

**EDGARS AUZIŅŠ**

**FALL IN LOVE IN A  
WEEKWE GET BY**

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18+

# Edgars Auziņš

## Fall in love in a week we get by

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### **Аннотация**

Is it possible to fall in love by order? Yesterday I would have answered no. But today I simply have no choice. Never believe in magic and suddenly end up in a magical world! Know nothing about curses and suddenly take part in a dark ritual! It's all about me. And there is only a week left. Fall in love or die and drag your involuntary betrothed down with you. A nightmare, not a prospect. And no beautiful magical world can save you. And all because of the hysterical idiot whose body he managed to get into. Now I have a ghost among my advisors, a professor at the magic academy among my bosses, and in my bra there is such wealth that it is impossible to carry around. And what, one wonders, should we do with all this?

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# Edgars Auziņš

## Fall in love in a week we get by

### 1. CHAPTER 1. Day one: Tuesday

I always thought that the normal reaction to a ghost was to squeal. That is, of course, if you believe in this nonsense, and if not, carefully look around in search of a hidden camera, make a photogenic face and then squeal, moderately loudly and without losing your smile. Because modern special effects can do anything—probably even a ghost. Depict. Authentic, with a protruding aura, or whatever it's called, and just a step away from you. Like this one...

For some reason, it didn't work out to squeal, but the thought of a hidden camera flashed and went away. I extended my hand and pointed my finger into the whitish, frozen fog – to where a face could barely be discerned in the swaying ghostly figure.

– Hey, be careful! Wow acquaintance – finger in the eye! – here the ghost, judging by the voice of a woman, stopped short, flew closer, hovered, as if he was peering intently at me. And he screamed so shrilly, as if he was being cut. Unless, of course, you can cut something intangible.

– What are you doing? – I asked, stunned.

– Body! At your place! “I wanted to cover my ears, but the

ghost suddenly rushed towards me, I instinctively jumped back, tripped over something and fell, painfully hitting my butt on the hard and cold floor. And the ghost fell from above. Feeling – brrr!!! It's like you've been swallowed by a slippery, scalding-icy jellyfish.

– Let me go! – I screamed.

But it was unlikely to be heard, because the ghost screamed along with me:

– Be careful, you clumsy fool! Ritual circle! Why did you lie down? Get up quickly!

“And I won't think about it until you let me go,” I muttered. When something is demanded in such a boorish manner, and even with insults, one must react adequately, that is, either send them away, or put forward counter conditions. Preferably such that the boor himself will be sent away.

The whitish icy cloud moved away, I struggled to my suddenly weak legs and finally looked around.

A small room, no windows, the light comes from candles lined up in a circle on the floor. Smoothly plastered walls, thickly covered with incomprehensible symbols. The floor outside with candles is painted with the same symbols, the inside is perfectly smooth and clean... Concrete? No, a stone. Looks natural. Even the veins are visible, also gray, but lighter, whitish, like this ghost.

Ritual circle, then?

Hmmm. It seems my latest investigation has gone somewhere wrong. Decidedly and categorically not there!

I bent down to feel the floor and froze. The fingers that felt like ours were... yes, they were someone else's! Mine are graceful. I think I'm generally lucky with my hands: a beautiful hand, fingers that are called musical, and the rings look great on them. I love rings and beautiful manicures. And now, instead of my favorite snake ring with ruby eyes and a scarlet manicure to match the ruby, I saw a modest light one – silver? – a ring with pinkish carnelian or, perhaps, jasper, and albeit neat, but still short, almost clean-cut nails. Although the fingers too... nothing like that. But mine are better.

Okay, stop. What am I thinking, what difference does it make whether it's better or not if it's strangers?!

– So what are you staring at? – the ghost was indignant. – Give me my body and go back where you came from!

– I came?! Your body?! Yes, take it! And send me back immediately! This is what you did!

– That's not what I did!

– ? What?! – What did you have to do for such a thing... I can't even say "result"! Summon the devil?! It seems that the "hereditary dark witch" I was going to expose claimed that the devil does not exist. Although what to take from a charlatan. Or... Isn't she such a charlatan, since instead of her dimly lit salon, decorated with a pretense of mystery, I'm standing here? Maybe it was her doing, and not this... shrill one?

– Ritual! Complex love spell ritual! – the ghost howled and seemed to melt into the air, only to immediately appear in

another corner of the room. – So what should we do now?

– What ritual?! Okay, stop! “I finally stopped understanding anything.” First a ghost, now a ritual. A love spell or something else – this is the tenth thing. The main thing is that the result is obvious. Even if it’s not what you expected. “Ritual,” I repeated. – Real. That is, these are not fairy tales, not quackery, and not...

– Haven’t you studied ritualistics? – something like mockery suddenly appeared in the washings. – Retarded?

– You yourself are retarded! Do you believe in all sorts of nonsense? Also tell me that psychics, clairvoyants and hereditary dark witches are not scammers.

– Pfft! – this ghostly impudent woman snorted distinctly. – There are a lot of scammers, and idiots too. Because true strength is not given to everyone. But every educated magician should know what a ritual is!

– I! Not! Magician! – It didn’t sound impressive and weighty, as intended, but... yes, too – almost hysterical! Is she contagious, or what?!

– She is a fool. And I, it seems, am no better. Wait here!

The ghost disappeared – this time completely, and I sat on the floor and stared at my not-my hands. She brought her palms to her eyes. She clenched and unclenched her fists. Strangers, but mine?! No, mine – but strangers. Wrong ring, wrong manicure. There is no usual bracelet watch. But the skin is soft and silky, even after the best cream it’s not like that for me.

What am I wearing? Some kind of depressing hybrid of a lab coat and an evening dress – a long, ankle-length, unbuttoned robe made of white dense satin, under which, thank everything, there are quite normal, only too tight and bright trousers and a tight T-shirt. ?Very tight! And there is something to wear! I felt myself, then tried to look at it, then felt it again... Those are boobs! I couldn't add a couple of sizes in an instant, could I?

In the heat of an argument with a hysterical ghost, I too easily accepted that I was not in my body. I almost forgot about it. But now the understanding has dawned – it's true. For some reason, my brain immediately rejected the possibility that the "hereditary dark one" had drugged me or drugged me with some kind of rubbish. Any nonsense is based on what is known, but here...

I suddenly wanted to look in the mirror. But there are mirrors in this ritual... well, not the hall, obviously! Ritual closet? In general, there were no mirrors, and there was no powder compact or lipstick with a mirror in the pockets. It's generally depressingly empty. Only a single key, however, on a very unusual keychain. A round matte white plaque, similar to a large coin, glowed slightly or – what is it called?! – opalescent? I turned it over in my hands for a long time, trying to understand what kind of material it was. Perfectly smooth, pleasant to the touch. Not ceramic. Too heavy for plastic. Not metal. Bone? There are no such bones! The unknown material fascinated me, and I did not immediately notice the inscription, not embossed or applied on top, but as if fused inside, into the very depths of the keychain. ?



PCiHBI. Abracadabra... ah, no, that's not all. ?PTsiHBI im.  
Panacea G. Hmm. Well, at least one word is familiar. It turns out  
that something related to medicine is already information.

Turning the strange keychain in my hands, I thought about  
moving again. If I am in the body of this hysterical ghost, and  
the ghost... well, he is a ghost – what about my dear and rightful  
body? Unconscious? In coma? Died? Not this! We must return  
to it when the ghostly girl understands where she made a mistake  
and corrects everything! Otherwise, it turns out that I'm looking  
after someone else's apartment, and in the meantime there's a  
fire, a flood and an invasion of robbers in mine?!

– Hey, how long should we wait? – I screamed. What if he  
hears? – Where are you? Are you thinking of bringing me back  
or not?!

– I don't think so, because I can't. “The girl floated right  
out of the wall, seemingly the same, white and translucent, but  
her voice sounded different. Smooth, muted, without hysterical  
notes. Otherworldly or something. It was completely freezing. –  
You won't come back.

– How can I not return? Why?! “I started to think wildly  
about everything at once: about the charlatan witch who probably  
had a hand in this outrage, and the ticket to Sydney bought  
last week. ? unfinished projects and materials not delivered on  
time, even about brazen red-haired Alice, whom she promised  
to feed and brush while Mrs. Wilburn sunbathed on the beach  
in Brighton.

– Wrong paths, dark, forgotten. They accepted the victim and closed. For good.

