

18+ Tsvetana Alekhina

*In the arms
of Mara*



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Аннотация

A young guy flies to the grave of his late grandmother in the city of Norilsk, and, without knowing it, violates the chambers of the goddess of ice Halls Mara. Once in the kingdom of darkness and trying to get out of there, he realizes that he does not want to go back.

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Tsvetana Alekhina

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CHAPTER 1

When I opened my eyes and looked around, it took me a while to figure out where I was. My face and hands were stinging from the injury. When I came to myself, I realized that I was in a hospital room. There were four beds in the ward, two of which were vacant my neighbor was opposite me. Remembering recent events, I could not make up the whole picture. I could not believe what I saw. Alternatively, was it a terrible dream? Alternatively, just hallucinations from the cold? The last thing I remember is that I was alone in an unfamiliar area; it was like an icy plain, a blizzard was circling around, and a beautiful woman was standing in front of me and mercilessly laughing at me. I closed my eyes and began to remember what had happened to me.

Various episodes surfaced in my memories, in one of which I remember the kingdom of the underworld. I was standing in a clearing covered with moss; it looked like an age-old jungle. There was a fire burning in the clearing, little men were running around the fire and squeaking disgustingly, they looked more like a bat. An old woman was standing near the fire; she was saying something and throwing wood on the fire. She looked like a beggar, covered with an old decrepit blanket, her body was covered with terrible scars, and her breasts hung down to her stomach. I pressed myself against an oak tree and watched the

whole picture, not understanding how I got here. It was like a Sabbath. These evil spirits did not seem to notice me, and I did not want them to notice me. At the same time, it seemed to me that they were pretending not to notice me. The old woman glanced in my direction from time to time and poured some ashes into the fire. I was shaking all over from what was happening, and I just wanted to disappear from this place. Not even to run, but to disappear. I was afraid to move, so that no one would notice me. Suddenly, the fire suddenly went out, the little demons ran screaming. The whole picture disappeared and a blizzard rose. The clearing, covered with moss, turned into a winter garden. I stood huddled against the oak tree, not understanding what was happening, and it became even scarier for me. I began to shake from the cold, and my soul was shaking with icy fear. The blizzard began to subside, and turned into a damn beautiful, fatal, insidious woman. At the same moment, the winter garden and all its inhabitants disappeared, and I found myself alone with this woman on an icy plain. Then my visions were mixed up, and I leaned back on the pillow with my eyes closed.

I fell into a deep sleep, hoping to see and remember who this woman was once again. Her beauty threw me off balance. I woke up in deep disappointment. I did not dream anything. The only joy was that I was able to get out of bed, and even hang my legs off the bed. The face and hands made themselves felt less. After examining the ward, this time more carefully, it seemed quite cozy to me. The walls are cream-colored. Bright windows

and pleasant curtains created a homely atmosphere. Taking a deep breath, I looked towards the front door, it immediately opened, and I shuddered. My neighbor came in, I immediately remembered him when I saw him for the first time. I have a good visual memory.

The neighbor greeted me affably. – From the timid? He said these words in jest, and I did not know what to answer. I could not tell what I had experienced. Moreover, was it a reality?

– Yes, no. Just thinking. I realized that my neighbor is simple, with a heightened sense of humor. We talked with him a little bit, and we did not even get to know each other. I went out into the corridor and walked around a bit, stood by the window. It was a fierce winter outside the window, and another picture presented itself to me.

I remembered that I tried to escape from the clearing, to find shelter, but a blizzard caught me and carried me away. She took it away like some kind of kitten. I could not understand if this really happens. I remembered that I was actually flying. I was even ashamed to mention it to someone. I returned to the ward, began to remember how it all started, where I am, and how I got here.

Returning to the ward, I sat down on my bed. My neighbor across the street was doing a crossword puzzle. After asking me the answer to one of the questions, he got a question instead. – How did I end up here?

– Two friends brought you. I think you fell asleep on the street

and frostbitten your limbs. That is all I know.

– And how long ago?

– Tonight.

It made me feel better that it was not a week. Memory was returning. I got into my nightstand, and found a cell phone, though discharged, documents and some money. After having dinner with a neighbor, I joined him to solve a crossword puzzle. A nurse came into the room and smeared my hands and face with some kind of cream. Then she left, slamming the door.

– This is an evil person. Tomorrow the good one will come, the neighbor said with an ironic smile. Smiling back, I began to get ready for bed. – Why are you so scared? All somewhat intimidated? Who offended you here?

– No. I replied dryly.

– What is your name?

– Victor.

– My name is Vova. Tell me what happened. Maybe I can help.

I wanted so much to tell everything to the first person I met, but I was afraid that they would laugh at me. In addition, I could not. Instead, I asked a new friend for a charger. Turning on the phone, I quickly wrote a letter to my sister, forgetting about the time difference. The next day my friends came to me and told me how they had saved me.

When I returned to my room, I literally bumped into Vova. — “Did they do that to you?” I realized that Vova would not let his friends offend, and would not leave me alone. I sat down on the

edge of the bed and, not knowing how to begin, began my story.

I flew to Norilsk to visit my grandmother's grave. This year she had an anniversary of ten years. Our grandmother lived in Norilsk all her life, and my sister and I only occasionally flew with my mother to visit my grandmother. Sometimes Grandma came to visit us. My sister could not fly with me because she has two children. I still have childhood friends in Norilsk, with whom I played when I flew to my grandmother. They welcomed me with joy, and I stayed with them.

