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Lex Legis trilogy

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INTRODUCTION

ONE LIFE FOR ANOTHER

The hard ground I lay on was the only thing my conscience could accept at that moment. I began regaining consciousness only after having stirred and felt tiny rocks cutting into my stiff back. Several seconds had passed before my body belatedly warned me of the pain. I was hovering, hovering between reality and a dream, between a blend of the good old days and these bloodstained ones, alternating sporadically in my head. Somewhere in the corner of my mind I knew where I was and what was happening, but the blackness, that horrible, thick substance, darker than blood, which kept enveloping my mind quietly and cleverly, was inducing me to close my eyes again and refuse to be here. Flicking its serpentine tongue, it wanted me to give up, to surrender. *Just like that. Give up.* It would be the easiest thing in the world. A blink of an eye would not be quick enough compared to the action that would suffice to forever vanish in the cold air, as if the world had never had me. My damned mind dared to doubt. I was at the very brink of surrender, I truly was, heavens forgive me; I didn't want to be there anymore, to stand and punch back, to be me anymore, to exist... I lay there thinking, praying, begging to pluck up the courage to disappear, but then a blast resounded through my body. I had nowhere to run. With cold steel fingers and a grip as stifling as the hug of death, the moment arose from the darkness, grabbed me and sucked me back into complete consciousness. I opened my eyes and screamed. Cognition restored, a return to the present.

Benevolent silence, blessed ignorance, they broke into a million tiny pieces, and my ears were immediately filled with the sounds of war. Women screaming, men shouting, children crying, the begging and the cursing. Explosions, hits, unearthly sounds. A scream got stuck in my throat as my heart began to cry hysterically. *Is it not over yet?* My eyes drifted through the blackness, watching the sky engulfed by the dark. Night had come, but the sky was devoid of stars, empty as my soul at this late hour. As my heart began to race, pressured by the sounds of hell, I was becoming aware of myself, and a tingling sensation, which had started to rush through my body in a freezing gallop, was luring me to burst into desperate tears. I finally realized what damage had been done. It required an uncanny effort not to scream my lungs out and disappear in a flash. Cowardice filled my already disheartened soul. I wished to whisper what was needed and, by the force of irreversible words, disappear from the jaws of that earthly hell, pretending in a different time and a different place that the world was turning in another direction... and just as I opened my dry, treacherous lips in my intention to do it, I felt a feeble touch on my shoulder. Gentler than a butterfly's wing, it was shaking just like the voice that whispered to me:

"It's time."

For a long moment I stared at the outline of her face, hard to spot in the darkness. For an instant I wondered what demonic dark had swallowed the earth so that not even a blink of light could reach us, and then all the painful wails, the bombardment sounds, the crying and the screaming became noise in the background of those words and her invisible eyes, which I knew were tensely watching me. A new insight rushed through my veins. How could I have ever thought I could turn away and disappear? How could I have thought I could ever close my eyes and sleep peacefully? The darkness and its

thick cloak failed to suppress all the vivid images, flashing before my eyes in a discontinuous rhythm. My daughter-in-law, my son... it pained me to think of him, the true heir of my noble surname, a line which had never, not even in the hardest of moments, doubted, surrendered or given up... A line I have nearly betrayed with a single move. A simple whisper from her had opened all the doors in my darkened mind and chased the dark away. My family, their future, a world for them... I decided to fight. For every smile which bloomed in this and needed to continue in the next life. For all I got and haven't given in return. For my unborn grandson for whom I have been doing this. I didn't stand up, I couldn't. I didn't lift myself up, I couldn't do that either. I turned toward her face hidden in the darkness and spoke my part with no thought, regret or fear.

"Una vita pro alia."

A sigh of relief slipped her lips as easily as a trace of sorrow scratched on my heart. She had doubted me. The whispers of others came dragging through the darkness, repeating the same words with a broken spirit, heart and body. It was the hardest and the easiest thing I have ever said. Still, I knew at the bottom of my core that I had done the right thing. Nothing else would have been right, not even close. I heard the last whisper to my left. I assumed we were all very close to one another. I closed my eyes to calm my panic-stricken heart and seething thoughts. I wished for silence.