–What sacrifice? “I wanted to scream, but instead I squeezed out a barely audible whisper, because I already understood: I am the victim. The real one.

“I,” the girl seemed to echo. -You are still alive, but I am not.

– But if I’m alive, I need to be brought back to myself!

– Stupid. You are alive – here. In my body, but the body is not the main thing. You are still you.

– And you? “Somehow I immediately, instantly forgot my own irritation and indignation, giving way to acute, unusually painful sympathy.

– Not anymore. Time is lost, the paths are closed, the ritual is completed. The connection with the body is severed. If you hadn’t been pulled into it, a body would have been found here in the morning.

– What am I supposed to do?

It's not like I was expecting an answer. It seems clear and so – accept the situation and move on. But they gave me the answer, yes what!

– You must cheat fate. Bypass the curse, otherwise it will take two more lives.

– Wait! – I grabbed my head and shuddered, feeling thick wavy curls instead of the usual short haircut. – Wait, not so fast. You were talking about a ritual, not a curse! About the love spell ritual, I remembered an important detail. – A love spell can,

of course, be considered a curse, but somehow... conditionally? More philosophically than...

“The one I was before was mistaken,” apparently, the ghost was tired of listening to my helpless babble. – Interfered with something that should not be interfered with. She called upon the wrong forces, spoke the wrong words. I'm sorry. I try to help. Now I see more, much more. I know something I never knew.

–What kind of curse?

– For love. You have a week. He does too. If there is no love, there will be no life. Both of you.

– I have?

“This body,” the ghost seemed to shrug. – So, you have it. And Dougal. And he didn't even know about anything.

– Dougal is someone else... Is he even someone? Did I understand you correctly, did you cast a love spell on him? And now he has to fall in love with me?

“He's into you, and you're into him.”

– What if I don't like him?

– You will die. Both. And guess what? – the ghost's hair suddenly stood up, and he himself seemed to be filled with an otherworldly, deathly light. – If he dies, I won't forgive you for this! I will find it even after death.

“Look,” I stood up and shook off my robe. – Don't forgive yourself first. You started all this, not me. But I want to live, so let's hope that I like your Dougal. At least a little.

– He was never mine. The one I was before... I'm sorry, I

really am. The usual stupidity, an argument with girlfriends, a desire to please everyone, even him. No feelings except pride and selfishness.

– Yes... Well, you and... – You can't even find words for this!

– If it could be fixed... But what's done is done.

– What is your name? Or now me?

“Charlotte,” the ghost flew very close. – Charlotte Blair. Now it's time to get out of here. I'll show you everything you need. You can occupy the house, I grant you permission. Take a name, a job...

– Stop, stop, stop, who do you work for?

– Assistant to the Doctor of Magical Chemistry and Pharmacy, Head of the Department of Potions and Elixirs, Professor Dougal Norwood. The same one.

– Who should I fall in love with?

“And achieve reciprocal love,” Charlotte reminded. – You will understand how difficult this task is. He is not a very pleasant person to talk to. Genius, in a word.

– And I don't even understand ordinary chemistry, much less pharmaceuticals. Not to mention... wait! Magical?! Where did I end up anyway? Is this still Earth? – Obviously, yes, since the ghost bears the quite ordinary name Charlotte, and there are Latin letters on the keychain. But magic?!

– Of course, Earth. England, if you want to be more precise. Panacea Academy.

– On the Earth that I know, magical chemistry does not exist

in principle!

– ? here – exists.

– So, not Earth. Or a parallel world, but what difference does it make? In my opinion, both are impossible. Well, you... did a ritual! I should have my hands torn off for this.

“Who I was died for this.”

– What should I do? That idiot you were is your own fault, and what does it have to do with me?! – for some reason, the inability to return to my home, at least in someone else’s body, to feed Alice, to finish my work, and at least to catch my breath from all this nonsense, sitting in my favorite chair, hit me more painfully than the threat of death just a week later. The final verdict...

– And you were not in your world when everything happened, and without a body, by the way. So call it what you want – fate or an unfortunate coincidence, nothing will change. But this is also your fault. Don't look where you shouldn't. Especially if you are not prepared for this.

– So-so... So, that witch after all... killed me, or what?!

– Nobody killed you. I don't know what you used to call it. Astral travel, perhaps. That witch... I can't reach from here. I wanted to prove you wrong. But you didn't want to listen. And having found herself in a world beyond your understanding, she behaved like... I don't know, the paths were closed. The ritual brought you here. And let's get back to what's important. What happened has already happened.

– Oh yes. And now I have a week to avoid completely dying. –

I had to try to focus on the “important”. – In short, we settled on the fact that an assistant to a professor, and even more so a genius, I would be like a ballerina out of an elephant. “I sighed and admitted the main thing: “I understand even less about love than I do about chemistry.” Unless, of course, you take into account the unhappy and unrequited one. Maybe it's easier to quit right away? To spend the last week of my life in revelry, to fly to Sydney... I've been wanting to for a long time... is there Sydney in this world?

– Eat. But first you will do everything in your power,” Charlotte responded in an unquestioning tone. – It needs to be corrected, changed, the way it is now is not good. There is only one death on my soul for now, and I don't want yours too. She said, I'll help. Come on, I'll take you home and tell you about Charlotte, about work, about the rest. You must not give yourself away, otherwise it will become very difficult to correct. You will work next to him, and in a week... one way or another something will change. – She disappeared, only to immediately lean out waist-deep from the wall. – Go!

– Where?! “I tried the locked door. There was no hint of a keyhole under the round handle.

– The key is in your hands. Place your pass on the door. This one,” she pointed to the keychain.

Indeed, as soon as he brought it to the lock, the door opened. “By the way, I'm Sally,” Charlotte said from behind as she floated down the dark narrow corridor. – Freya Sullivan, in full.

“You are Charlotte Blair,” this... ritualist objected. – Now. At least for the next week. Then you decide.

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The Panacea Academy, where Charlotte worked and was taught by this same Dougal – a doctor, a genius and an unpleasant person, was almost a medieval castle, proudly rising on a hill in the middle of the heather moors. At the foot of the hill, on one side there was a village where teachers and staff lived, and on the other there were several small, pleasant two-story dormitories for students. The view from here must have been stunning during the day. But now, in the dim light of the moon, which barely diluted the darkness of the night, everything looked dull and, perhaps, mystical. In the worst sense of the word. Only in such a dark place can one get involved in a ritual with a deadly curse. Something good is doubtful. The bright lights near the dormitories and in the village brightened up the impression a little, but in contrast to them, the darkness around seemed thick, almost tangible.

And the lanterns themselves were... strange. I didn't even immediately understand why. Only then did I realize: the light was not like what I was used to, it gave off a cold blueness and something otherworldly. Is it also magic?

“There's your house,” Charlotte waved her ghostly hand. Somewhere towards a whole street of identical brick cottages. That is... I don't know, can a house be called a street if even the most seedy road does not lead to it? Neither to the teaching village, nor to the dormitories. It's like they're flying on

broomsticks here! What is magic?

Charlotte, hearing about brooms, explained:

– There is a portal network. You need to learn how to open portals – everyone can do it, even children. It's simple.

– Oh yes, I forgot to say – I'm not a magician. Although no. She spoke.

– Now – a magician. – Charlotte didn't seem to hear my irony. Her chilling, otherworldly emotionlessness was beginning to frighten me. It would be better if she screamed and became hysterical, like at the very beginning! – You got the body of a sorceress. It remembers, it needs you to remember too.

“Translating body memory into conscious knowledge is a wow task! How?!”

Charlotte's ghostly body suddenly enveloped me, embraced me in a sticky, chilling way. The hand went up on its own, as if pulling back a curtain. Behind the “curtain” a piece of the living room was revealed: a bright green armchair, a glass table, on the table there was a teapot, a cup, an open packet of cookies and an open magazine turned upside down. On the cover, a doll-like blonde in a short flared fuchsia dress smiled invitingly. “The trends of the season are brightness!” – shouted large letters over the blonde.

I stepped there – somehow I stepped in a special way, fully aware that this “step” would eat up at least half an hour of walking, at least half a day on the plane. The “curtain” gently fell behind him, cutting off the path. Charlotte hung next to me, and



I was finally able to breathe in normal air, and not the cold of the grave.

– Very simple. Do you remember?

I wanted to say that I didn't even understand anything, but...

Well, yes, I didn't understand. But I can repeat it, I felt it.

