pain though, it was just a burden, one he must carry up the hill, up the mountain slope. And yes, he resisted that image. If he could, ever, die for the rest of the world, he would do so, if he couldn't help it. He'd seen soldiers die for the rest of the world, arms shattered, bowels out, cold shivers. There was nothing heroic or noble in that. He just had to trudge on. His mind - one more step. And one more. He's gotta go. He's got to. This would be the final surprise of his life. Like a fucking candy mountain. And he already knows what they're gonna find up there. No wonder they call it Zen mountain.

He believes, thinks, he knows Niki has learnt enough. Maybe that newly acquired strength of hers, the speed, the awareness - maybe it's just a pill the sea gave her, with a short expiry date. But she could manage without that. He knows she could. She's good. Not a fighter, she's a dancer, more like. And she's good at making friends. And salt. And she's got her own mind, she always has. And...one more step. One more. And, she's a good kid. He really believes she's a good kid. She's got the passion and the heart. And...one more step. She can do good in the world. He...one more step. He knows she can. And...one more. And all that crap. In fact, he knew fuck all about her. She was like a new generation you can't imagine. But it's there, all the same, and it does...one more. It does whatever the fuck it wants. And...one more. And you have no idea. But...one more. But he's seen a few brats..one more. In his life. And this...one more. And this brat has a future. Or...one more. Or not.

Niki imagined words. As they staggered up the hill, she did. Back in her childhood - and she wouldn't resist the image now - back in her childhood...no, wait. This here, it was like a perfect storm. It's where everything's just right, and every little thing adds up, so in the end, you've got the worst storm ever, just like here, no way they could be here without a perfect storm, and she didn't know the phrase, never heard of it, until she did. Back in her childhood, though, everything had a name, it *had to* have a name, like everything needed a box to fit into, and all those dead words are swimming up now, uninhabited, there was *sensei*, a teacher, in school or in life, then *sempai*, an older friend, then *Shi no teki*, an arch-enemy, and also *waifu*, someone you had a crush on, see, crush, that's another dead word, and Niki was pretty sure Volkov wasn't her *waifu*, not in a hundred years anyway, but she felt like he was every other of those words, and there must be a name for someone like Volkov, there has to be, and then she remembered something else, *don't give it a name if you want to kill it*, and maybe Volkov said that once, or someone else did, but she can't remember.

In some ways, she may have taken after her mother. So whoever was responsible for the end of the world, she would gladly gauge their eyes out. In other ways, she was a very different person. And in the past few months, she had grown up more than ever before. With time, she realized that her mother, Volkov and everyone else were just slaves to circumstance. Yes, there was this mind-numbing anger, and it bubbled up every now and then, but other than that, her thirst for vengeance was gone. She never really forgave her mum for her betrayal, or Volkov for slaughtering the remnants of what she could call family. No, full-blown, mindful forgiveness was sentimental, even in the old world. And here, it had no place at all. Niki was a survivor, or getting pretty good at it anyway, and survivors don't thrive on the past. The past lacks nutrition. So, it wasn't forgiveness - at best, it was a blend of understanding and forgetting, mostly forgetting. And in her rabbit hole, behind some of those little doors, certain memories were locked up and left to wither. Maybe next time she remembers the twins, their last moments, and herself in their heads, she won't piss her pants. And still, there was a deal to be kept, and it rang sweet, sweeter than whatever that's on top of the mountain.

And then, they were there. On top of the mountain. Volkov fell on his knees. Of course. Niki ran across the clearing, screaming and dancing, like a clown who got a date. Of course. She ran back, jumping and

spinning, head first, then landing in the grass and stuffing it in her mouth. Of course he knew it. Why would anyone give it that name. There was...

"There's nothing!" Niki cries out, laughing.

"I know."

"Nothing at all!"

"Yeah." For a little while, he imagined a family trip to a lookout tower, in foggy weather.

"How could you know? How did you? Look!" And she raced through the meadow, and then crash landed into it, head first. There's a time for everything, Volkov thought. There's even time for her to utter the ominous sentence, about the goal of the journey and the journey itself, something like that, and she's gonna feel like the first being on the planet ever discovering that concept. There's a time for that. And there's time for Volkov. It's ticking away, even though his body is going through the motions, like those dozens of broken bones and crushed organs gotta be mended, just before he puffs out his soul. And the pain is still there, that signal device left over from ancient times, and if evolution had half a brain, it would let humans control it, and suppress it whenever it disturbed their lunch. Yea it hurt, oh god it hurt. No, not a signal device, he thought - it contained hope, a hope for deliverance. Into a dark, curly ball of nothing.