"Has night fallen?" I asked quietly.

"No", she replied in a whisper to my right. "Midday just passed."

I sighed very cautiously and carefully, as much as my punctured lungs would allow.

"How long have I been unable to see?"

"Several hours."

She started sobbing quietly. I wanted to comfort her, but I didn't know how. A tear slipped out of my eye and surprised me with its velocity. It rushed toward my ear and tickled it before it vanished into nothingness. I noticed the screams in the distance had stopped, and again, for a split second, I wished to disappear. Of course, I banished the cowardly thought right away, and it was too late anyway. Words once spoken can never be taken back. It was something we repeated throughout our lives as we walked through them, something of great importance, of which we were aware just as we were aware of the existence of life itself. Verbum is sacred. Verbum is the reason for our birth and death, the reason for this and a hundred other wars, just as it is for peace and its myriad forms. This war, more terrifying than the scariest of nightmares, wasn't supposed to end soon. I didn't believe that for a second, but I did believe we had altered its course with our deed. It could have been just a crack in the glass, thinner than cobweb and tinier than a snowflake, but it was there, it vouched to shatter the glass and reduce it to dust. *One day.* The smell of open wounds, scorched houses and a shivering fear permeated the already heavy air, and for the first time I felt truly grateful for going blind.

"Theo? Theodorus?"

"Yes, my friend?"

"We should... should hold hands. How... how can... I..."

If my eyes had not been forever chained to darkness, they would surely have extinguished themselves at that moment, not to watch his tormented face.

"It'll suffice to just put your hand on my shoulder", I replied in a firm voice of a stranger, of someone who wasn't going through this, not in this manner. I soon felt Dexter's soft touch on my shoulder, and

I flinched slightly. I felt the scars and open wounds burning under his fingers, but still I felt an unusual urge to laugh at his shaky fingers barely touching me, as if a stronger touch could hurt me even more.

“Take my hand”, Onoria whispered to Dexter in an unusually composed voice. Was I the only one having qualms?

Carmen never removed her hand. On my left shoulder, where her timid hand touched the end of my collarbone, I felt a throbbing. She was very close, so close I could feel her warm breath and soft sighs as she resisted a new outbreak of tears. She was undoubtedly a very courageous woman. Damn, even I was barely holding back tears, because I knew no amount of teardrops could ever portray our suffering. The four of us were lying, I presume, in a circle, touching the one next to each other and awaiting the unknown, maybe the worst, as if all we'd already been through wasn't horrible enough, as if the pits of hell hadn't opened up long ago and devoured us in a blazing inferno. Dexter's arm suddenly grabbed my shoulder. Carmen's arm followed. I shivered. *It's starting.* I turned my head to the side again, taking advantage of the moment which hadn't caught up with me yet. I could have loved Carmen. I could have, had there been more time, had the world been different, and had our fates not been tightly woven. I saw us in some lost future, myself with a long beard, and her with silver streaks entwined in her auburn hair. My son would already be proud of the strength of his own son.

Someone screamed a terrifying scream which froze the blood in my veins. Only then was I filled with primal fear. Soon we were all screaming, my voice blended with theirs and merged into an inhuman choir of deathly suffering. My mind, exhausted from the fight and shocked with the intensity of the sudden pains, began to shut down, and for that I felt a hint of gratitude. We screamed in hellish, desperate voices as the skin peeled from our feet. Our burnt

flesh rolled upward grotesquely and revealed snow-white bones, solid for just a second more of this lifetime, before they began to crack like feeble twigs, leaving a swaying dust behind. Had my sight not abandoned me, I would have seen the dark red meat retracting, blackening and shrinking until it became a flame. Dexter's voice fell silent, and his hand slipped off my shoulder. Carmen was still shaking in pain. I slowly began to lose consciousness as my thighs burned, sizzling in the fire and vanishing. *This smell...* The cries and shrieks of my comrades were dying out and resounding in the air which smelled of burned flesh and corpses. All the indescribable pain was making me cry, vomit, scream and shiver uncontrollably. I felt my essence surging toward the end of the bridge and disappearing in the breeze.