– ? how to determine where to go? Only to familiar places?

– I will take you everywhere. Until you get the hang of it. And for public portals, it is not necessary to know what the exit looks like. If you want some tea, the kitchen is to the left. “Did it seem, or did she actually sigh?” – I hope you like cupcakes. This body loves them.

Cupcakes, tea and a story. Detailed, but not too clear. To begin with, this is actually Earth, really England, but magic is the order of the day here. Instead of the metro, buses and trains – a public portal network. Chemistry is the one that I now, in theory, must know at least at the bachelor's level, and not a long-forgotten school course! – is divided not only into organic and inorganic, but also into magical and not. Healers... this is generally a special conversation, because they master magic at a very high level. ? They are trained in this very academy with a teeth-breaking abbreviation instead of a name.

“Panacea Armoran Academy of Applied Healing and Chemical Biological Research,” Charlotte said. And she added: “Everyone just says “Panacea Academy.” And Dr. Norwood's department is of potions and elixirs. Magical pharmacology – is this name easier for you to understand?

– It’s much simpler...

– Don’t be afraid, you won’t have to do anything complicated. Especially with Dr. Dougal – “I myself, don’t touch, don’t touch!” The assistant is doing the paperwork – can you really understand the papers? Registers mail, receives and sends. The professor has an extensive correspondence, he is a world-class luminary,” she explained with unexpected pride, as if she had lit this luminary herself. – We’ll have to control the class schedule. Make sure there are no overlaps. It happens that he is called to a conference or an urgent consultation. Then everything needs to be adjusted and replacements arranged. And if he has an important phase of the experiment, he gives an unscheduled control. Then you’ll just sit in the audience and make sure they don’t cheat. He even makes his own coffee.

– In general, something like a secretary. Okay, I can handle it. Maybe. You know, friend, it seems to me that you are still in love with him. At least a little.

– Do you think that a rather frivolous and selfish girl can fall in love with a man who, instead of “hello,” says “you look disgusting.” If you collect your hair, you will ruin the potion,” and instead of “goodbye” – “And finally disappear from my sight”?

– Do you think that I will fall in love with him? And in just a week.

– Are you frivolous and selfish? – Charlotte asked, but did not expect an answer, as if she already knew him. Although, to be honest, I wouldn’t be able to answer. We are all selfish

and frivolous... we happen. And we are also different. And with different people – different. Look, the same Mrs. Wilburn thinks I'm sweet and sympathetic, and our production editor thinks I'm a notorious bitch. How can I know what I will be like next to the unknown Dr. Norwood?

A heart-rending ringing sound came from somewhere above.

“Alarm clock,” Charlotte’s ghostly face rippled: she was probably wincing like that. Still, if there is something constant in all worlds, it is alarm clocks and a general dislike for them... – There is a bedroom. In an hour you should be at the department.

– Did we talk all night? – I was amazed.

– Almost. ? now you have to get yourself in order, change clothes, comb your hair...

– Collect your hair so as not to spoil the potions, yes, I understand. By the way, thanks for reminding me – where is your mirror? I want to finally see who I have turned into.

“Well, it could be worse,” I thought, looking at the huge wall-length mirror in the bathroom. – “Okay, much worse.” Nature did not deprive Charlotte. Perhaps this body would be called luxurious by those who are not delighted with modern fashion trends. Thin waist, steep hips, defiantly high voluminous breasts. It was heavy, I felt it very well already, having walked with her for only a few hours. “Hello, Barbie,” I thought gloomily. ?except maybe not blonde. A shiny mop of chestnut curled in unruly curls. How long does it take to style such hair? Horror. “In an hour at the department”?! This is clearly not enough to wash, dry

and give at least some kind of sane appearance.

– I do not like? – Charlotte asked, floating into the bathroom. – I liked that one.

– Maybe I should get a haircut? – I thoughtfully tugged at the wavy strand. – I don't see a hairdryer or electricity here at all. By the way, where does the light come from? – the chandelier in the living room and the ceiling lamp in the bathroom were burning quite as usual, brightly. Not as deathly as street lights. But – no sockets, no switches.

– Magic. Let me show.

Again, the almost familiar feeling of a slimy cold jellyfish swallowing you – and your hands shot up, making passes. R-time – a hot wave passed over my head, my hair shone and lay hair-to-hair. Two – the unruly hair is arranged in a high, strict hairstyle. Tr-ri – the traces of a sleepless night and a difficult conversation disappeared from the face, the cheeks softly flushed, the eyes sparkled fervently. Gorgeous!

“It's impossible to fall in love with such an assistant – your Dougal is definitely a cracker,” I voiced the logical conclusion.

Charlotte waved my hand again, turning off the light in the bathroom.

– And now – to the kitchen. I'll teach you how to quickly prepare breakfast and make coffee.

To the pulpit Charlotte me – or us? – delivered five minutes before the start of the working day. Dougal was already here, and I stared with greedy curiosity at my intended betrothed.

He, however, was almost entirely hiding behind an unfolded newspaper – it seemed German. All she could see was the burning black top of her head and her long, ringless fingers. Moreover, Charlotte immediately retorted:

– Don't look so closely. Say hello and run to sort out the mail. Come on, "good morning, Professor Norwood"!

“Good morning, Professor Norwood,” I repeated like a parrot and ran to the table on which was piled an uneven stack of newspapers, letters and parcels. If this is mail in one day, how does he still manage to teach?!

“Suspicious punctuality,” this doctor-professor muttered under his breath. He didn't even raise his head from the newspaper. – I'm waiting for a package from the Munich Academy, look.

“Look,” Charlotte ordered. -Can you identify the German?

– I...

– Answer mentally.

“I know a little German.”

– Fine. Search.

The voluminous package was found in the very middle of the stack – judging by the weight and format, two or three rather thick magazines. Under Charlotte's guidance, she also selected several letters from regular correspondents. I put it on the professor's desk. She paused slightly – now, although from an unfortunate angle, it was possible to see her face.

Well, nothing special. A man is like a man. About thirty

years old, probably. Too pale to be a hot brunette – maybe he doesn't stick his nose out at all? Clean shaven, neat – and I already imagined a classic “mad genius”, always disheveled and unkempt. He suddenly looked up from the newspaper and looked up at me. Dark, even scary.

– If you need something, tell me quickly. Don't loom.

Zar-r-raza!

– I wanted to remind you that the first couple... – “Charlotte! Who is our first couple? Fast!” “Healers, first course,” she prompted. I picked up: “Healers, first year.” If you have something important...

– When I fall into insanity, you will be the first to know about it. In the meantime, please get down to business.

"Hopelessly!" – I said with feeling, almost shying away from his table. Contrary to my expectations, Charlotte remained silent.

Until the end of the working day – and this, by the way, is four couples, plus a long lunch break, and several hours of consultations after! – I heard exactly three more phrases from him. “Send this by express mail.” “No, and stop distracting me already!” – in response to the offered coffee. And “Don't forget to close the door,” to my “Goodbye, Professor Norwood.”

“What was that all about? – I asked Charlotte, going out into the street and exposing my face to the cold evening wind. – Something like “Get out of my sight”? Or a hint that without direct instructions I'm not even able to close the door?”

– He doesn't like open doors. And that Charlotte didn't

like closed ones. Well... – she seemed to think, – sometimes it's better to have at least some kind of reaction than total indifference. That's what it seemed to me.

“I'm sorry, friend. About indifference. Familiar.” “I tried to let my hair down, but the hairstyle, held together by magic, did not budge.

“Don't think,” prompted Charlotte, “Just believe that it will work out.”

I wanted to say that it's not so easy to believe if you never... but while I was looking for words, suddenly it really happened. As if by itself.

The wind caught the freed strands and tangled them. Fine! How tired your head is from pulled hair! And why was it necessary to collect them in a bundle if throughout the whole day I didn't even see a single potion that I could hypothetically ruin?

– You'll see again. You have not yet been to his personal academic laboratory, nor to the general student laboratory.

I've never been anywhere before! The first day of seven passed – it was like falling into an abyss. Into the abyss. I sat with my nose in the mail, again running through the mail and the schedule. At lunch, when the professor had gone somewhere, I secretly looked at the magazine he had left on the table. The same one from Munich. A bunch of chemical formulas, half a page each. I very hesitantly identified the simplest of them as “some kind of horror from organic chemistry,” but mostly there was “some kind of basically unknowable horror.”