Remembering my grandmother, my friends and I laughed at the stories she told me as a child. These stories were like fiction, but my grandmother assured me that it was true. When I arrived at the cemetery, I started looking for my grandmother's grave and got lost. My friends stayed at home. I corresponded with my sister on the Internet; she helped me to look for her grave. Then I failed. I remember exactly that I was standing near an abandoned grave, the earth split into two parts, and I fell into the abyss. It seemed to me that I had fallen into hell, but it must be hot in hell, and I ended up in an ice cave. From my heat, there were vapors until I began to be covered with an icy crust. I decided I was dead. Grandma's spirit took me away. She must have been offended that I did not find her grave. I got up and went to look for a way out. I walked through the snow tunnel as if through a maze that did not end. My legs gave way and I fell.

I woke up in a clearing covered with moss. I told my friend about the fire, and everything that happened in the clearing, and

how I saw the woman. Then I fell and woke up in the same place by an abandoned unmarked grave. Deciding that I was freezing, I began to look for a way out. The weather for this time of year was quite calm, windless, and the minus was not big. Seeing the exit, I purposefully headed towards it, deciding to go to the grave tomorrow. Suddenly a blizzard came and caught me. This time I found myself in an ice palace. The palace was huge, and everything in it was made of ice. The first thing that caught my eye was the little men who were running around the campfire. Moreover, even these little men were covered with ice. In addition, even an old woman with a sagging chest stood like an ice statue, holding some shamanic objects in her hands. I decided I was just crazy. Mrs. Snowstorm threw her icy gaze at me. Then it turned into a pile of snowflakes, and I found myself again in a clearing covered with moss. I stood by the oak tree, holding on to it tightly with my hands, hoping that the blizzard would not be able to carry me away. She was not here, there was no one? I began to look around, I was shaking with fear, not knowing where I was, and I tried to find my way home, and went through the bushes. This incomprehensible area reminded me of the ancient wilds, something like from a fairy tale about the Lukomorye. These strange plants, labyrinths, moss, elves and all that. My friend was listening to me, and I did not know if he believed me or not.

– “It’s all like a fairy tale, of course,” he said in a quite serious voice, but I believe you. We got up and went out to smoke. On my

return, my friend asked me to continue the story. The lights went out in the hospital a long time ago, and we were lying in our beds.

I was mentally transported to the place where I got lost, looking for a way out of the clearing. Then, when I managed to get out of the bushes, I began to look around, and realized that I was lost. Not knowing what to do, I wanted to call my friends, but to my surprise, I did not have a phone or documents. I remembered perfectly well that all these things were always with me, I left the house with them. I corresponded with my sister. I panicked and went wherever I could. I was walking along the path, and I found myself in a green tunnel of moss, it was a maze. It was dark in this realm. it is an underground realm! Walking by touch, my legs did not obey me and were giving way all the time. Leaning against the moss wall, I closed my eyes and fell asleep. I woke up already at the cemetery late in the evening; my friends met me to my joy. I was so glad to see them, even though I could not tell them anything. I just said I was lost, even though they already knew it.

After sitting with friends for a while, I went to my room, or rather my friend's room. It was his late grandmother's apartment, and the furniture was inherited. I was lying in bed and thinking about what had happened. I was very much frozen, and I could not understand why I was shaking, from the cold or from the fear, I had experienced. Friends did not understand anything. They thought I was just scared of walking around the cemetery, especially late at night. I wanted to sleep very much, and I was

afraid to close my eyes, fear pierced my soul. There was a strong wind outside the window, it was howling, and that made it even scarier. A street lamp was shining through the window, and I was looking at the shadow of snowflakes on the wall. Old creaky furniture and a relic of the day created the interior of Count Dracula's castle. I smiled to myself, wished my sister good night, as always forgetting about the time zone, and closed my eyes.

As soon as I closed my eyes and relaxed for a moment, a shadow immediately ran along the wall. I shuddered involuntarily. My heart started pounding. I opened my eyes and looked with fear at the wall, which was illuminated by a street lamp. I already knew that anything could happen and involuntarily tensed up. The figure of a beautiful woman flashed across the wall, and disappeared. Now I knew I was not alone in this room. I could not call for help for fear that I would be considered crazy. Nervous overexertion gave me a headache and I got ready for further actions, at this time my room was slowly covered with ice. All the walls, floor, ceiling were covered, a beautiful pattern appeared on the window, and the front door was frozen solid. My room became like an ice cave, and despite this, I did not feel cold, I did not feel anything but panic fear. My sofa, on which I was just trying to fall asleep, turned into an ice bench. I prepared myself for my fate. What will happen next, and what does this woman want from me? Who is she?

A whirlwind of large snowflakes formed in the room, they circled, and turned into a strict old woman, this is not the old

woman who humanized by the fire, it was completely different. She darted her gaze at me, and I recognized in that gaze that formidable beautiful woman who was chasing me. For a moment, my fear disappeared, and I stopped being afraid. I wanted to ask who she was, but I was waiting for the first, her further actions. She walked past me tapping her staff on the icy floor and flew out the window in the form of a blizzard. My room has regained its former appearance. Everything became the same as it was. In addition, as if nothing had happened.

I was sitting on the sofa with my legs pressed to my chest, I wanted to smoke madly, but I did not want to show myself to my friends. I leaned back on the sofa, closed my eyes and relaxed for a minute, forgetting about what had happened. These supernatural phenomena drew me in, and I became interested in them. I waited for further developments. The fear still did not leave me, but I got up from the sofa and went out to my friends to smoke.

I plucked up the courage and decided to tell my sister everything. After looking at the time, I decided not to postpone everything until the morning. To my surprise, my sister immediately answered me. She calmed me down in every possible way and asked me to tell about each new incident. Her explanation for my stories was that I violated the chambers of a strict dark Goddess. She asked me to remember every wrong word, every gesture, and all my conversations. She also asked not to go alone to the cemetery, as well as to drink as little as possible

and return as soon as possible.