They both know what's coming. She would never say this to Volkov, ever. But now, it doesn't really matter anymore.

"I'm... I'm scared. Are you?"

"Nah. I've been too close to death too many times. Kinda loses the shock value. Give me that sword." She hands it over and he unsheathes it, inspecting the blade.

"Dried blood," he says. "Always clean it when you cut someone. Especially if you go for the guts."

"Okay." He hands it back.

"You fought three men. Cut one down. You're stronger now, you're faster. You've never been afraid, and now you're afraid?" She takes a deep breath, stretches out her arms, folds them back again.

"The sun," she says.

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's over the horizon, and in the summer, it's right over your head. I know that. And I used to know why, but I don't. Or these birds here, their names, where they nest. Or who's Eve, and who's St Agnes. I know nothing! Nothing at all!"

"Bloody Stockholm syndrome. You'll be fine."

"Or what's stock home...sin drone!" As the last minutes of his life were ticking away, he felt weirdly proud. Not that any of this was his doing. In a very symbolic way, Niki was like a youngling being flushed from her home, through one of evolution's magic tricks that people call puberty. And of the few younglings Volkov met in his life, she was the only one with a Socratic take on things. Clever kid.

"Fuck the sin drone! What if I said no?" Or maybe not so clever, Volkov thought.

"I'll tell you what would happen. That anger you wanna feed. It would always be there. Until you forget what it is, or where it came from. It's gonna be hungry, all the time. And you'll feed it, with drink and blood. And all that, because as a kid, you made a promise and then you broke it. 'Cause you were scared. Don't be scared." They sat in silence, for a very long time. Niki, with her face buried between her knees, Volkov, biting his tongue. The wound in his side hurt more and more. Not that it matters anymore, but he won't make a sound, not now.

"What if..." It's nothing but a whisper.

"No more ifs," he said. "You still don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?" He developed an aura of serenity. Volkov did. If you have hours, minutes - you calm down. You don't sweat or shiver. Some aspects of conversation made him less serene, though. Promises and deals aside, there was a very practical aspect to his execution. And still, she has no idea.

"I'm your ticket across the sea," he said at last. "There's plenty of string in my backpack, and you're out of rabbit feet. Get it? You wanna live or you wanna die? I'm tired. So get on with it. Now. No more talking." He doesn't look at her anymore, he just sits there and stares at the bubbling mass, and the hills behind it, upside down and deformed by the sea's warped sense of space.

"Give me a moment. Just a moment." She stands up, wipes her nose with her sleeve, takes out the sword. Walking a few steps away into the clearing, she crouches in the grass.

As she sat with Volkov, she remembered herself as a kid locked up in a cage, and all that happened since then. But now, with her hands resting on the handle and the cold steel, she remembered the story of the fox

and the bear, the one she heard from the hermit at the bridge. And suddenly, she wasn't afraid anymore. She knew she'd always been a fox, and back then, she could be nothing but a fox. And now, she was still a fox, but she could also be a bear.

When she walks back, Volkov straightens out, lays his hands on the grass, closes his fists.

"We had a good time," he says.

"The best." He takes a last glance at the dead sea. In a way, he will be compost. It's the natural cycle of life.

"Sorry," he hears her whisper. Then there's something like a flash, at the back of his head. And then he feels nothing.

Volkov's body is lying in the center of the clearing, abandoned. A raven flies by, sits on the shoulder. He hops around and then lands his beak into the wound in Volkov's side. There is the unmistakable stench of dried blood and schnaps. The unmistakable taste. He burrows his beak in his shoulder. Then, he plucks at the soles of his feet, charred by the dead sea. His ribs, broken countless times. That lousy spark. He's done things no lousy spark has ever done, to the raven's knowledge. No lousy spark lasts that long.

Meanwhile, a small figure is making her way through the tall grass on the side of the mountain. As she approaches the raven people's camp, the sentries raise alarm. The camp is surrounded by a barbed wire fence, with two lookout towers in the front and two in the back. A few arrows fly her way and she dodges them. To her, they're in slow motion, and she - she's as fast as a squirrel, hopping in the grass. When she reaches the front gate, she draws the katana and holds it up, in both hands. And then, slowly, she lays it on the ground. The crowd at the camp are standing still, not knowing what's coming next. Niki raises her arms in the air. The words come out of her mouth, reluctantly. Like they weren't hers, like someone else said them, another girl, in an entirely different universe.