“A couple of dozen people in the world will fully understand this,” said Charlotte. – Not more. Higher magic applied to elixirs.

A day to nowhere. A day in which there was not even time to think about the almost hopeless quest “mutual love in a week.” And it’s good that it wasn’t found. Because now I understand very clearly that I want to live. I want it unbearably. Much stronger than I thought before. After all, what really matters is not that the only thing waiting at home is the neighbor’s cat! But this wind, which Charlotte probably no longer feels. Distant Sydney, which seems to remain an unfulfilled dream. A million everyday unnoticed little things that turn out to be significant when you lose them. A life where you can dream about the future, plan or just wait, knowing for sure that you have it. A present, long and preferably happy future, not a measly six days and one evening!

And a new world, full of wonders – I’ve only, one might say, looked through a crack, I haven’t seen anything yet, but I already want to get comfortable here and figure it out! Magic. Real magic, not faked by scammers. One step – and you are even in another city, even on the other side of the world! No crowding in the subway, no fear of plane crashes. A couple of waves of your hand – and order is in your head and in your house. What then can be created with really serious effort?!

The snatches of conversations that were snatched out of my ear – at lunch, in the dining room, and between couples while I was running around changing the schedule – turned out to be almost completely incomprehensible to me. They discussed the



features of some phases in some rituals, and whether they change when Latin is replaced by Greek or Sanskrit. They complained about the failure of the harvest of some creeping rotten plants – honestly, I would not be upset about the failure of something with such an unappetizing name! They complained about Professor Krushanski, who failed almost the entire group in the test – this misfortune would have been quite understandable if not for the topic of the test: “The influence of seismic activity of magical territories on the development of the population of ordinary sensoria.” What is this sensory? Does it have anything to do with sensors or just sounds similar? Charlotte, overhearing my bewilderment, explained mysteriously:

– Dr. Krushanski is a leading expert on population dynamics, but his theory of seismic stability control is considered by many to be unproven.

“You have a medical academy? – I was surprised. “What does population and especially seismic activity have to do with it?”

“Sensory,” Charlotte explained. – A rare and valuable ingredient, found only in seismically unstable areas. Foretells earthquakes, eruptions and other cataclysms by explosive reproduction. That is, Krushanski thinks so. He invites all those who disagree to settle somewhere on the slope of Krakatoa or Mauna Loa and check it out personally.

In short, there would be enough new interesting topics in this world for me to last for years and years. ? here...

Stop. I don't even know for sure...

“Charlotte, listen! Did you say a week?

– Yes. Do you have memory problems?

“Happy calendar! – I snapped. – How is this week counted? Since this morning? Since the beginning of the day? How much time do I have, exactly?”

Charlotte didn't answer right away. She hung there, swaying in the wind, like a translucent wet sheet, and was silent. I waited, getting more and more nervous. Did she just now think about it and decide to count? Or doesn't she know?

Finally she answered:

“Everything went wrong from the second phase of the ritual.” The second phase necessarily begins exactly at midnight. But I remembered it well. This means from midnight or a little later, when this body was left without a soul.

Wonderful. Minus the night. Although... to be honest, what could happen at night? Whether Dr. Norwood was some kind of cheerful partygoer, or a Casanova who doesn't miss a single skirt, much less such outstanding tits, or at least a lover of night walks arm in arm with his assistant, it's a different matter. But you can hardly count on communication with this cracker outside of working hours.

Hopelessly. Hopelessly.

“Charlotte,” I asked, quickly wiping away a treacherous tear, “let's go home.”

“Go, you know how,” she responded. I pulled back the invisible curtain and stepped...

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Unlike quick breakfasts, Charlotte didn't bother with dinners. No stock of food in the magical analogue of the refrigerator, not even some yesterday's soup.

"The person I was before preferred to buy ready-made," Charlotte explained. – Easier. She had enough money, but she didn't like to tinker in the kitchen.

– I don't like it either, although in this we are similar. So, explain what and how you are doing here.

I examined the contents of her – now my – purse back at lunch; there was a wallet, in it – unfamiliar coins and a thick pack of plastic cards. Two bank ones and a bunch of bonus ones. By the way, I received a free lunch for employees by presenting my key fob. More precisely, by applying it to the identification plate at the checkout. Comfortable. But they didn't serve dinner in the academic canteen.

"Order here," the ghost chose a card with a delicious picture of pizza. – You're hungry, and they have fast delivery. Just pick it up and think about the menu, a communication window will open.

What can I say – it's more convenient than the phone and even the Internet! I chose a large pizza with mushrooms and a salad, added fruit juice to my order, and at the last moment added beer. I don't like him too much, but it's a shame to end up in another world and not be able to compare? Moreover, there may be very little time for comparison.

Thoughts turned to the professor. While I very much doubted that I would be able not only to make him fall in love with me, but even to fall in love myself. He didn't evoke any disgust or rejection, but he didn't evoke any positive emotions either. Demanding, corrosive boss. He nitpicks over little things. He's not rude, but... honestly, it would be better to be rude! If I had been a little more impressionable, his chillingly polite remarks could have brought me to tears. Noticeably distances himself. This is reasonable behavior for a boss, but it makes my task even more impossible. As if it weren't already almost impossible!

Just one day – and even in my thoughts I call this cracker exclusively a professor! An amazing start to a romantic love story.

– Tell about him.

“You've already seen it,” it seems, this was an objection. Or surprise? In general, I understood that the ghost considers the information given out in the morning to be exhaustive and is not eager to repeat it.

–What kind of person is he? – I decided to be persistent – in the end, my life or death may well depend on the exact answer! – The world's luminary – understandable. Head of the department – I've seen enough today. But if you put the scientist, the boss and the teacher aside, what remains? It is not the doctor and the professor who should fall in love, but Dougal Norwood. And the doctor and professor did not inspire me either. Maybe the person will be more interesting.

Charlotte froze, perhaps even froze in place, as if plunged into deep thought. It looked, frankly, scary. Not only is it a ghost, but also a motionless ghost in the middle of a nice little kitchen, flooded with sunset light from the windows.

– Hey! – I couldn't stand it. – Are you still here?

“It's strange,” she finally woke up, floated across the kitchen and hovered by the window. – The man Dougal Norwood is not in Charlotte's memories. Doctor, luminary, boss, man, but all this is very general, schematic. Dislikes public speaking, students, almost everyone, with rare exceptions, open doors and tea. It seems that's it.

– Few. – Actually, practically nothing: I already understood about the doors, but inviting the professor to tea... well, it's already clear that it's a failed idea. – What does he like?

– Brew potions. But this is already clear,” Charlotte paused, as if she was listening to something or really carefully examining the living memory of who she was before. – Silence. Your own personal laboratory. Still a mother. Yes, Mrs. Norwood comes here often, I remember something like this... Lemon cinnamon pudding. The last time Charlotte ordered in advance was in London.

Hopeless, I thought for the hundredth time. Even if he is not a mama's boy, but just a man who loves his mother, it doesn't matter. Worst competition ever. Especially if the man is one of those “married to his work.”

– Sydney.

– No. I'll try to find out more. Need time. Can you cope here without me?

– How can we cope? Dinner will be brought. I'll find a bedroom.

– Fine. – Charlotte disappeared again, like yesterday in the ritual room. And I suddenly thought that I didn't even know where her front door was, let alone open it. And she went looking. And in general – look around.

It is unlikely that Charlotte was particularly neat – I did not notice that special, ideally symmetrical order that is achieved only by boring pedantry. A winter coat was still hanging in the hallway, and closed shoes were next to sandals. But the cleanliness reigned in perfection – of course, if it can be achieved with a wave of the hand. Millions of housewives will envy them with black envy...

The front door opened with a light touch, although it was locked – I heard a quiet click of the lock. The door, by the way, was unusual, although in London you can sometimes see such in old houses. With a square viewing window covered with a bronze grille and a bronze door knocker, polished to a red shine, in the form of a coiled dragon. But I didn't find a bell, a very ordinary doorbell. What is it – guests are knocking here? And how, I wonder, can you hear from the second floor?