My friend listened to me with interest, asked me to continue, but I was tired. I had a terrible headache, I wanted to sleep, and I fell asleep. In the morning, the nurse treated my burns received from the cold, and after breakfast, my neighbor asked me to continue the story. It was difficult for me to remember everything that happened, there were gaps in my memory, and I remembered in parts. Mentally returning to the places where I happened to visit.

– Vova, tell me, are you really interested in this story?

– You are kidding! You happened to see the Goddess of the Slavic Pantheon! I myself am a little fond of this topic. Now, after meeting you. I am already starting to really believe it.

– “I don’t believe it myself. I did not believe it until now. Now, just like you, I am starting. My sister is obsessed with it. She helped me get out of the underworld. He says I have been in Mara’s arms! My friend smiled back with his ironic smile.

– And what were the consequences?

– Next. In the morning, after drinking coffee with friends, we decided to go to my grandmother’s grave together. My friends decided to accompany me so that I would not get lost in the cold like last time. We walked along the road and laughed loudly at the stories that my grandmother told me as a child. When I reached the place, I stood by the grave remembering my childhood. My days spent with my grandmother, and those funny stories that she told my sister and me. My friends stood aside and waited for

me. I looked around, looking for the abandoned grave near which I got lost. I could not find her, and I had to leave with nothing. Although my goal seemed to have been achieved, but I did not get what I wanted. It is time to fly away. However, I did not want to. I could not explain the reason to my friends, only my sister knew it. She insisted on my departure. The ticket was purchased, departure the next day. I only had one night left, and I did not want to lose it. Mysticism pulled me in, and I wanted to find out who this woman was.

– It was our last dinner. We had a good time with friends, and after saying good night, I went to the room reserved for me. I closed the door behind me and sighed heavily. To my surprise, I was looking forward to her appearance. I sat down on the edge of the sofa and waited. It was a dark polar night outside the window. It was November outside. I looked at the light from the lantern and admired the beauty of the snowflakes that swirled in this light. I knew that this woman could appear anywhere and from anywhere. Therefore, without wasting time in vain, I checked all my things collected for tomorrow, got ready for bed and went to bed.

– I closed my eyes and began to recall all the events that had happened to me over the past three days. I did as my sister told me; I remembered everything from the moment of arrival until tonight. My goal was my grandmother's grave. My grandmother was a pagan. When my sister and I were little, she read us fairy tales, and told us entertaining stories, legends about the gods.

I never believed in it, and I did not really listen. Our parents were against these legends. However, my sister loved these stories, and believed with her grandmother in these gods. We grew up, my sister continues to believe in these myths, but I do not. Sometimes we have controversial questions about this.

– What city are you from?

– We were born here in Norilsk, then moved to live in Voronezh, and my grandmother stayed in this city. This is her hometown. My childhood was spent in the city of Norilsk.

– I remember one of the legends about the gods, my grandmother told my sister and me about Mara Maren. How could I have known then that I would meet her? – She will turn the whole fur coat inside out for you. Grandma was talking. – Everything inside. This is the woman of the kingdom of Navi. Her possessions lie beyond the black river, across which the Kalinov Bridge is spanned, guarded by a three-headed Serpent. The Great Lady Madder loves to rest in her icy Palaces in the far north of the Earth. Her reign time is winter. When all nature is asleep. Madder does not like when her peace is disturbed. When the awakening comes, and the Earth begins to revive after hibernation, the reign of Madder ends. Moreover, she goes to her chambers. I was silent for a minute and noticed how my neighbor was listening to me attentively.

– And then, what happened then?

– Later. Remembering everything from the beginning. We were going to fly with my sister, but we did not find anyone

to take care of the children. She brings them up alone, and I help her. We decided that I would fly alone, and on the day of departure she saw me off, protected me like a mother. My sister is older than I am and has always taken care of me. It was not for nothing that she asked me to remember everything I said, what I laughed at. Because before the flight we remembered grandmother's fairy tales, had a good evening with her children. When I arrived here, my friends and I were laughing at the same fairy tales; perhaps this was the reason for my adventures. We laughed at them even when we went to the cemetery. Then I dreamed of seeing the image of this woman again. I have been looking forward to this moment. At that time, I could not even think that this was the goddess of the Slavic Pantheon. At first, I thought it was hallucinations from the cold, or from excess alcohol. Then I decided that it was the grandmother's spirit that took me away or I would go crazy. I did not know who to tell all this to, and it was only after talking with my sister that I realized that I was entering another world, another dimension. In addition, I do not even get there, but they take me away and bring me back. However, why? I myself became interested, and I began to wait for our meeting with her. Our conversation was interrupted by a doctor's visit. Then we went to lunch, after lunch we lay down on the bed, and I continued my story.

– When I went to bed, I was full of hopes that she would come again, or rather fly in the form of snowflakes. However, my hopes were not fulfilled. In addition, I fell into a deep, deep sleep.

In my dream, I dreamed of a clearing, bats dancing by the fire, I wanted to approach them, and I took a decisive step towards them. There was dampness underfoot; the air was heavy because of the large amount of moss. I was able to see these trolls; they looked like little devils with bat wings. These creatures had no heels, and their pointed ears gave a funny look. These creatures were clearly having fun, their squeaking sounded disgusting, the fire was not burning with a natural flame; something had obviously been thrown into it. The appearance of a nasty old woman did not spoil the fun, but rather intensified it. The old woman began to prepare some kind of drink on the fire. She uttered incomprehensible words, poured some mixtures into the pot. The liquid in the pot bubbled, and gave off an unpleasant smell to the whole neighborhood. Along with this smell, the fog began to come. At first, it was a thin puff of smoke, and then the fog began to thicken and turned into thick dark smoke. Because of this smoke, nothing was visible. Taking advantage of this moment, I came closer. Hoping that no one sees me, I stood in front of the fire, trying to look into the pot. The liquid in it looked like red wine. The old woman looked at me and did not say a word. The ritual was over, the fog continued to advance. The little men ran screaming somewhere, and I followed them at a brisk pace, not seeing where I was going. I walked, not knowing what I was stepping on, there was dampness under my feet, and branches of bushes fell into my face. The only thing I looked at was the little infuriates, it seemed to me they knew where to go.