I turned my head toward Carmen once again, with eyes wide open and mouth gaping in a silent scream. She returned an equally silent stare. All of a sudden I could see her, her large eyes and the spark that was slowly going out inside them. I saw it with my heart, skipping beats just as it was about to come to a halt. I saw the fire eat up her pretty neck with a disgusting hunger, and seize her beautiful face, turning it into a grotesque mask of horror and agony. I immediately regretted that, before my end, instead of the face of Love I memorised the face of Death... And there, just behind her, I saw my two cut off arms in a messed up, discarded pile. The fingers were detaching and falling off as the skin peeled off in chunks and disappeared with them in some abyss. There was blood licking the skin, piece by piece, until the fire ate it, too. I turned my eyes back to the sky, now glowing in an incredibly blue, encouraging colour. One last time it was just as I had always remembered – endless, magical and promising. Then came the darkness. I felt the flame on my chest, fire biting my lungs and piercing my back. The smell of burned hairs

and skin filled my nostrils. The last thing I thought of was that blue sky. I wished my descendants would see it for as long as they lived. And then I, too, breathed out and ceased to exist. The flaming tongues, having swallowed the last body part in the circle of humans, crackled with a threatening sound and vanished in its very core. There was nothing left on the coal-black grass underneath us but a pinch of heavy magic we had voluntarily summoned to rid us of our lives... and erase us from the face of the Earth.

CHAPTER 1

MARIGOLD, VALERIAN, BASIL AND BURDOCK

A newborn day was sneaking in through the corners of the morning, announcing its presence with only a few sunbeams. The sky had a cold from the winter, still holding the Republic firmly in its grasp, showing no intention of releasing the hold of its cold fingers. Traces of its cruel three-month-long reign remained at every turn, from the fog that wouldn't go away in the mornings, to the heavy frost making even centuries-old pines bend down. Beta rushed home, blowing on her frozen fingers to try to warm them up, if only a little bit. She was softly singing an old song her mother used to sing during such cold days. Beta wasn't superstitious, but she was fond of the old ways, so she sang of Morana and her hard life, in order to appease her at least a little and help her leave. Her shoulder protested occasionally under the weight of the hefty leather bag she had been carrying for several miles, but Beta didn't seem to care. Getting up early that morning was worth it. Stirred by her quick pace, sweet scents of wild thyme, mint, primrose, nettle and sage twirled in the air. She wasn't the only one who had headed outside of the City of Ragusa to find various herbs. All citizens had done it either the previous or that morning, because Yarilo, the first day of Spring, had approached the doors of their humble homes and was about to knock. Beta thought about all those people as she entered through the Eastern Gate. She hadn't met anyone along the way, but from the corner of her eyes she could see shadows emerging and vanishing just as quickly behind the high walls.

There was nothing unusual about it – hiding and lying had become a part of everyday life to the citizens of Ragusa ever since the Great War, and although Beta had only a basic knowledge of the war, during her lifetime she had experienced enough to convince herself to be invisible and lie just as much. To a passing stranger this place would seem just like any other sleeping city, about to wake from a sweet dream, but Beta knew very well how bustling the streets actually were. She could smell the caution and fear in the air, just as she could imagine how much effort was put into making it unnoticeable. *And how much was at stake.* A shiver passed down her tiny body. Living in a world of dictatorship and capital punishments had taken its toll. It was vital to remain invisible in this city if you wanted to live. She was supposed to be one of them, just another shadow on the City's ancient walls, but she believed no guards would see her, since there were but a few marching around the streets in these wee hours of the morning. She believed herself to be equally invisible as the remaining hundred souls, rushing toward their houses from the fields. Feeling unladen, she stepped onto Stradun, hardly waiting to reach her warm home.