"I come in peace," she says.

Some time later, she walks, panting, but with a verse on her lips, one she memorized and now mumbled, swallowing every other syllable, forgetting those she could not pronounce. Her step is heavy, like a bear's, but sure, and when she throws a finger ahead, it swims and then sinks, as the sea has retreated into itself, then another angry toss, now a thumb, then a piece by the elbow, a bone splinter, a chunk of aged muscle, and further down the sea goes, recoiling from her as she throws body parts around, there's a knee cap, there's a sinew with some cartilage, and even the *zlukhs* keep their distance, and the verse in Niki's head goes like this:

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;  
Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide;  
Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl,  
With a huge empty flaggon by his side:  
The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,  
But his sagacious eye an inmate owns:  
By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide:—  
The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;—  
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.

## Chapter Seventeen

*where time is of the essence, and some things run full circle*

They did give her the body. After all, they never ate their own, they buried them in the sea, and they were as scared of the sea as anyone. She said she'd do it. And she did. Most of it, anyway. She didn't tell them it would be piece by piece, but burial it was, of sorts, like scattering the ashes.

Volkov was roped to her back, still unconscious from the blow, when she'd hit the back of his head with the katana handle. And Niki was still discovering new things about her body. She didn't have to walk, even with this load on her back. She could run. How long could she run? Half a day, with pauses, then rest, then half a day again. She'd avoided the camp at the seashore, paused at a stream to clean the wounds in Volkov's side and shoulder. By some otherworldy miracle, they seemed to be healing, but still, he'd wake up hallucinating, not knowing where or who he was, like his mind was wedged between life and death.

She took him through the desert, in a single day. Then another day, through the hills and valleys, to a village she remembered. On the way, she would ask for schnaps, two glasses - one poured down Volkov's throat, the other one was for the wounds, and his feet, and some other cuts and scratches.

"Arr, ye meid i' one piece. Tha' cun's wobbly tho!"

"He just needs some rest," the mayor said. By then, Volkov could sit, but his mind was still miles, and dimensions away. Niki went to look for Tobias.

She found him in front of a house, and they hugged.

"I need something," Niki said after a long while. "It's Volkov. He's...not well. And the winter's coming. He needs some place to rest. A warm bed...with a blanket. And food, and tea, and schnaps..." Her voice broke. "And I don't have that. I'll pay. Ten nights." His eyes lit up, and then he buried them in the ground at his feet.

"No, four nights now, and six nights after winter," she said, resolutely. "I don't want you to forget I'm a whore."

"I can't do that now," Tobias said, and then a girl appeared in the front door, arms folded on her chest.

"Is she that whore?"

"Yes, but..she's a good..."

"A good whore."

"She's a good friend." The girl sighed. Her raven black hair rustled when she turned her head to Niki. She looked very pretty, Niki thought, and, what was the word. Yes, proud. There was but a tinge of regret, but mostly, Niki felt happy for Tobias.

"After you left, he wouldn't shut up about you. And then, we..he moved in with me. We're...family. And now, *you* want in the house."

"Not me, Volkov."

"What about you?" Tobias said.

"If I could stay, for a few days..."

"You can stay all winter," Tobias said, straightened out now, looking the girl in the eyes.

"Good friends aren't many," the girl said after a while.

"I came all the way here, because I trusted him," Niki said. "I knew he'd want to help us."

"Just like I trust him." the girl said. "Can you do stuff around the house?"

"I'm not just a whore."

She stayed. There was a fascination with cooking she discovered in herself, as her senses were more acute now. She could tell, quite exactly, how much salt was needed, or pepper, or basil, or thyme, to the last speck or crystal. She could tell if a chunk of meat was cooked, by placing a fork on top and pressing down, just slightly; she would find the exact moment when the center was still pink, and juicy. And then, there was a slowly cooked broth, with the bones that come first, and then there's a long wait, and she'd add the vegetables, one sort at a time, because they cook at different speeds, and then lovage and parsley leaves in the end, and thin slices of garlic, just the right size. Niki was all into cooking.