From the outside, the cottage looked like a fairy tale house. The red brick was barely visible through the green ivy and blooming climbing roses, white and deep scarlet. The small front

garden is full of flowers – tall mallows, bright multi-colored phlox, a Chinese lilac bush, asparagus lace and bluish hosta leaves, lush petunias and nasturtiums in flowerpots floating in the air without any noticeable support... Magic? For some reason I couldn't believe that Charlotte had created such beauty herself. Very thoughtful combinations of colors, the work of a garden designer is visible. And how to take care of all this? It seems that, in addition to watering, you need some kind of fertilizing? I'll have to ask. In a week, if...

The sun was falling behind the hilly horizon. The scarlet sunset evoked thoughts that were very far from optimistic. "So where is the vaunted fast delivery?" I returned to the house in irritation.

The order was waiting on the table in the living room. Pizza, fruit drink, beer. Advertising booklet. What, no couriers? What about payment? Okay, questions can be put off until Charlotte returns. I'll go find a glass. I'll be drinking booze down my throat in a week. Not earlier.

The beer turned out to be unusual, with an islandy-bitter aftertaste. But it pleasantly coated the tongue, was cold and softly hit the head – what else do you need, one wonders, in another world, in someone else's house and with a piece of hot pizza in your hand. But it ended unexpectedly quickly, so I went to explore the second floor only with pizza – it was definitely tastier than anything I had tried before, "impossible to put down," as they say in the advertisement. And why didn't I order two at once? Although who's stopping you from repeating it tomorrow?

On the second floor, in addition to Charlotte's bedroom and the guest room, there was a rather strange room, which, apparently, was intended as an office with a library. But Charlotte's entire library consisted of a stack of glossy magazines and several romance novels in paperback, travel format – books that you wouldn't mind forgetting on the train. As for the office, it seems that she fulfilled and exceeded the daily work quota during the day, and preferred to relax at home. But how to relax... I looked in confusion at a piece of floor about two by two yards, covered with something like rubber stitched with metal. For some reason there was no desire to attack there. What could it be? Whatever! From a treadmill to a magical version of some hellish computer shooter. ? black matte wall opposite? Very similar to the screen of a turned off TV or laptop! Not counting the size – if this is really a screen, then it will be of the “mega-cool home theater” class.

– To enable or not to enable? – the last piece of pizza went into my stomach with pleasant satiety, and I waved my hand: – ?, tomorrow!

The screen lit up.

“Tomorrow we will have a pleasant sunny day,” the announcer said. Her trouser suit, azure with a turquoise tint, would do justice to the trends of the season, and her smile would serve as an excellent advertisement for some advanced magical dentistry. – No precipitation, northwest wind, from weak to moderate. Air temperature at night...



“To hell with the weather,” I said gloomily. After all, I wasn’t going to turn it on at all! Although now at least it is clear that this is a TV, and not some...

– event poster? – asked the doll-announcer.

– Turn off. I have to go to work.

I got there and I’m arguing with the TV! What’s next? Will the washing machine enslave me, or what replaces them here? By the way, you should check your wardrobe. It looks like a closet in the bedroom.

The TV turned off as soon as I stepped beyond the threshold of the room. Apparently, before this happy moment, he hoped that I would change my mind...

The closet was bursting with a wide variety of clothes. But, in the best tradition of jokes, my first reaction was a classic feminine one:

– There’s nothing to wear!

Charlotte clearly spared no expense on the latest fashionable items. Although I had a hard time imagining how they would fit with the chilly autumn weather: slush, rain and fog. Short flared skirts and open sundresses, tight T-shirts and tops. A dozen cocktail and evening dresses – too open, provocatively revealing. Everything is bright, evoking thoughts of the beach, dance parties and even dates. Yes, probably this fuchsia color should suit me – I held the dress to me and nodded approvingly, looking in the mirror. Or that cornflower blue one... But, my God, not for work!

Trousers were conditionally suitable for work – conditionally, because I would have preferred black or neutral beige, rather than the red-brown ones I was wearing today, or the bright blue, olive and crimson ones hanging in the closet. Raspberry pants! Nightmare!

And not a single one, NOT ONE! Classic blouse. Not white or anything like that.

Yes, if you show up at the department in this crimson horror and sticking beacon... It's surprising that the professor is only hiding behind a newspaper, in his place I would probably crawl under the table.

Decidedly going downstairs to the bonus cards scattered all over the table, I found a business card of either an atelier or a boutique – I didn't even bother to look into it. She squeezed, desperately thinking about a strict work outfit – black trousers of a classic cut, a white blouse – fitted, tailored to the figure, but closed and modest.

It jerked as if someone had roughly pulled my hand. And I ended up... apparently still in the studio. A rack with fabric samples, a display case with buttons, lace, fasteners...

And either the hostess or the master, plump, at first glance, attractive to me, who smiled affably at me and asked with frank curiosity:

– Miss Blair? What's wrong?! So suddenly – and so strikingly different from your usual orders!

“I want to impress a man with certain tastes,” I answered

honestly. It is always better to hide the big truth, putting forward a small and not the most important part of it...

– Oh-oh-oh... I understand! Now we'll dress you up, Miss Blair, no doubt, the chosen one will be impressed and smitten.

“Oh yes, I'm smitten,” I thought gloomily. Meanwhile, I found myself standing on the same platform from which I almost shied away from at home – and opposite, another Charlotte Blair wove out of thin air. Like in a mirror, but three-dimensional. And already on her materialized the same blouse I had presented and black formal trousers – a little narrower than I wanted, but they emphasized her figure so well that I could not resist and nodded.

“We need to change the top,” the master shook her head (still a master? And what a shame, I have no idea how to address her, but Charlotte probably knows!). – Like this, look.

The darts at the waist lengthened, and the blouse fit exactly to the figure, almost the same shape as all of Charlotte's beacons. The turn-down collar was replaced by a stand-up collar, the top buttons were not a cutout, but... as if in a hurry, they simply weren't fastened all the way. The strict style has become defiantly sexy. No, it's not suitable for work... But I couldn't refuse.

– Great, but a strict classical one is also needed.

“Strict classical ones can be very different,” the master smiled. – Let's see what suits you best.

The next hour – no less! – we went through the styles. In the end, my eyes were filled with ruffles, inserts, embroideries, brooches... But the main thing is that I really couldn't choose!

Almost everything looked simply wonderful. Even immediately excluding models with lots of lace and puffy collars, I was literally torn. Until she mentally waved her hand: Charlotte's account did not allow for such excesses, she said that day: "Manage your money boldly, Charlotte never lived only on her salary. My father has his own business, he paid for all major expenses. Although the salary at the Panacea Academy is significant, even for an assistant."

The bell above the front door rang melodiously, and she stepped inside... I didn't dare call her a middle-aged woman, more like a fairy. Light, thin, in an airy dark gray dress, so elegant and at the same time surprisingly simple that you can't help but fall in love. Light wavy strands spilled out of a lush bun and framed a thin, beautiful face. "And no makeup," I thought enchanted, "but she looks amazing. Everyone would do that. Magic? How old is she really? A little over forty?"

– I'm sorry, Grisella, I saw that you were still open. Good evening. Shall I interfere? – the fairy woman looked at me with eyes as amazing as all of her – clear, bright, as if sunny, and suddenly smiled softly. – Miss Blair. What an unexpected meeting.

– Miss Norwood! – the master exclaimed in amazement, turning around. – Sabella, dear, how long have you been gone! Come on in, don't stand on the threshold. Cup of coffee? Tea? It's always open for you, you know.

Norwood?! Really... oh my God, the dry-haired professor has

such a mother?! Or is it my sister?

“Good evening,” I answered as neutrally as possible, so as not to betray my ignorance. It sounded warm – it was impossible not to smile in response to the smile of this amazing woman, who was endearing at first glance. “I’ve already chosen everything, so...

And she stammered in confusion. Politeness required assuring that “no, you won’t interfere in any way, and in general it’s time for me to go,” but to leave when the opportunity to find out something about the professor almost falls from the sky?! Even if the journalist’s habits didn’t resist, I’m not such a fool! But also to impose on communication, not knowing everything that Charlotte probably knows...

“Miss Blair, if you want to pick it up today, you’ll have to wait.” About fifteen minutes, no more, – the master very successfully came to the rescue. – Sabella, you...

– Don't worry, I'm in no hurry. And yes, I guess I'll have some tea, as usual. Thank you, Grisella. Why don't you join me, Miss Blair? – She pointed to one of the round wicker tables on the opposite wall. Probably just for those... waiting ones.

– With pleasure!