Ragusa was only beginning to stir under the morning star when Beta stopped in front of the Rector's column. The law ordered everyone to bow to the stone figure whenever passing it, and those not bowing were punished by public flogging. Beta didn't know much about the Rector, only that during her entire lifetime he had been travelling around the world and that the Senate was tirelessly preparing for his return, although he never came. There was a rumour among the people that he had the monument made in honour of the person he had once been, before the title of Rector, although the people preferred not to call him that, and not to talk about him at all. There was all kinds of talk about him, from absurd

theories that he was an eerie ghost, to assumptions that he was a bloodthirsty murderer hungry for territory. The last time Beta heard of him was several years ago, when the Senate announced the Rector and his soldiers had conquered the West. Her mother, if she knew anything, remained silent, along with everyone else Beta ever asked. She knew very little, but she trusted her mother and the other citizens, so during her feigned bow, she whispered the words they had taught her:

“Non bene pro toto libertas venditur auro.”

Were it ever overheard by someone who wasn't supposed to, she would be accused of sacrilege and sentenced to death, but being so sure of her insolent and faked bow, Beta liked to mock the stone face. On the surface, Ragusa was a subdued city-state, a hunched old lady under a heavy-handed regime, but deep underneath she carried many underground passages, tunnels, chambers and staircases, just as a warrior woman would carry her bow and arrows. Ragusa might have been just a shadow of what it had been before the Great War, but no country in the world was a match for it. Beta straightened her back proudly in front of the stone figure of a young man with lovely curly hair and a big sword in his hand. His sculpted eyes seemed to have a fire burning inside. Her gaze then wandered off toward the flag fluttering above the Rector's head.

The early morning sunrays lit an embroidered hand with an adder sliding between its fingers. Quite an appropriate demonstration of the workings of the Senate. When Beta was little, she was convinced the adder would flick its tongue whenever she bowed down with her mother, but now she smiled inconspicuously at the same flag for an entirely different reason. As most other citizens of age, she was now a member of a quiet society which planned resistance. Their activities were slow and limited, but despite that, they had done a lot over the

past decades, which has, among other things, resulted in Ragusa's underground. Beta was often the one asking why they still hadn't acted and attacked, but she was always met with the same response. *Patience, child. The time will come for us to rise.* Members of this society were armed with patience alone, and their activities were limited to moving at night. Owing to that, Beta fondly remembered, the greatest pride of the whole City came to be. Once, the Senate had ordered a few seamstresses to make the representative flag for the Rector's column, and so they did. What the Senate didn't know was the straw the citizens were clutching at. Between two layers the seamstresses had embroidered a single word which could be seen only on selected nights. *Libertas.* One single word was giving hope to thousands of hearts, the word that made it easier to humbly kneel before the stone figure, and the Senate wondered at the decreasing number of those punished. The word worth dying for. The society called themselves Lunarians, in honour of their silent comrade and best friend, the Moon. *Why?* – Beta remembered the question she had asked her mother breathlessly, when she had been finally introduced into the world of the adults. *Because the word can be seen only under the brightest of moonlights.*

Beta looked at the Rector again. An inexhaustible hope flared in her chest just as fiercely as the flame in his carved eyes. She felt his terrifying presence, as if there was a piece of him personally hiding in the cold stone, but at the same time she felt inexplicable strength, which made her believe she could put out his gaze with a single breath. A sigh came from her lips as she began to walk away from the stone statue and the flag which swayed seemingly innocently in the wind. Just as she started guessing what awaited her at home, since her mother had gone to gather herbs as well, someone abruptly grabbed her shoulder. Beta screamed. Her bag fell to the ground.

"What are you doing in the streets before the morning bell?"

The voice addressing her belonged to her worst nightmare. For a split second Beta noticed several shadows rapidly vanishing, so she quickly fell to her knees.