Time dragged on, in a way that it hasn't before. There'd always been stuff to do, and somewhere to walk to. But now, a day's work could be done in a few hours, and the rest was, well, time. Time unmoving, time well fed, time rolled over in your mouth and gnawed at, slowly. It wasn't Niki's time. Hers was restless, and warped, and exploding. Well, she survived, nevertheless. She'd spend some of the time sitting at Volkov's bed, and they talked. They'd never really done that before - there was no time. Now, whatever

they talked about, that's really none of your business, but let's just say it was decided that when winter passes and Volkov gets well, they will travel together.

After a few weeks, it was agreed that Niki would go and check on Agnes in the mountains, but not before she took an early morning sprint and brought Volkov his winter jacket, the one they'd left in a tree, the one he knew he'd never see again. He folded it under his head and looked almost content, by Volkov standards. But Tabby, the legless cat who survived the mountains, the desert and the dead sea, he was happier still. His spine no longer protruded from his back, as the girl with raven hair gave him both breakfast and dinner, with dedication and precision that feels alien to every nomad, and he would lie on the porch all day, waiting for a small rodent hero, unafraid to touch a helpless cat, and then another one, and another one.

And off she went, armed with the two ice axes and a backpack filled with supplies for Agnes, ones she got in exchange for two wild boars. Niki went up the slope, the one that saw their miraculous descent. She made the climb in a few hours, and she crossed to St Bernard Pass in two days, as the raven watched her from high above, and saw her half gliding, half flying on her snow shoes.

Agnes was alive and well, she remembered Niki's scent, just like Niki remembered hers. She filled her pantry, and for a while there, she imagined, with an inward smile, that her real job was emptying some pantries, and filling others. And then, she did the little she could to break a bit of Agnes's spell: she dug in the snow, and then in the frozen earth, sacrificing two shovels, and then they buried the dried-up body from upstairs, wrapped in a blanket.

Later, they found a large board, nailed it to the front door and on the board, Niki wrote a warning to future travelers, in big, coarse letters, while Agnes helped her with the spelling:

HEAR LIVETH AGNES.  
SHEE IS VERY SWEAT,  
BUT SHEE IS A LEETLE IL.  
TEE HER UP WITH A ROPE FOOR THE NIGHT.  
DON FOGRET TO UNTEE HER IN THE MOORING.  
BE NEIS TO HER,  
OR NIKI WILL FEIND YOU.  
P.S.  
DON EAT THE SOOSAGE.

The cabin had a supply of logs to last ten more winters, much thanks to the Norwegian stove that went through five logs a day. And as they lay sprawled on the sofa, Agnes tied up and cursing quietly, Niki stroking her hair, she felt like she was back home again, but not the real home, it was a home imagined, and Niki sensed, more than ever, that she could not live in a paradise, in a utopia, or even here, in the best of all places, with Agnes; not for long, anyway, she would be restless, and itchy, for her home, her real home, is elsewhere, beyond the mountains, it's where people kill each other over a jar of pickles and in villages, women are meant to spread their legs and breed, it's where raiders roam the suburbs and over in some forgotten belfry, there is a Vermeer, and there's a tin roof she never wants to see again, with sixteen lines carved into the soft metal, and a supermarket which her and the twins raced through, on a first class steam engine, and somewhere in the hills, there is a pile of ashes that used to be Volkov's home, and three graves, with Nathan, and Weepy, and mum, and Pig's bones are resting in another valley, scattered by vultures and foxes, and in a ditch far away, there is a Volkswagen Beetle, and of all the places in the world, that's where she wants to live, she must.

And so, when at last she bid Agnes goodbye, promising to come back with more supplies, she ventured further across the mountains, with a good part of the winter still ahead of her.

The good twin met her in the street. He was cautious at first, patting his sidearm, but Niki told him he'd be dead before he could draw it. That piece of information made him more relaxed. He sensed that for Niki, it wasn't a power game, it was just a game, and she was not there to wipe the city off the map. They walked to the black stump that was once a cherry tree, and Niki inspected it, then waved at him to come closer: look, there's two here, and two over there - two buds on the rear side, and two at the roots, and come spring, they would grow into saplings.

Niki told the commander about their journey, and Volkov's rehabilitation, and the land beyond the mountains, and about Agnes, and he listened intently, smiling, most of the time. Then she asked him about

many things, and also about the cure, which seemed to be working, and the commander even told the men to spread it across the land, but the people in villages wouldn't listen; Niki sat down, at the foot of a low brick wall, lost in thought, and as more words were passed, she understood two sad facts about life over there - first, people hunted zombies because they were easy prey, and second, the army were just a band of thugs, and looting and abducting women doesn't really go well with educating the general public. She frowned when she learned that the women brought here didn't get paid for their work, and she scolded herself for ever thinking otherwise; she'd thought they were whores, just like her. What kept the men here was the looting, and the women they got for free, whenever they wanted.