Tea appeared in the same magical way as pizza. A pot-bellied teapot, two cups on saucers, a sugar bowl, a jug of milk... and lemon pudding with cinnamon, which finally removed the question of who was in front of me. Okay, almost definitively – the possibility of coincidences can never be discounted.

The tea smelled like mint and went wonderfully with the

pudding – and the pudding was just as incredibly delicious as the pizza. Probably, in this world they cook exclusively with magic, and that’s why the magical result is obtained.

– They don’t serve delicious puddings at Panacea Academy? – Miss Norwood smiled, picking up another piece with a spoon.

“Not that much,” I almost blurted out the “I didn’t try it” that would have burned to the very core – she was amazingly conducive to frankness. She was struck with a sudden panic – how closely had the real Charlotte communicated with her? “Yes, Mrs. Norwood is often here”... But where – here? Judging by the manner of work of Professor Norwood, he would not tolerate visits to the department even from his beloved mother. Maybe in the same village where Charlotte lives? They could have crossed paths there by chance.

I don’t even know how “small” the world is of those involved in one way or another with the Panacea Academy! Maybe the mother of the professor and world luminary knows everyone there, or maybe just one or two who work next to her son or are friends with him. If he even has friends at the Academy, Charlotte didn’t mention them.

Well, one way or another, now I need to establish contact. Despite the fact that there are no topics for conversation, no clues or common interests. Perhaps Dougal, but you can’t say straight out: “I need to find out about your son! As much and as detailed as possible!”

“Besides, at the Academy, thoughts are occupied with

everything but the taste of pudding,” I said with a smile. You can’t head-on – approach from afar, in tricky zigzags, or circle like a hungry shark, approaching the target. As best you can. Pick up the crumbs until a large and truly valuable piece falls. “Sometimes it seems like you don’t even notice what you had for lunch.” Enough more exciting problems.

Miss Norwood looked at me with surprise and interest.

– Is it true? Wow, I...” she suddenly seemed to change her mind about finishing what she was going to say, took a sip of tea and silently put the cup down. – If work makes you forget about puddings, but does not cause irritation, then this is the right choice and great happiness, isn’t it?

“It’s not that I never doubted my choice,” it seemed right to “confess,” because if I, we succeed, I’ll probably want to return to journalism, and not sit over papers at the department. “But I like to know that I’m doing the right thing, and not some nonsense.” Besides, the Academy is really interesting! It’s just a pity that I myself didn’t...” I paused and hastily took a sip of tea. Let him think for me. She didn’t have a hand in many interesting things, she wasn’t capable of anything more than being an assistant—anything. Getting someone to finish your sentence is a great way to get to know them better. Well... or not him – but what he thinks about you. ? for me now – I still can’t say too much, if suddenly she knows Charlotte better than I think.

– Not an academician? – asked Miss Norwood, and seemed to be joking, but her voice was rather thoughtful. “I must admit, I

didn't expect to hear something like this from you," she suddenly added.

I always thought that "my heart skipped a beat" was just a beautiful, but extremely stupid phrase. It turns out that it happens... I have established, as they say, contact! You have to know how to pierce yourself in five minutes.

– ? what did you expect to hear? – I pretended to take a sip of tea. Gain a couple of seconds, come to your senses. Decide what to do next. Admit? Turn it into a joke? Run away?

– I work in the most prestigious institution in Britain. We light up the stars. And I'm proud to be involved in this. This is a great honor. And Dr. Norwood is a wonderful boss. Oh, sorry, I have to run, otherwise he will be extremely unhappy. And he shouldn't be dissatisfied, because he is a world-class luminary! And together we light the stars..." Miss Norwood grinned. – Something like that. What a mistake it is to judge people by their first impression. I'm really sorry. And I've never noticed such a habit before.

You managed to get into the carcass of a prestige-obsessed fool! No, come what may, but...

– It looks like her. And it's very sad. And you obviously know how to make the right impression. You know, Miss Norwood, I'm not at all sorry that I'm not an academic and I don't light up the stars. But it's a pity that I'm Charlotte Blair. Because she did a colossal stupidity, and now it's unknown how to get out of it.

The already large blue eyes widened, but, to give credit where



credit is due, this amazing woman did not drop the cup or exclaim something like “Oh my God!” and didn’t even conduct an interrogation on the spot.

“I think, Miss Blair, we need to talk.” But a fashion salon is not suitable for such conversations.

– But you wanted something here...

“He’ll wait,” Miss Norwood stood up, and I jumped up after her.

I was ready to leave without waiting for my order – sometimes even eternal skeptics like me believe in signs of fate! But here is the master – or is it the mistress? – came out to us with a voluminous package of my new clothes. The old Charlotte probably never thanked her so warmly. Why else would there be such amazement?

– Sorry, Grisella, I’ll come by tomorrow morning. Suddenly I remembered an urgent matter. Memory... – Miss Norwood waved her hand, opening the portal, and added quietly, inviting her to enter first: – The only thought when you see this: split personality.

“But this is not it,” and I stepped onto the fluffy cream carpet in the small living room.

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I sunk into a soft chair, clutching a cup of tea, and didn’t know where to start. Miss Norwood was in no hurry. She sat opposite me, looking out from under her eyelashes, as if she was looking for ten differences between me and the real Charlotte.

There was no point in beating around the bush, but it was worth starting with the main thing.

– Charlotte died. I was possessed by her body, and she is now a ghost. He flies nearby and repeats how sorry he is. ? What's the point of being sorry? I messed something up in the ritual. “I paused, wondering if it would be possible to also bluntly reveal that I'm not the only one in head-over-heels problems. Still, as an adviser, I liked Miss Norwood much more than the ghost Charlotte. – In a love spell ritual. On her and Professor Norwood.

– To Dougal?! But, Bran the Blessed! For what? After all... nothing connected them.

– You said it yourself – there, in the salon. “He is a world-class luminary, and together we light the stars.” Becoming the wife of a luminary is much more prestigious than being a simple assistant. Which they notice only when they forget to close the doors behind themselves or show up to the laboratory with their hair down. No, she was not in love with the professor. But she really wanted his attention.

– Right. Too much ambition and empty bravado,” Miss Norwood stood up and grabbed herself by the shoulders, as if she was freezing or trying to control herself not only figuratively. “She knew that such dark magic requires sacrifice.” Always! We all know this!

– Dark magic?! – probably, to say that I was amazed would be a gross understatement. – Love spell?

– Not a simple love spell. Ritual. For ordinary girlish stupidity,

a potion is enough, it can be removed easily, but if Miss Blair performed a ritual... Oh yes, very dark and ancient magic.

“I would never have thought... Sorry,” I realized, “it was probably a stupid question, right?” But where I was drawn from, there is no magic at all. Only quackery and superstition. I don't understand this stuff at all.

Miss Norwood turned to me and looked very softly, with sympathy.

–Where did you get attracted to? And how did this happen? Ancient, forgotten forces walk only along the paths of spirits. They don't care about mortals until they call.

– I definitely didn't call! But... – the living, arrogant face of the “hereditary dark witch” appeared before my eyes: heavy eyelids, upturned chin, lips, inaudible whisper... – I am a journalist. I was doing a report... just about magic. About what our scammers pass off as magic. Apparently, since magic exists in principle, a real witch could be found among those scammers? She claimed that she was hereditary and, by the way, dark... I offered to prove it to her with at least something other than empty words, in response she promised to take me to the astral plane. And... that's it. I woke up here already. With a screaming hysterical ghost in front of your nose.

– Poor girl. She probably didn't even understand what happened. I didn't realize that this was the end. Is the ghost here with you now?

– No. I don't know when it will appear.

– But if your connection is not broken... When did this happen?

– This night. Charlotte said midnight or a little later. During the day I replaced her at the department. Because...” I froze, clasping my hands. Suddenly I realized that I had been on the verge of hysteria all evening, and now I came almost close to her.

– It’s not over, right? – Miss Norwood asked chokedly, as if through force. – Dark rituals are irreversible, and since Miss Blair’s body has absorbed someone else’s soul, that means... A love spell. How much time do you have?

– This is also known... known information?! – God, Charlotte turned out to be even more of an idiot than I thought! But it seems I won't have to explain the details. – She said a week. The first day has already passed. And I... I don't know what to do at all!

– Not so much famous as frightening. From scary fairy tales,” Miss Norwood walked around the room, then sank back into the chair. – Miss Blair forgot about the main condition – ancient forces always need a victim. She paid with herself, but the ritual was already broken. You shouldn't anger those you know nothing about. As far as I understand, she is now tied to you and will remain tied until the curse ends. Tell me, miss... It's not really Blair! What is your name?