The fog began to clear, and I began to look around. It was no longer a clearing covered with moss, but more like an autumn abandoned forest. All the trees and shrubs were leafless. The sky was not visible, it was not there as such, and there was a black haze. It was a cold autumn, and the air was wet and cold. A cold shiver ran through my body, and I began to shake from the cold. Wet, yellowed leaves rustled underfoot.

I noticed that one of the devils had strayed from his own and stuck in the bush. I decided to help him get out, and squatted down for this. The imp was scared of me, and I felt funny. Barely suppressing a smile, I picked it up, and it turned out to be not so nasty. I continued to shake from the cold, and I held him with trembling hands. The imp tried to escape; I squeezed him even harder and asked: – where am I?

– On the threshold of the Navi world. The imp squeaked in a childish voice.

– Where is everyone going?

– You need to get across the Kalinov Bridge faster. The holiday is coming soon.

– Which one?

– At Mara Madder's ball. She is coming into her own soon. She holds a celebration in her honor every year. Nevertheless, she has a limited number of guests. If you are not invited, then it is better not to show yourself in her eyes. Run away from here. She will punish you.

The more I was removed from her, the closer I wanted to be

to her.

– How do I get to the party? In addition, I squeezed him even harder. This creature was smaller than my palm. He began to beep loudly and attract attention. I let him go and he flew away. All I had to do was not noticeably follow everyone.

The souls of the dead began to join our small company. They were ghosts with light transparent eyes. They flew after the devils, I realized that they were meeting guests and escorting them to the place. I began not to have time to follow these evil spirits, and strengthened my step. Souls continued to fly up and join, but there were not many of them yet. I remembered the words that the bat had squeaked to me that the number of guests was limited.

The flying company made an abrupt stop, and I took a breath. Looking around, we found ourselves on the edge of the forest; there was a large stump in the middle. An old woman stood next to him and poured out the same red drink that was brewed in another clearing. The drink was poured into the skulls, surprisingly it was hot, and everyone who received it stood in a circle. At first, the ghosts got up, as I understood by seniority, they stood in a circle holding the skulls. Then the bats, they rather protected the guests. Thus, a double circle was formed around this stump. I really wanted to drink this drink. I was shaking from the cold, despite walking fast. I felt weakness in my body, I felt my strength leaving me, and I fell into unconsciousness. The sight of this old woman was so terrible, I was afraid to approach her.

My mouth was dry and all I wanted was a sip of water.

The inhabitants of the clearing continued their journey, first the besyat, followed by the dead souls. There were more than a hundred of them. The old woman was the last to set off. All the guests and their escorts took the skulls with them. The old woman left her medicine here, and I was waiting for her to leave. As soon as she left, I ran up to the stump. There was a surprisingly hot drink left in the pot. Despite the terrible smell, I took a big sip. Immediately after drinking, I felt strong, and the cold left me. All I needed was to catch up with my own. I already considered them my own, despite the fact that I am a living person; I was in the other world. I completely forgot that at any moment, I could return to the world of the living, and to my surprise, I did not want to do that at all. These devils became my friends, even though they did not know about it. If I had told anyone at work about this, I would have been immediately sent to a mental hospital. I did not think about it, the only thing I thought about was how to get to the holiday.

I did not notice how I ran to the right place at the right time. I did not feel any pain or fatigue, I did not want to sleep or eat. For a minute, I thought I was a ghost too. The number of guests increased, and the speed of the hike decreased. The most real magic rose before my eyes. The dead trees that had shed their leaves and prepared for winter came to life and bowed their gnarled branches in front of the guests. Snakes and lizards crawled under their feet, bowing their heads before the flying

souls of the dead. The foliage that had fallen under his feet was fluttering, although there was no wind here initially. We slowly continued to walk; I still tried not to be noticed, although it is hardly possible if in this otherworldly world the dead nature comes to life.

The procession is over. We stopped at the riverbank. A bridge was thrown across the river. The river, as well as the bridge, were of large size. Looking around, I saw around me many living, or rather dead creatures. These are the souls of people, also animals, birds, trees. Everyone froze and stood motionless. I was afraid to move, but I tried to see what was happening on the other side. I remembered my sister's words about Mara Marena, as well as my late grandmother, who spoke about the Kalinov Bridge, the Currant River. – Madder's possessions lie beyond the black Currant River, separating Reality and Nav. The Kalinov Bridge is spanned across this river, which is guarded by a Three-Headed Snake.

I remembered these words, and began to understand where I am. The guests separated. On my right hand stood the dead souls who accompanied the devils. All the evil spirits are on my left. These are all the same devils, goblins, kikimores, mermaids, trolls, as well as the dark spirits of the Slavic pantheon. I hid behind a tree, hoping that no one could see me. No one paid attention to me, everyone was looking at the bridge. I looked back and saw a huge number of ghosts. For some reason, no one accompanied these souls, and they stayed away. There were

few animals; I could not understand what they were doing here. I also noticed the Kalinov Bridge. The crowd of people became animated and began to slowly move forward. The procession was led by souls accompanied by evil spirits. It was very slow. I did not know who to go with or how to get there. I decided to go the very last, I wanted to see this ceremony, how and what would happen. I completely forgot about the fear, and about the fact that I am not an invited guest here.