If Niki was someone else completely, and maybe older, with a breadth of experience that makes you resigned towards all the things you cannot change, then maybe, she would think this was a vicious circle, like a snake feeding on its own tail. However, Niki wasn't someone else completely, and she didn't think in circles. And so, when she heard quiet moaning from the barracks nearby, she asked the commander to follow her inside. The scene wasn't pretty, but fortunately, the sight of the commander made everyone stop - the woman got dressed quickly, and so did the four soldiers.

"She's tired," Niki remarked. "I could take her place." All five protagonists at the scene nodded eagerly, albeit for different reasons. And Niki offered them a game. Sex, she said, is best if it comes with a story. Like theirs - fighters' stories. Show her what they can do, in the arena. Then, she'll remember their moves, the shapes of their muscles, their names. And she, she will show them what she can do. And then, they won't be fucking a nameless thing. They'll be fucking Niki.

There were some laughs, and jokes, and some grabbing that she endured, and whenever the commander wanted to talk, she touched his arm and stopped him. And as it happened, four fights were arranged for that afternoon.

When they were out in the street and the woman had run away towards the canteen, the commander remembered there was a nightwalker kid in town, looking for Volkov and Niki. She asked him to take her to the girl, and he protested, and then she asked again.

She was slightly younger than Niki, torn trousers, a garden machete tucked behind a leather belt. There was an image she saw in a dying woman's mind, long ago. Cut in half by Volkov's sword, clicking her teeth, and the last thought in her mind was that of her daughter. Niki went through all the names she knew. Some, she discarded straight away, some she rolled on her palate and inspected with her tongue. Until just one name remained. The right name.

"Tomi," Niki said. She seemed older now. "You were looking for me." The girl stopped a few yards away from them, squinting her eyes.

"You're that zombie? Is she, commander? Is she that zombie?"

"No, you're the zombie," Niki said, but the irony was lost on Tomi. The commander nodded his head.

"Did you...did you kill my mum?" Niki let out a sigh, then patted on the sheath that hung from her side. "This sword killed your mum."

"Then take it to your grave!" Slowly, ceremoniously, Tomi took out her weapon.

"She can't fight in here," the commander said.

"There won't be a fight," Niki said. "Tomi. Tomi, wait."

"Shut up, zombie!"

"Your mum was trying to kill me. That's why she died."

"I don't care!" Niki hung her head, and a weary smile ran across her face.

"I know you don't."

"Stop!" the commander snapped at Tomi. "Fighting is prohibited. You'll get a week in the cell." But Tomi held out the machete and then jumped.

"She's not...fighting," Niki said.

"I can see she is trying to hit you. With a machete."

"As you can...see, she's not...hitting me. And...now, she doesn't have a machete. Because she could cut herself!" The last words were meant for Tomi, as Niki raised her voice.

"Now she's definitely fighting," the commander remarked, as the corners of his mouth began twitching. "She's hitting you with her fists."

"You can see she is...not hitting me...at all, she's only...damn it, I don't have time for this!" she shouted, twisting Tomi's arm behind her back. "We'll be back. Just a minute."

They walked inside a shop, as a plan began hatching in Niki's mind. The mechanic greeted them with a smile while Niki pushed Tomi's face against the counter.

"I need a bicycle lock, metal chain, one circle on each side, and a padlock."

"It wil c..." he shut up just then, recognizing Niki.

"I know. It'll cost me. That girl, one night, fuck her senseless." Something in her eyes made him tremble all over.

"Trust me. You don't want that girl. Not for one night, not for one hour, not for a single minute. Now, we really don't have time to chat, like old friends do. So, give me what i want, put it on the tab, I'll pay you in the evening."

It was like she switched into work mode, but a different work mode than she was used to. Time was of the essence.

"Now," Niki told Tomi when they were out in the street, "if you try to hit me, I will hit back. Got it?" The girl's face was red, and crumpled, as her mind had to contain the wish to tear Niki apart, there and then. "I want you to say it."

"Got it!" Tomi said and spat in Niki's face.