"Forgive me!" she uttered with a moan, as her heart pounded in her throat. "My mother suffers from a fever, so I went outside the city to pick some herbs and make her tea!"

The lie she told the dapifer had been ready in her head ever since she set foot out of bed that morning, but not even in her wildest dreams had she imagined having to use it. Her gaze was fixed on the stone ground, but somehow she felt his suspicion, so she quickly pulled a bundle out of her bag and raised it above her head. She kept her head low as they had taught her ever since she was little, and prayed to the heavens for the best. The air no longer smelled of picked herbs as much as it did of fear and anxiety.

"Stand up."

Beta stood on her feet, not bothering to shake off the dirt from her modest dress. Instead of relief, fear surged through her veins as her eyes found his. In the hooded face she found winter incarnate.

"I've memorised you. If I see you just once more, I'm taking you straight to the Rector's Palace."

Beta's already troubled heart now sobbed with grief. *How many times had my Victor heard it before they...*

Suppressing the suddenly arisen memories and skilfully hiding her unrest and fear, Beta bowed as a sign of gratitude.

"This time I'll turn a blind eye. Remember the great generosity of the Senate."

Beta bowed her head humbly and murmured a thanks.

"I didn't hear you."

"I am most grateful, Honoured Sir."

Beta hated the way they had to address them. She could barely keep her fingers from shaking and didn't know how much longer she could pretend to be an innocent little thing not breaking the law. Her mother's warnings to hide in the back alleys came flashing through her head.

"Have you reported your mother?"

Just one more lie. Say you intend to and then disappear.

"No, Honoured Sir, but I will as soon as I make her tea. She got sick only last night, and the Hospitum doesn't take anyone in before the morning bell."

"Yes, true enough", he admitted. "I'll check at noon if you've reported her. What's her name?"

"Una, Honoured Sir."

"Full name, commoner."

Beta winced at the insulting word he used for her. After all these years, she still hasn't got used to it.

"Una Ghetaldus."

"Ghetaldus?"

The dapifer's voice gave a hint of recognition.

"Is Marin Ghetaldus something to you?"

"Father, Honoured Sir."

Beta's accelerated pulse began to slow down. Now that he knew who her father was, surely he didn't have the same intentions as he might have had before.

"In that case, you must be Bete", he said in a neutral voice. She met his gaze.

"No, Honoured Sir. Bete is my father's nickname; he called me Beta."

"The second?"

She felt a taste of disgust in her mouth as she prepared to answer why she had such a Latin name.

"My father hoped that I would follow in his footsteps. That I would be the second in the family to... serve the Senate as their right hand."

She could feel the battle taking place inside his mind, because, despite being a commoner, Marin Ghetaldus was almost untouchable, and reproaching his daughter would mean to answer to the Senate itself.

"And, will you? Or will you be just another granary worker like your mother?"

"If the Senate deems me worthy," she replied with a prepared act of humility, dreading her own words, "I will gladly follow in my father's footsteps."

His face was now completely calm.

"Go, and don't let me see you again", he said. Beta bowed once more, hoping it was the last time, and hurried on her way. As she climbed the stairs, leaving Stradun and the city gates behind, Beta could tell by her steps that her heart had finally settled. *This went better than I could have hoped.* The last thing she expected was a guard of the Senate itself asking about her family tree, but since he did, she was certain his priority wouldn't be to check at the Hospitum if the great Marin Ghetaldus' wife reported a fever.