– Sally... That is, actually Freya Sullivan. Sally – for loved ones, I don't really like to be called by the name of the goddess. I'd like you to call me that.

– It's a pity, it's a wonderful name with a beautiful history. You

can call me Sabella, it's easier. Tell me," she hesitated, sighed, and in an unconscious, seemingly habitual gesture, raised her hand to her eyes. – Surely I won't be mistaken in assuming that the curse is two-sided? And that you are connected not only with Miss Blair, but also with my son?

Still, mother...

"Yes," I almost whispered. – But he doesn't know. Nothing.

– He must find out. – It sounded with surprising composure for such news. "Not about the ritual," she added hastily. – And that Miss Blair is no longer quite Miss Blair. Otherwise you have no chance. No one. But if you behave like you did today in the Rizella Amtown salon, I think ignorance itself will not last long. Dougal is observant.

"There are two problems," I still drank the long-cooled tea. In one gulp, without feeling the taste. – He and I. Professor... Dougal," it took an internal effort to pronounce the name, "it seems to me that he is not at all one of those who can fall in love in a week!" And even to his own assistant, who until now had only been annoying. ? I... I just want to drop everything and run away!

– Do you still have a loved one in your reality? – Miss Norwood asked softly. No, Sabella.

"He left me," I put the cup down and leaned back in my chair. – And he didn't even leave for someone else. Just one fine morning he told me that I was unbearable and he got a job in Sydney. Away from me. God, there, at home, I even left a ticket

to Sydney. I didn't intend to chase him, but I really wanted to see, just see... the city for which I was exchanged. It became some kind of obsession. And now I'm here, and all my plans are in vain... and what are my plans now?

– Sometimes a miracle or tragedy needs to happen for us to look at things differently. “Sabella seemed to be talking about me, but it was as if she was talking about herself too.” – Do you still love him?

– Don't know. I would say no, but... It hurts to remember. It's annoying. It's a shame. Our psychologists say that such feelings cannot be caused by someone to whom you are indifferent.

– Wounded pride, disappointment and broken dreams also cannot be called indifference. But you can't call it love either. Well, at least for now we at least have hope. You don't look like a person who is in a hurry to give up his life.

“Tell me about Dougal,” I asked. Now the name came easier. “I asked Charlotte, but she doesn't know him at all.” Only the light, not the person. At the pulpit he... – I hesitated, searching for words: what mother would like it if they directly said “cracker” about her son? – Very closed. It's all about work. It seemed to me that he was incredibly irritated by any distractions. Even a simple question if he would like some coffee.

“Rather, he's annoyed by people who like to “light up the stars,” Miss Norwood smiled. – And Panacea Academy. Everything, from the roof to the dungeons. He is there not of his own free will, but because of me. But that's not what we're

talking about now. Let's go," she stood up and beckoned me to follow her. – It's difficult for me to judge him unbiasedly, you must understand, he is my son. So let's agree, I show, and you ask, whatever comes to mind.

"Unwillingly?" It happens that for a week they convince you that some topic may be interesting, but you dodge it by hook or by crook – and then suddenly you smell the smell of sensation in a short phrase that seems to be irrelevant, or even about nothing at all. This is exactly what has happened now. In the words of Sabella Norwood, and if you look at it, in the tone of her voice, the lowered eyelashes, the almost imperceptible shadow that came across her face, there was something much more hidden than she was ready to say out loud. Well, that's really not what we're talking about now. I'll try to find out later... if this is at all important in our situation.

In the meantime, we obviously came to the nursery. Funny wallpaper with a Teddy bear and Winnie the Pooh, a funny lamp in the form of a ghost floating under the ceiling – fortunately, not at all like Charlotte, but rather like Casper. Small table and bookshelf. I ran my fingers along the spines and tilted my head, reading the titles. Textbooks, a children's encyclopedia, colorfully published educational books for children – "The History of Alchemy", "From Amoeba to Pithecanthropus", something else that is little clear to me – about magic...

– Now Dougal rarely spends the night with me, and occupies another room. But he likes to sit here, thinking about the next

difficult problem. He says this nostalgic atmosphere inspires him.

– Book child? – I asked.

– Oh, what are you talking about! Since childhood, he believed that all the most useful and interesting things are stored in the head, and not on paper. Some kind of inexplicable hostility to letters. I hardly even read textbooks, I said why, if there is a teacher who has speaking skills? The compulsory program was too easy for him – he was bored, and since he was bored, that meant he was trying to find something more interesting to do. In just six months of elementary school, I seem to have mastered all the healing spells that can be used on children. And she could create a portal to the principal’s office or to the school infirmary without thinking for a second.

I smiled involuntarily.

– And what activities did he consider interesting?

“For example, find out what will happen if you apply an eternal growth spell with a speed component to the royal turnips, and cast an endless doubling spell on the humates in the compost, so that the poor growing organism has enough food. Or how fast the regeneration of mandrake roots will be when cemetery soil is added to the nutrient mixture. Turnips broke through the roof of the school greenhouse and covered the entire school stadium, along with the players and spectator stands, with leaves, and three magicians from the environmental control department had to tear it out of the ground at once. Fortunately, the “poor growing organism” did not have time to produce seeds. Although



ecologists convinced me that the seeds would have retained the original characteristics of the plant, but... they didn't know my son!

I laughed out loud. I would never have believed that the stern Dr. Norwood, with his “pick up your hair”, “close the doors” and “don't loom” could destroy the school greenhouse with an experiment (you can immediately see the future genius!) and in general, it seems, was a headache for the teachers and the director. “Poor growing organism”, that's what you should call a banal root vegetable! Although... it's far from banal!

– And the mandrake? I hope she didn't kill anyone?

– The experiment ended before it began. Dougal was caught in the cemetery. According to the caretaker, the boy was trying to raise a zombie. He himself claimed that this was not a ritual circle, but just a platform for disinfecting the land, because he did not want to introduce pests into the greenhouse! But Dougal was expelled in disgrace and forbidden to poke his nose into the cemetery territory. One way or another, he had no luck with the cemetery land.

Sabella stopped short, and I unexpectedly took her hand.

– Let's hope that the ban is still in force and he won't be unlucky again.

– Yes. Hope! – She, as if waking up, shook her head and gently squeezed my fingers. – I can show you photographs. Want to?

– Certainly! I like to look at photographs – by the way, the honest truth, especially if the pictures were taken unexpectedly,

and not in a studio for retouching. – They can be very... honest, perhaps.

There were no photo albums in this world. We came into a small room, where opposite the already familiar screen wall and the “rubber” platform in front of it stood a cozy sofa and a small table. Probably to drink tea in front of the TV without descending into arguments with the announcer. A short smooth gesture and the screen lit up.

“Dougal,” Sabella said briefly. And she asked when a scattering of tiny pictures appeared on the screen. – Is it very difficult for you, Sally? In our world? If not for this monstrous ritual, would you have become interested or at least gotten used to it? After all, for a person who has never mastered magic, everything here probably looks very strange,” she nodded at the screen. – Portals, spells, tea and puddings out of nowhere?

“It’s hard to find yourself... out of your mind,” I joked sadly. – Lose everything you’re used to. Work... my favorite job, yes. It’s probably really for the best that the person you love suddenly wasn’t there. ? here – here it’s interesting.

– ? your parents? – Sabella asked carefully, as if she was afraid to touch on a sore subject.

– Seven years ago. Car accident.

“I’m very sorry,” it sounded much more sincere than all the “sorry” for the ghost of Charlotte. “My father died when I was nine, but I still remember him, young, cheerful, as if he was always there. Well,” she added after a pause. – If we want you

to work tomorrow and not fall asleep in piles of correspondence, then we need to hurry up. Of course, I can give you an elixir of vigor, but it has side effects that Dougal will not be able to ignore.

She waved her hand again, and instead of small pictures, one large one appeared on the screen. It's not even a TV. This is some kind of multifunctional TV-computer! Unless you have to click the mouse.

– Here you go, Sir Bradlington, the one who has the skills of oral speech. Teacher of natural history and natural magic. Well, his mantle belongs to Dougal. They got along great.