I climbed a tree and watched what was happening. The crowd slowly moved forward. The deceased souls formed pairs with the same devils, a large column was formed, and they held a skull in their hands. The view from above was terrifying. The fog began to come again, and because of it it became worse to see. I saw everything. As the souls walked across the bridge, a three-headed Serpent met them at the other end of the bridge, and they disappeared somewhere, but I could not see where. The column gradually advanced, and it became smaller. I started to feel cold, and I got chills.

When the last souls had passed and the bridge was empty, a strange man came out on the bridge and descended to this shore. He looked like a hermit, his image fully corresponded to a human, and at the same time, he was somewhat similar to a goblin. Having examined his image closer, I saw in this man a noble elder. I wonder who he is. In addition, what is he doing in this place?

– This is the god Veles. I shuddered. One of the ghosts was

talking to me. They could move through the air, but I did not know they could talk. These ghosts were asexual, they looked like transparent cellophane bags, and they had no legs, hair, shapes. Judging by the voice, a man was talking to me. The ghost approached me, and stayed close.

When Velez came closer, the trolls parted, and the animals bowed their heads. Velez said something to them in an incomprehensible language and the animals went back. Then Velez slowly left. In addition, behind him, the trolls began to march.

– This is the guardian god of the forest. He is also the master of the kingdom of Navi, along with Mara Marena, Chernobog and Koshchei, the husband of Mara Marena. This is their underground world. Velez thanked the dead animals for helping him protect the forest and its inhabitants. The animals returned to the world of Reality, only anew. If you want to go to Mara's ball, then you need to go with the trolls. After they pass, the road will be closed. She will not let anyone else in.

– How do you know?

– We come here every year to honor the great goddess, but alas, we are not allowed access. All these souls once angered her very much, and she does not invite us to her holiday. All souls of former sorcerers, magicians and sorcerers who, when they tried to establish contact with her, were very angry. She also does not like lazy people, and those who once did not keep their promise. She severely punishes these people.

– And who are the souls who left accompanied?

– These are the guests of honor. These ones were able to establish contact with her. These souls were very lucky. She always patronized them. My chills were getting worse, and it was getting harder for me. If you once had a problem with her, then it is better to appease her, otherwise you will not be able to. The ghost fell silent and looked at me with kind sad eyes.

– Why did you come up to me?

– I can see right through you. I am a former magician. I also know another secret, but I do not know whether to tell it to you or not.

– If you have started, then tell me.

– That old woman who shamanila by the fire, whom you saw for the first time. It is your grandmother. Mara made her house cleaner, she, she...

Then my dream ended and I woke up. I fell silent. My story is over. My interlocutor listened to me attentively, without interrupting. I was always alarmed by the fact that my interlocutor was looking at me very carefully. He wanted to say something and was silent. The strangest thing was that he believed me. Does he really believe that too? I did not doze off for long. After dinner, we walked down the corridor with him and got ready for bed. As soon as we lay down in bed, Vova asked me to continue my story.

I woke up sweating and shaking violently. To my surprise, I immediately got my bearings where I was, and immediately

remembered about the plane ticket. I realized that I was in hell; I was transported from hell to hell. My hell was that I needed to get there urgently, and I did not know how. Friends came into the room and brought me good news. It turns out that I had a fever all night, and they called an ambulance for me. The doctor gave me an injection, and I slept until morning. They handed over my ticket without me, and they decided to keep me until my recovery. That was the best news for me.

I called my sister and told her everything. Everything is as it was. To my surprise, she believed me, and together we thought about how I could get there. There was very little time left. As soon as the trolls cross the bridge, there will be no access, and I will not be able to get to the holiday. My sister told me that Mara would celebrate the holiday in her ice palaces.

– What is the reason for this holiday?

– Mara Madder is a sign of winter; it comes into its own on 25 November. Her time is winter. In addition, her rights end with the arrival of spring, when they burn the effigy of winter. She is afraid of the sun. Today is the day of winter; it comes into its own.

– What do you and I need to do to help our grandmother?

– I do not know myself. Can somehow appease her. To perform the rite.

– I think I also made her angry at something. In addition, I, too, will have to be punished. Only I am still alive.

– Don't worry, brother, I will think of something. Keep me

posted on everything that is going on. I mentally said goodbye to my sister and came to my friends in the kitchen.

I drank a cup of coffee, the fever increased. The clock showed exactly seven in the morning. I calculated the time zone. My thoughts were in hell. I wonder if there is a time zone there, and what is the countdown there.

– What are you thinking about?

– How can he think of anything in this state? Let us give him medicine instead.

– What is it?

– What the doctor ordered while you were sleeping.

A friend brought me medicine, and I drank it. I have not eaten for more than a day, and I did not feel like it. I wanted to smoke, but I did not have the strength to go out on the balcony or the landing. My friend took a step to meet me, and opened the window.

– Smoke. He said. In addition, he got a cigarette for himself and me. A friend sitting over a cup of coffee laughed at us.

– That is what your grandmother's fairy tales have brought you to. They even started smoking indoors. Are you not afraid that the Snow Queen will fly in here now and take you away! I was standing, and subconsciously waiting for this moment when she would fly through the window. I needed it. We finished our cigarettes in silence, the medicine began to take effect, and a friend went to the window to close it. As soon as he closed it and we sat down at the table, the kitchen began to be covered

with ice. Despite the open door to the corridor, only the kitchen room was covered with ice. Ice covered everything: curtains, windows, chandelier, and every little thing that was in this room. It happened quickly enough; I was already ready for it and was not particularly afraid. My two friends had a hard time, and I was afraid for them and their lives, too. The ice continued to crackle, and its thickness reached a large size.

– What the hell! My friend dropped the cup from his hands, and it froze in the air along with the spilled liquid. I noticed one of them had a trembling lower lip. However, I could not say a word to them. For a moment everything froze, we all froze, an abyss opened up in front of us and we fell into it. We landed in a clearing where I once drank a miraculous drink. The pot was empty. Looking around, I did not see anyone. I was looking for the inhabitants of this world to continue my journey. I completely forgot about my friends, but I should have thought about them.