Sentries and dapifers were everyone's worst nightmare, answering directly to the Senate. Beta shared the people's fear of those guards, because once they got a hold of you, you never saw the light of day again. But if there was anything more frightening, it was the question – why was the fear-inspiring Senate in mortal dread of the Rector? Who was he and what did he do to make citizens clutch their chests and cringe at the very mention of his name? Most Ragusans had never even seen the Rector, but they feared him so much that their entire lives were subjugated to his laws. Beta presumed the Great War played a large role in it, but she didn't know much, since everyone refused to talk about it. Her mother once told her no-one wanted to be reminded of the terrors they had had to endure, nor did they want their children to suffer as they once had, and she could understand that. Citizens could see the members of the Senate just a few times a year, when they would leave the Rector's Palace to inform the people of great changes. An example of this happened last year, when nearly a hundred detainees were found guilty of disobedience and were taken away from the City. Beta's eyes filled with tears as she recalled the painful day when her mother had held her tight to keep her from charging into the convicted lot and dragging Victor far away from the disaster. She never forgot his handsome, courageous face, staring boldly ahead and listening to the verdict that ripped him out of her life and took him to the Mines of Epidaurum. She had no clue what exactly had happened to him. It was believed he hadn't survived, for the mines were a synonym for silent executions. No-one knew exactly how he died, or if he died at all.

Shaking her head to chase the dark thoughts away, Beta focused on the remaining walk home. While kneeling before the dapifer, she had decided not to mention it to her mother, who would probably be infuriated with worry; she had warned her to stay well hidden,

which Beta remembered, blushing in shame. Again reprehending herself for her incredibly stupid disregard and bad judgement, Beta went down the stairs of St. George and in just a few steps reached her humble home. As always before reaching for the doorknob, she automatically looked up at the stone letters in the lintel she had grown up with – IHS. Those three heavy letters, lingering above every front door in the Republic, didn't mean a thing to her, nor to the rest of the younger population. According to her mother, it was just another ugly reminder of the Great War and nothing more. The sounds of the sea disappeared with the slam of the front door. Her mother Una lifted her weary eyes from the table on which she had been sorting herbs. Immediately, relief spread across her face and ended up in a sincere smile at the sight of her child. A cloud of guilt covered Beta's heart.

“Greetings to you, my daughter!”

She came to her and gently kissed her forehead. Beta smiled bravely, careful not to give away that at this very moment she could have been in the Senate's courtroom. Acting completely calm, she asked her mother:

“What did you manage to find?”

Una returned to the table and started showing her the neat bundles.

“Marigold, valerian, basil and burdock.”

She shook her head cheerlessly upon seeing her daughter's puzzled look.

“I know, this side had more plants than yours, but you wouldn't believe how many people I could see almost clearly! I was afraid the whole time they would catch someone.”

Beta handed her brimming leather bag to her mother, refusing to give into the guilt. Una started taking the herbs out, nodding her head contently as she approached the fireplace. These past weeks Beta had worked hard on a depository. It was a very complex, but also simple idea, which she had made specially for this occasion, thanks to Victor. Beta sat down at the table, resting her head on her hand as she gazed dreamily at the fireplace. Victor was very skilled with his hands and adored to do everything his imagination would let him. He spent a lot of time with Beta and her tireless desire to learn, so very soon she could almost perfectly copy his work. *He would surely be proud.* Up until this year, Beta and her mother hid everything that wasn't supposed to be seen under a loose board in their bedchamber. One time, during a weekly search, sentries found that hiding place. Fortunately, it had been empty at the time, so Una received only ten lashes for, as they said, *suspicious household management that defied the specific orders of the Senate.* Beta took to work that same evening, after seeing to her mother. Using coal, she drew a dense bush of ivy all around the fireplace, so it seemed to engulf it on all sides. Every day for several weeks, she carved the leaves until they resembled a creative decoration for an otherwise ordinary fireplace. However, one leaf was almost inconspicuously thicker than the rest, and upon pressing it hard, an iron bar protruded from the wall and pushed the frame of the fireplace just a foot forward. This gave Una and Beta space to stash anything, without anyone finding it. Having placed the last bundle in the depository, Una sealed it with a hard push. The iron bar returned to its upright position with a soft *click*. The fireplace once again looked unusually lovely and entirely innocent. Looking at her mother, Beta remembered the dapifer's earlier remark about her place of employment, so she asked:

“How was work today?”