"Good." Niki went through the procedure in her head as she wiped the spit off her cheek, like she was reading an old recipe, on torn paper yellowed by the sun.

"Now, tell me what you want."

"Kill you," Tomi hissed, drew in air and spat again.

"One more thing you want. And stop wasting water. You waste water when I tell you. One more thing you want."

"Zen mountain." It was a whisper, and it didn't come with a spit.

"Good. First, I take you to Zen mountain, then you can kill me. Got it? Say it."

"Got it."

Back with the commander, Niki asked about fights and betting, and then she took Volkov's little salt box out of her backpack.

"Do I get a cut?" the commander said, barely containing his laughter.

"No you don't."

In the arena, Niki made sure Tomi bet on her, instructed by the commander. Then she stepped in, naked feet on sand. The referee said no shirts, no shoes, but he was kind of shy on the shirt part. The rule wasn't really designed with women in mind. Or maybe it was. The audience roared with excitement, and perhaps even with the old desire to rape, and disembowel, and cause pain. Niki didn't have time for any of this. She was a grabber. Dodging a few blows, she grabbed the soldier at the waist and threw him over her head and into a brick wall. There used to be two walls, all that was left of a house. Now there was just one.

Everyone was dead quiet as she walked up to the referee and took the large sack of salt resting at his feet. Noone really wanted to touch the lioness, queen of the jungle. Spotting the mechanic in the crowd, she walked up to him while everyone around backed off.

"How much?"

"What are you?" he whispered, white-faced. Niki didn't have time for this, either. She took his hands, pressed them together and poured them full of salt.

"Niki. Nice doing business with you." Then she unlocked the padlock on Tomi's chain and nodded to the commander. There were supplies to buy, for themselves and Agnes, and some hooks and nails and rope, and kid's clothes and a sleeping bag for Tomi. Niki would leave her with the commander to choose the clothes, she wouldn't want to see that. She'd rather have a glass of schnaps in the bar, toast to an invisible friend, and put a name on the board. No more fights happened that afternoon.

When they're out of town and near the bridge, Niki sits down to brew them tea.

"We need to talk," she says when they start drinking.

"I'm not talking to you," Tomi says. She's stopped spitting. Niki thinks it's...what's the word? Yes. Progress.

"You won't. I'll be talking." She takes a deep breath, and now the recipe isn't on a torn paper, yellowed by the sun; it is floating free, somewhere in her head. "I won't carry you on my back. I'll walk in the snow, and press in the footsteps, and if the footsteps get snowed in, you die. We're gonna climb, and if you don't

do what I tell you, you fall, and you die. I'll walk the desert in a sandstorm, and if you lose me, you die. I'll cross the dead sea, and if you stray one step to the side, you die. And all this time, it will hurt. And you'll want to lie down, and just...wait it out. So every time this happens, you think about me. Imagine things, in your head. It'll help you stay alive. Got it?"

"Yes," Tomi says.

## Epilogue

*where a traveler enjoys a brief nighttime visit*

Tomi is fast asleep, tucked in her dwarf-sized sleeping bag. She's been sleepwalking for much of the afternoon, but she made it. She's tough, Niki thinks to herself. Not a beast yet, but tough. She's sitting on top of the hill, and her nekkid butt is spread on a piece of styrofoam she scavenged from a pile of rubbish down there in town.

*We don't want her here,* Misha says.

*No we don't,* Adri says.

*In a long time.*

*A very long time.* Niki just sits quietly, watching the stars, and the clouds eating some of those stars, and then giving them back.

*She will live,* Misha says. *And see places!*

*And we see them with her!* Adri says.

"You will," Niki whispers. "There are... there are so many things I want to show you." The image brings a smile on her face, and a stinging sensation in her eyes. A raven flies past, and then sits nearby.

*Tell me something, little spark,* he says after a while.

"Yes."

*The little spark wants to put out the lousy spark. That is why she moves forward. And in the end, she helps the lousy spark live. It is not a very good story. It makes no sense.*

"Good."

*I knew that,* the raven says. He flaps his wings, chasing little ghosts out of them. *Remember, now you are just a tourist. No more gifts.*

"I know," Niki says, and the raven laughs, which sounds like a croak.

*Of course you are not a tourist, little one. You're a ferryman. A ferry...person.*

"Does it matter?" She folds her knees under her chin. "Why did I get a gift?"

*Everybody gets what they want.*

"What do other people get?"

*The same, most of them. What does a spark want? Fly faster, burn brighter. Spark things.*

"Some want their mothers back," Niki whispers.