– Where are we? What is happening? Listen, you are at home here! Explain.

– We are in hell with you! I said joyfully!

– What?

– Well, or to put it culturally in the realm of darkness. Moreover, I need to get to the party.

– What? Explain again?

– I do not know how to explain all this myself, but this is my second time here. In addition, today is a holiday for one of the Slavic goddesses, and I need to save my grandmother.

– I understand everything. Do not go on. It is just that you infected us with a virus, and the three of us went crazy. Now we will all come to our senses, and that is it. No more holidays.

– It makes sense. I also hold this point of view. It is just a glitch. It is necessary to listen less to fairy tales about goddesses.

My friends turned away from me and went in the opposite direction. I already knew where I was and realized that I needed to go in the opposite direction. I wanted to run after us, but stopped. They also got up, not knowing where to go. This place has become so scary and cold that I was scared myself. Winter was coming into its own, and it was palpable.

– What are you going to do?

– I will go further, I know where. I did not know what to do with them. Take them with you or leave them here. A spirit came for me.

– Hurry up. There is very little time.

– What should I do with them?

– Let them wait here. We will escort them back. Now run as hard as you can. I was running, and I forgot about fatigue. When I reached the bridge, I saw the trolls leaving. Stopping, I asked the spirit to tell me about my grandmother.

– Your grandmother once, in her youth, resorted to the help of the great goddess Mara. Nevertheless, later, she stopped honoring her, worshipping her, and did not fulfill her promise. The goddess was angry with her, and made her house cleaner. In addition, you incurred her wrath by behaving improperly at

the cemetery and laughing at Mara herself. She heard everything.

– And from where do you know all this?

– Do not forget that I am dead, but clairvoyant. Now go.

– And how can I help my grandmother?

– You will find out for yourself. Go faster. A three-headed serpent guarded the bridge. He rose into the air and spread his wings. The horror took my breath away, and I felt myself losing strength. I ran across the bridge and felt my knees tremble, and the bridge was wobbling under my feet. As soon as I found myself on the other side, I saw emptiness. The plain stretched before me. I expected to see something more, something different. The plain was endless. I did not know where to go next and stood waiting.

After taking a few steps forward, I saw how the picture changed its screensaver. Everything was different here. It was like a well-maintained park that had prepared for winter. Everything was well cleaned here, the trees are well maintained, and there are even benches for relaxing. Street lamps illuminated the dark space. I went to wander around this park in the hope of meeting at least someone in this dark world. I could not figure out where everyone had gone, because I was running with the trolls. How it all happened. Where should I look for them? Looking around, I realized that this park, like the plain, has neither beginning nor end. I walked along the asphalt path in the hope that it would lead me wherever.

The park turned into a forest in an instant. It was a green clearing, on which a house covered with moss stood among the

trees. Here everything was deserted and abandoned, and no one seemed to live. I wanted to go to the house, but an invisible force pushed me away. I made another attempt and was thrown back again. I completely forgot about my fear, and that I am alive among the dead. I did not know who I was anymore.

I stood still and looked at the house. Suddenly everything went dark and another picture appeared in the dim light. It was like a billboard that changes the screensavers. A dark abandoned house appeared in front of me. It looked like a haunted house, but no one seemed to live in it, as in the previous one. This picture was like a nightmare. Everything was dark and creepy here. Dark bony trees moved their bony branches. A palisade surrounded the house and skulls were planted on it through one. There was cold ground underfoot and not a drop of greenery, unlike the previous house. This time I was scared, and I did not dare to step forward, but on the contrary stepped back and bumped into old rotten boards and fell. I was sitting waiting for someone to come out of this house. However, there was a deathly silence and I got up. I am tired. I desperately wanted to stop this nightmare, but it dragged me in, and I did not know how to end it.

I stood and waited for what would happen next. Silence won, and I went ahead. It was even scarier ahead; the picture changed its screensaver. There was a stone castle in front of me. The fence of this castle was also made of a stockade, only a skull was impaled on each stake. The railings in this castle were made entirely of skulls. It was dark enough and fog began to set in.

Terror seized me and I wanted to run away from here. I began to miss my friends and even the spirit who initiated me into these secrets. The doors and windows were closed. It looks like no one lives in these houses, I thought to myself. I wonder what kind of houses these are, and who lives in them? The castle was made of stone, unlike the two previous houses. Skeletons stood at the entrance gate like two faithful guards. On the very edge of the roof sat a black raven, and stared at me intently. This made me even more scared, I no longer wanted to continue on my way, I wanted to wake up as soon as possible, but I did not know how to do it. The mist enveloped the whole neighborhood, nothing was visible and I did not know where to go next. Clouds of dark gray smoke obscured everything around. I began to look around. Someone suddenly touched my shoulder, and I flinched. It was my friend.

– We finally found you! It is a creepy place! What do you think? I was quite surprised to see them here.

– We have been looking for you for a long time. My friends came accompanied by my new ghost friend. – Your friend helped us find you. I was excited to see my friends. My fear disappeared and I wanted to continue on my way.

– We decided to go with you to the end. Did you hear that you are going to the party? I smiled cordially in response, as a sign of agreement.

– How did you find me?

– We ran after you across the bridge. The snake obviously did

not like it, and we had to run as fast as we could. When we caught up with you, you suddenly disappeared and there was an empty meadow in front of us. Then we found ourselves in a clearing near a house covered with moss. It turns out that this is the house of Veles himself. He guards the vestibules of the Navi world and appears here occasionally.

– Where does such knowledge come from?