Una shrugged her shoulders, sighed and wiped her hands off her apron, although they had been perfectly clean. It was a habit she wasn't even aware of, a move from work which she took home. She spent her days making bread for the needs of the City, or helping with Mercy, and she did all that in Rupe, a stone construction for containing and processing wheat, barley and millet. Beta was very fond of that habit – it reminded her she came from a person who fed many mouths alongside hers.

“As always. Lots of poverty, lots of hungry ones.”

Mercy was supposed to show the people that the Senate cared, but on some days, when they would give out cereals or even whole bread, the citizens were reminded only of indifference. Beta stopped to think for a long moment. She closed her eyes and let her fantasy roam so far as to imagine Rupe empty, and every home filled with the smell of warm bread.

“Wash up.”

Beta opened her eyes in surprise and looked in the direction of her mother's voice. And indeed, prepared under the window, on a small table lay a wooden bowl with clear, cold water. She smiled at her mother, thrilled and hardly suppressing an urge to squeak. Ever since she was little, Yarilo was Beta's favourite holiday, and washing up with flowers to greet the Spring was to her the highlight of the year. Una threw into the bowl some herbs and flowers she had torn before stashing them away. The surface of the water blossomed with colours, calling Beta to touch them. She rolled up the sleeves of her shirt, shoved her hair out of the way, then slowly, almost timidly, immersed both of her hands into the cold water. Adrenaline rushed through her veins, ascending from her palms that had gone white, to her elbows that shivered. A feeling of bliss filled her chest. With a gentle move she turned her palms upward, catching the water with

flowers, and just as she was about to lift it to her face, she closed her eyes. The moment her face met the water, soaked with the essence of every flower and herb, Beta saw a better world. A world where one could sleep peacefully at night, a world in which they were people, not commoners being whipped or beaten like dogs for it, a world in which living a life meant enjoying every breath, not being punished for it. She rubbed her face to use every last drop from her palms, then she immersed them back into the scented water.

“Tell me about Yarilo, mother.”

She heard her mother's soft footsteps approach and stop just behind her back. Una placed a hand on her shoulder, and Beta sighed delightedly under her warm touch that differed so greatly from the hands she held under the icy water.

“The god of death and the underworld, fearsome Veles, kidnapped Yarilo, son of the supreme god Perun, with whom he had a feud. He took the newborn Yarilo into the underworld, where he grew up beside his daughters. Once Yarilo became a strong young man, he left Arbus mundi, the roots of the tree of the world, and headed toward Perun's halls at the top of the sacred tree. Yarilo braved his way through various worlds unravelled among the branches, and when he reached ours, he brought us spring. We named and celebrated the day as Yarilo, in his honour. When Yarilo finally reached Perun, he met his beautiful daughter Vesna. Not knowing they were siblings, the two youngsters fell madly in love. A wedding was set to take place on Midsummer, which was later named the first day of summer. However, shiftY Yarilo cheated on Vesna just before the wedding. Furious Perun struck his own son with lightning and instantly killed him, and Vesna grew old in a flash from the immense sadness and turned into winter. They called her Morana, and she became the worst nightmare of every living

creature. One day Perun got a son Yarilo and it all began again, because Yarilo is a god being constantly born and dying anew, just as Morana is a goddess who grows old and young again. The world has remained such, after summer comes winter, and after winter comes summer, and as long as the wheel turns, we celebrate life that never really dies."

Beta's eyes slightly watered under shut eyelids. As her mother's closing words echoed through the room, Beta felt as if Morana herself was holding her hand.

"Mother," she whispered softly, "will this world ever know better times?"

Una squeezed her shoulder.

"Yes. Sooner than you think."

Beta opened her eyes. She stared far off into the open sea, where the sky met the ocean and where things were just as they were here, just as they were in the rest of the world. She thought of Victor again and found it hard to believe her mother's words.