*No they do not. See, a dead spark is just a speck of ash, and it has fallen to the ground. Sparks move on.* Niki is quiet, and the raven is right.

"And those who stayed? The...raven people?" she asks after a while.

*They have lost something, and they wanted it back. Silly sparks.*

"And Agnes?"

*Oh Agnes. She is not a spark at all. She is more like a firefly.*

"Firefly."

*Yes. She goes off, and on, and off again. Just like a firefly.*

"And in the sea, she wanted... she wanted to be a better firefly."

*Yes, and she got just that.*

"Volkov. He didn't get anything."

*He did.*

"No. He doesn't like gifts. He hates it when things are free." For a long while, the two sit side by side, gazing into the night.

*Do you not find it strange, talking to a raven?*

Niki looks around, absent-mindedly. Misha and Adri are fighting in the snow, the swarms of droplets colliding, exploding into a cloud and then forming shapes again. The night covers them with her cloak, and for a while, only their voices are heard through the thick, impenetrable darkness.

"No, not at all," Niki says.

## Afterword

What you've just read is like a piece of sinew that's been chewed on for too long. The characters and the story have somehow lived in my head for maybe ten years, or as long as I can remember. What started off as a joke became a short story, then, a concept - 'a novel in seven chapters, four parts per chapter' - because, well, you gotta tame your language somehow. All of that was in Czech. Then, I put it to rest for maybe five years, during which time the characters in my head started speaking in English, so this is where we are now. The whole story was created anew, aided by nothing but my flimsy memory - save for a few scenes from the dead sea, which just can't go any other way.

Even at the beginning, the story kinda avoided genre categories, and I had little to no say in the matter. Sure, I could have overcome my laziness and learnt the fundaments of a genre, together with a writing style. Sure, I could have pressed these onto the story, and made it march in tempo. I'd certainly call it one of my greatest shortcomings, as well as a virtue: the fact that I can't. Every time I laid it to rest and then revived it again, it became more introspective and intimate. If it is written poorly, in part, that's just my incompetence. However, beyond that, the story is told as it should be told, and the characters in it are very much alive. Perhaps the narrative arc - or whatever you call it - it the shape of a piss line in snow, but don't blame me for that. A number of great friends have helped me on the way, and one of them in particular, carrying a vision of Volkov and Niki in her head, just like me, would sit down with my text, exclaiming, "He wouldn't do that!", or, "That's just like her!", and things of that nature. Perhaps, at some point and for some people, characters are more alive than real human beings. A change in a person's behavior leaves us surprised but weirdly acceptant; a change in a character's behavior, however, is a mortal sin that calls for correction.

Another book from this fictional universe, *Anger Monday*, was written in seven weeks. *Nightwalker* took ten years to write. However, at long last, I feel that this is its final form. The story of Niki and Volkov, the story of two generations, and in many ways, the story of a renaissance.

Over those ten years, the story may have changed, but the world has changed much more than that. And I don't mean the cultural sensitivities, which are largely irrelevant: now, they would make me issue a warning to people with more delicate minds: be warned, this is a postapocalyptic novel. Food is scarce, death is plenty. Things you'd consider shocking, scandalous, impossible in your universe, they are commonplace here. No, there have been graver changes to the world. The story was once a wet dream, of blood and violence, in a wakeful reality that was perhaps creepingly unjust but mostly quiet. These days, however, when kids are shelled to pieces on a daily basis, amongst the modern apartment buildings, in schools and hospitals, the story has become woefully inadequate. To someone spending the night in a subway station beneath Kyiv, it must be but a bedtime story, both soothing and ridiculous.

I knew Volkov would have been a part of this. His backstory changed accordingly. And then, everything fell into place like pieces of a puzzle. Ever since the story has taken some form, he's walked through much of it unimpressed, cynical, unwavering. Acceptant. Years ago, it was a parody of masculine invincibility, a genre favorite. In the pulp variety, it would always be a mix of James Bond and a village brawler. Now, it has begun to make sense. Of course he's unimpressed: he's seen much worse.

In one particular aspect, to me at least, the story is still a wet dream. It contains moments of wild courage, so unrestrained that Volkov comes to believe Niki is a natural born suicide. This makes the post-apocalyptic world a fun place to live in, almost: here, courage or wits won't help you against an artillery shell.

*Olomouc, January 2023 and Melk, June 2023*