– It was your friend the ghost who enlightened us! Then the picture changed dramatically, and we saw an abandoned house. The picture is not pleasant. We wanted to go home so much. This is the home of Chernobog, the master of this world. It seems that the gods do not live in their homes, but live somewhere else. I wonder if there is a lot of badness here. How much longer do we have to walk?

– And who lives in this castle?

– This is the abode of Koshchei the immortal. This is Mara Marena's husband. In addition, that abandoned house is the house of his father Chernobog. Koschei loves skulls and bones. He collects them and decorates his abode with them. Chernobog also has a son, Viy, but he does not go to the festival, and it is better not to see him. We have done the main way. Soon the ice palaces of Mary Madder will appear before us. Now all the main gods have gone to the festival, with the exception of some.

– How do we get to the holiday?

– They are waiting for you there. You were allowed to get here, but I do not even know about your friends. It is dangerous for

them to stay here. They may not come back. I looked at them with regret. My conscience tormented me. I did not know how to help them anymore. My only goal was to save my late grandmother, and instead I dragged my friends with me. Now there are three of them.

– Let's go further. The Spirit led us along, and we found ourselves on the edge of a cliff. The cliff was made of stone; there was an abyss under his feet. Stones rained down from the edge and fell into the abyss. On the other side of the cliff, ice Palaces could be seen. There was a huge distance between us. It seemed that this Hall was somewhere on the other side of the world, perhaps even in the sky.

– “These gods cannot live in heaven. They are terrified of the light. This is what kills them. They are inhabitants of darkness. They are darkness themselves. I looked at him, and he actually sees everyone through, despite the fact that he is transparent.

– How do we get there?

– It is complicated. I have never been able to do it myself. It started snowing, and light snowflakes were swirling in the air.

After making several passes from side to side, I noticed a transparent bridge. It was barely noticeable, made as if from water, barely frozen water.

– Here it is. Look, the bridge. This is the transition to the ice Palaces. My friends came up to me briskly. – Who is the first? I asked happily. To my surprise, one of my friends took a decisive step. The bridge swayed. Despite our general fear,

he continued on his way. We followed him. After taking a few steps, I looked back. Stones were falling from the cliff. Nothing could be seen from behind, everything was shrouded in darkness. Bony tree branches could be traced among the haze. The snowfall intensified and the wind began to blow. The bridge became lighter and more transparent and seemed about to melt.

– The main sign of Mary is frozen water. Said the spirit, flying over us. If the bridge melts, I will not be able to help you.

– And what will happen to us? We are already in hell! I tried to joke, but I was not laughing myself. The bridge melted, and we fell into the abyss.

We woke up in the cemetery, near an unmarked grave. Friends frantically looked around. I was laughing at them; I knew how they were feeling right now.

– I hope we dreamed it. Alternatively, just a glitch. Come quickly from here. We walked from the cemetery at an accelerated pace. We were wearing the clothes in which we left the apartment. There was a heavy snowstorm outside. Almost nothing was visible.

– Let's remember how we got here. I suggested it. We need to get back. At least for me.

– You need to. You come back. What did I forget there? It is too early for me. My friend was screaming furiously.

– You had fun when you laughed at her. I objected. Now you want to leave.

– Lets not quarrel. We need to remember everything from the

very beginning. We were all laughing, and we all ended up in that place. Now we need to fix it all.

– I agree. I answered. One of the friends reluctantly agreed. – It all started with my grandmother's grave. That is where I fell into the abyss for the first time. We need to find the grandmother's grave.

We went through the cemetery in search of a grave. Despite the severe frost and blizzard, we did not feel cold. We walked for about an hour and found ourselves in the same place near an abandoned grave.

– And then what? How long are we going to walk here?

– Stop whining. Go home alone. Vitka and I are staying. One of them abruptly headed for the exit. Although I did not know where the exit was anymore. His figure was receding, and because of the blizzard, he was no longer visible. After standing for a few seconds, we went back to search for the grave.

– I roughly remember where she is, this is where we found you the first time. We went in the direction of relying on the memory of a friend. When I reached the grave, I stepped over the fence. The grave was covered with snow, and I was standing almost knee-deep in snow.

– I wish Grandma would help us. I thought to myself. As soon as I thought about it, I immediately found myself on the other side of the cliff. I was standing on the edge and stones were falling from it as well as on the opposite side. The view from this cliff was the complete opposite of the other. It was

like heaven and hell. The view of the ice Palaces was a beautiful sight. It was a white palace sprinkled with fine silver sand that stretched out on a beautiful ice island. The view of Nav was dim and gloomy. It looked like an abandoned shed overgrown with cobwebs, in which the windows were clogged and the light never penetrated there, although it really was. Even the air there was a gloomy color. It was always damp, cold and dark there. The mist enveloped the opposite shore and it was hard to see.

I stood and looked at Nav, and abruptly looked back from a touch on my shoulder. My friend was here too. – The meeting place cannot be changed! He said happily. – I repeated everything after myself and ended up here. Your grandmother helped. I smiled back. We turned to face the ice palace. It seemed to us that he was far enough away from us. His appearance was terribly beautiful. It was as if he was carved out of thin glass. A thin carved border gave a particularly refined look to this building. The steps were just as thin and it was scary to step on them.

We went forward in order to get closer to the palace, but the more we went forward, the further away from it we became. I stopped in exhaustion. – When will it all end?

– Soon. I looked around and saw my ghost friend, and next to him our friend who had left the cemetery.

– You have already done the main way. You are going the wrong way, so you are moving away. I will bring you to the end. Then I do not know what will happen. It seemed to me that the

spirit sighed heavily, but he could not do it and I felt sorry for him. I saw the sadness in his eyes and did not dare ask what he was sad about.

– “You don’t want to know that. You will see for yourself soon. We continued on our way and the palace began to approach. When we reached the steps, we stopped. The Spirit looked at me. – Go on alone. Maybe I will not see you again. With these words, he disappeared.