Having arrived at the Rector's Palace, the dapifer who had spent the whole night guarding would in other circumstances have relaxed and looked for a bench to sit on while awaiting his next command, but now he just kept marching in his long strides, passing by all the benches in the cold atrium, until he reached the gate of the Great Hall. He didn't have to knock. He was expected. The heavy, carved door opened in sinister silence without any assistance. In other circumstances the dapifer would have felt an icy chill down his spine,

but now he kept walking through the room with a firm pace, his gaze fixed straight ahead. The Senators sat upright as gods, waiting for him in complete silence. The dapifer didn't wonder why their faces looked so unnaturally pale from a distance, their eyes lifeless and staring at nothing, maybe even at worlds that existed only in their heads. He didn't see that. He approached the large table covered in dark-blue velvet and bowed so low he could feel the blackness tingeing it. He even paid no attention to the pots filled with a yellowish liquid of a smell sour enough to induce vomit.

"So?"

The cold voice that cut through the silence belonged to the eldest Senator. This simple question implied a good moment to relay his report. Straightening to his full height, the dapifer continued to look at the floor and, without breathing in, without contemplating, he began to speak.

"The City was unusually quiet. The minor offences we're used to daily were fully absent last night. After the evening bell, the citizens withdrew to their homes and until the morning bell we didn't encounter anyone. No-one walking, returning late from service, visiting or moving at all in the City. It seemed as if everyone had completely disappeared."

Silence spread through the room once again, appearing heavier than before. The dapifer kept looking down and listening to the lack of life in the Hall. Another Senator's voice came just a bit louder than a whisper:

"You mean to say that not *one* single person was found in the City this *entire* night?"

The dapifer, who had been serving loyally his whole life and knew nothing of life outside those walls, felt a commotion in his head.

Lasting for a while now, it began approximately when he headed to the Palace, having finished his shift. The unpleasant feeling, like he could hear vague whispering somewhere in the back of his head, and the strange headache influenced his prepared answer. Thus, at the last moment, just before he was about to alter his statement and name the only person he had found in the City, his lips let slip an answer known to him from early childhood:

“Yes, Your Grace.”

With the last syllable, the pressure in his head diminished. The dapifer kept his gaze fixed on the marble tiles beneath his feet, as the tension between the Senators grew. Silence lasted for only a few moments, then the eldest Senator spoke again.

“Very unusual”, his voice revealed resentment. “Don't you consider it unusual?”

The dapifer's eyes were very calm. Despite being very colourful and vivid, the marble tiles told him nothing.

“No, Your Grace. The seasons are changing. Maybe the people just need to adapt to the weather. Most of them are elderly, anyway. A sudden change from cold to warm will drive many to the Hospitum.”

“Very well”, said the same Senator. “For now we'll put that subject aside. Be very thorough in this morning's roll call. And right afterwards, proceed with the search, surprise the citizens. Should you notice something strange, it could be the reason for last night's silence. You will watch the walls till midnight, then you can retire till the morning bell. Take as many guards as you need.”

The dapifer bowed, staying low for a moment longer to express his deep respect, then he swiftly turned around and started toward the exit in his long strides. The pressure in his head suddenly subsided. When the Great Hall's door closed, the dapifer walked the

short way to the City Watch. At the very entrance he was greeted by three strong sentries.

“Awaiting your orders, Sir”, said one. The commander who had just reported to the Senate returned their look. He couldn't have known that, at that very moment, his eyes turned from black into their natural green colour. Not one of the sentries in front of him noticed it.

“The morning roll call will be more thorough and last longer than usual. The searches will be done unannounced right afterwards. We guard the walls till midnight. At the toll of the bell, you are all dismissed.”

His tone was strict, devoid of emotion. Together with his subordinates, he marched toward the middle of Stradun. There, upon tolling the bell, they announced the morning roll call, at which the citizens had to step out immediately after hearing their name called. The dapifer wasn't revisiting the conversation he had had in the Great Hall. In some other circumstances he would have remembered everything and wondered why he had lied about meeting someone that morning. The only thing he knew now was that he had entered the Great Hall and received orders to extend his service until midnight. Everything else disappeared in a whisper.