After standing for a while, we began to climb the elegant staircase. We walked as if enchanted; everyone was looking at the beauty of the castle. From the inside, the castle was no less beautiful than from the outside. Everything here was made of ice. Luxury was present in everything. The mistress of the palace had a delicate and elegant taste. Thin and icy lace decorated the walls of the palace, and thin and icy incisors were present wherever possible. The ceilings were undoubtedly high, they could almost be said not to exist. There were ice vaults decorated with snow patterns.

– That is what I understand the taste!

– Quiet. Do not draw attention. We passed, if we say it in our language, the foyer, and entered a narrow corridor. We spent so much time on the icy floor and did not feel the cold. After passing through a narrow corridor, we found ourselves at the entrance to the central hall. In front of us were trolls, and in front of them were the same dead souls and their escorts. Souls and devils were having a nice conversation about something; they

were still holding skulls in their hands. The trolls stood idly apart from them.

– I wonder why the trolls are not in business.

– Do not attract attention. We were the last ones standing, and tried to hide behind a column. For some reason, these characters initially did not pay attention to us. The only inhabitant of this world who stared at me intently is my grandmother. I was looking for her with my eyes, but for some reason I did not see her anywhere.

– The most important thing is that we got here.

– That is for sure.

The doors opened, and souls and their accompanying persons began to slowly enter the hall. They came in a slow column, like on the Kalinov Bridge, in pairs. I stood on tiptoe to see something, but I could not. As we progressed, we also progressed, and became closer to the central hall. The column passed, the trolls remained, and they went in pairs. As soon as they passed, it was our turn and we froze. I did not dare to take the first step. I leaned against the doorway and began to carefully examine what was going on inside.

Inside there was a huge hall with massive columns that supported the arches of the palace. The hall was huge and empty. The tall windows were covered with delicate lace patterns. There were four thrones in the hall. Two stood side by side, the other two were on the sides not far from each other.

The host of the holiday was sitting next to her husband

Koshchei. Her face was deathly pale and insanely beautiful. Her eyes were constantly changing color from bright blue to black. Her long hair of a bright black color hung down to her waist, and a crown of silver was decorated with precious stones.

Her husband never took his eyes off her. He was a thin, terribly scary and bony villain. His small eyes glowed with malice and greed. He greedily looked at everyone around him with his hateful gaze. Mara herself was very beautifully dressed for the holiday; she was wearing a beautiful festive dress. Her husband looked stingy enough for the holiday, and nothing seemed to connect the two people. A huge number of skulls distinguished this villain. Even his throne was paved with skulls made of ice. His crown was decorated with skulls. I realized that this villain is obsessed with turtles.

On Koshchei's right hand was his father Chernobog. He was an old, decrepit old man, very unpleasant in appearance. He was wearing a black robe and I could not see his face.

On the right hand of Mara was Velez. He was a pleasant old man, more like a forester. In appearance, he had no place in this company.

In the center of the hall, there were souls one by one with little devils. They formed a circle. Trolls decorated the walls with their ridiculous appearance. I tried to find the old grandmother, but she did not catch my eye.

- Well, it turns out I came here for nothing?
- What do you want to say?

– “I don’t see her anywhere.

– Who?

– His late grandmother.

– “What does she look like?”

– When I saw her, she was an ugly old woman who was shamanizing by the fire. Her appearance is simply terrible.

– Let’s try to find her together. As far as I know, they can all change their image here, as they like.

– Yes, everyone except her. She is a servant here. She needs to be saved. One of the friends leaned against another opening and tried to climb higher to see what was happening inside.

– I think I see her.

– What does she look like?

– Standing in the very ring of the hall, all in rags and holding some sort of sieve in his hands.

– That is her. Did she guess me wrong?

– Maybe she just cannot come to you. She cannot.

– “You’re right. How will we proceed?”

– “I don’t know.

– Probably, when the holiday begins, we will merge with the crowd and try to approach her.

– Good idea. What will happen to us if this snow queen enchants us? Will it cover with a crust of ice? Alternatively, whatever.

– Yes, I agree too. As a child, I listened to fairy tales about Koshchei, but I did not know that he existed. In addition, I heard

that the great wizard, magician and sorcerer. He is immortal. And, how will we be saved?

– I understand you. However, you got here with me, just like me. Therefore, staying here is already a danger. We are in hell. However, we have every chance to get out of here.

– How, if it is not a secret?

– I do not know myself. I am sure that my grandmother knows about it for sure.

– “You’re right. It is necessary to save the grandmother, and she will solve all the problems.

– It is a pity that our friend ghost has left us.

– Yes, it is a pity. He has helped us well enough.

There was a deathly silence in the hall, and everyone froze in anticipation of something special. I was staring intently at the center and for some reason I did not see anyone. How my friend could see something there. Looking back, I saw that the palace was not standing still, but moving through the air.

– How is this possible?

– What are you talking about?

– Look back.

– Oh, my God. When it all stops. How are we going to get out of here?

– Where are we anyway? Underground or in the sky?

– “I don’t know. We walked away from the hall and walked down a narrow corridor, since we came here. When we reached the steps, we looked down. We were actually floating through

the air. The view from the top was quite beautiful. The icy mountains, the snowy plains, it all seemed so small. The air was icy and my feet stuck to the steps. The air was clear and transparent, and a blizzard was blowing below.

– How is this possible? I am scared to imagine what she might do to us when she gets to us.

– Do you think he will get there?

– And you think she does not know that the three of us are here. In addition, how do you think we all got here? By her grace.

We went back to continue watching the holiday that had not yet begun. The corridor was crowded with people in the flesh. They appeared out of nowhere and stood up waiting. There were not a large number of them, and they continued to appear. We froze in amazement.

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