A thin gentleman in a cap, with a brushed mustache and a square chin, sported a striped suit and a bamboo cane. He stood, apparently, at the entrance to the school, and behind him a flock of kids about five or six years old was stomping around; one of the boys actually dressed up in a black robe that evoked memories of Oxford graduates. Well, as soon as I dressed up, I drowned in it – that would be more accurate! The robe fell in beautiful folds, spread along the wide steps like a royal train, and a curly, uncut crown stuck out from above and dark eyes sparkled provocatively.

– And that's later. High school. Dougal with Rosa Aleus. Next to him is his friend, Chester Fully. Now he is one of the leading healers in Britain.

Rosa Leus was not a girl at all, as I thought for a moment, but... probably something like that same royal turnip. I mean, a victim, that is, a product of another experiment. An

unidentifiable (by me, at least) plant that looks like... nothing like anything! A little from rose hips, a little from cabbage, something almost imperceptible from an orchid...

– This Rose was their project. You see – twelve rhizomes. And usually – seven, in rare cases – any odd number up to eleven. Nobody believed that they would succeed.

– Lord, what is this?! Is it... moving?! Or it seemed to me? – I didn't see any rhizomes at all, except that they were the same moving tentacles, one of which was gently stroked by the round-cheeked, freckled Chester Fully. Dougal did not show any tenderness towards Rose, but she affectionately wrapped three tentacles around his wrist at once. And she even, it seems, tried to press a juicy curly leaf to her cheek.

– Yes, this is straight up... some kind of love triangle! – I exclaimed.

Sabella laughed.

– You're almost right. Rosa lived with us for another ten years, can you imagine? This is an amazing plant, difficult to care for, very rare and, one might say, intelligent. True, Dougal was never particularly interested in botany. He always liked chemistry better. ? Chester adored Rose, he read sonnets to her when he came to visit. Shakespeare. “What does the name mean? “oza smells like a rose”... Roses Aleus are partial to poetry and music.

I probably looked completely stunned. Intelligent plants, partial to sonnets! And Shakespeare too! Did our William Shakespeare really travel around the world? Or is this world

almost a reflection of ours?

Or maybe, on the contrary, the reflection is ours?

“You are tired,” Sabella said softly. – Maybe we can see the rest tomorrow?

“Let’s do it tomorrow,” I agreed with relief. – That is, thank you, Sabella, I would be happy to. I just seem to have an overabundance of information – my head is swelling.

– Open the portal to the living room whenever you want. Miss Blair showed you how, didn't she?

– She showed me, but... Do you have any means of communication? Should I warn you?

– About the visit? No, of course, why? I'll hear when you come.

“I guess you just have to get used to all this.” Okay, I'll come by after work. Thanks for the invitation. And... for your understanding,” she added quietly.

“I'll try to contact a ritualist I know, but I'm afraid we won't be able to fix anything.” Ancient rituals, unfortunately, cannot be neutralized. How she could do such a thing is beyond my comprehension. – Sabella sighed heavily. – Don't despair, Sally. Dougal is not a bad person at all. Maybe too harsh and withdrawn, but not bad. Just please don't wear anything provocative or too bright. He can't stand this at work.

– I understand him very well! – I answered with feeling. – These terrible crimson trousers! Why else would I rush out at night looking to order normal clothes?

I was so tired that I was afraid not to get home – that is, to Charlotte's cottage, I must already call it home. But it turned out that my head, overloaded to the point of complete inability to think, was not at all an obstacle to movement: my body automatically made the necessary gesture, and I stepped from Sabella's living room to Charlotte's naturally and easily, as if I had been visiting guests this way all my life.

I barely had enough strength to go up to the bedroom, take off my clothes and crawl under the covers. I felt a cool, soft pillow under my cheek and fell into sleep as if into an abyss.

## CHAPTER 2. Day two: Wednesday

“Day two,” I muttered, opening the portal with the usual wave of my hand. After pizza and coffee for breakfast, in a strict white blouse and black trousers, I felt... no, not at all as confident as I would like. But at least it's acceptable. I don't sleep on the go, no crimson pants – that's already happiness. And if you consider that “Rizella Amtown” was, it seems, the name of the master? – cast a self-smoothing spell on the clothes... Or what else can you call it when you take a blouse out of a bundle, and it unfolds right in your hands and becomes perfectly ironed, just put it on? It even became interesting, is this part of the services of an expensive high-status salon or is it in the order of things in this world? And there is no one to ask; Charlotte never returned.

I arrived at the Academy earlier than yesterday; the large clock above the professor's desk said ten minutes to ten. But he was already sitting with a newspaper, exactly like yesterday – he's spending the night here, or what?!

“Good morning, professor,” I indicated my presence.

– The disease progresses and threatens to develop into a chronic stage. “He looked at his watch and again buried his face in the newspaper, and I suddenly remembered how the Dougal boy sternly turned away from the sheet of Rose ... what's her name, who was stroking him? Aurus? Aleus? And she could barely contain an inappropriate smile. – During the third couple I

have a meeting in London. If you cannot agree on a replacement, please notify us immediately. There will be something to keep them busy.

– Fine. I will solve this issue right now.

Fortunately, yesterday I already had to deal with the schedule, and I knew where to run and who to contact. Otherwise, it is unknown how she would have gotten out of it. The deputy director for academic affairs, a stern, gray-haired lady, was accustomed to Charlotte's frequent visits and changed the schedule without question. This time I was even happy:

– How fortunate, Professor Levy just asked for extra hours for chimerologists.

That's what I reported when I returned. And she sat down to sort out the mail.

Today the professor had little correspondence; at first glance, nothing particularly urgent. I drove away the obsessive thought that even the urgent might soon become irrelevant for him. She followed the straight back in the black jacket, looked at the clock – second by second, the utmost degree of punctuality. It's probably easy to be punctual when traveling through portals – no traffic jams, random encounters or sudden changes to the usual route.

The letters, arranged in piles, went to the professor's desk, and I took up the newspapers. It's time to see what's happening in this world!

I don't know whether Professor Norwood watched the press



so carefully, or whether the same set was delivered to all departments, but on his table were all, apparently, more or less popular publications, from the Times and the Daily Telegraph to a funny newspaper with the title “Positive news” and several sheets of free advertisements. That's where I started. After all, how else can you quickly and thoroughly get acquainted with the new world while sitting at your workplace without the right to leave and the opportunity to chat with the same unfortunate people tired of work? And it was interesting what the local press is like – from a professional point of view.

She grabbed the entire pack and took it to the table, which at the department served as either a general worker or a lunch table – empty and clean, occupied only by a kettle, always full of boiling water, and a decanter with always ice-cold water. A convenient piece of magic... Cups and a supply of sugar, cream and biscuits were stored in a cabinet nearby, on the top shelf. The bottom two were filled with test tubes and bottles of reagents and brought to mind jokes about biologists who had dead mice stacked in the refrigerator next to their sandwiches, awaiting dissection. Thank you for not talking about the morgue and pathologists...

I made strong black coffee, poured crackers onto the saucer and unfolded the top leaf. Well what can I say. Beautiful, catchy, stylish. Bright colors, fairly thick paper, good layout. It's nice to hold it in your hands. As for the content... The very first ad made me choke.

“An experienced magician-ritualist provides advice on creating individual rituals.”

What is this, you ask? A hint from the universe? Sign of fate? But Sabella argued that no ritualists would help in my case, although she promised to still find someone for consultation. We need to show her. I could hardly resist not immediately hiding the piece of paper in my purse. It's better to ask permission, at least out of politeness.

I looked at my watch – forty minutes left until the end of the class. For now, I'll read what else the universe offers...

“Recharging amulets, updating enchantments, enchanting objects of any complexity from scratch on a turnkey basis.” Will it be useful or not? Ask Charlotte if any charms in the house need updating? The gaze darted across the sheet chaotically, drawn to the bright frames. The most ordinary “buy-sell-search” side by side with the same “buy-sell-search”, but completely incredible for the world I was familiar with. In fact, “I'll buy a piano inexpensively” or “I'll give away a crib for half the price”, and next...

“A young female pointy-eared manticore is looking for a boy to mate with. Red color, excellent pedigree, exhibition diplomas.” Brrr... I can just see an exalted lady in stiletto heels, embarrassed to say the words “male” and “bitch.” And it doesn't matter that it's not a collie or a Doberman, but a manticore – breeders in all worlds are probably the same. So, if you suddenly need a manticore on your farm, don't look here.

“A nanny with a quick response is urgently needed. The child is 3 years old and has learned to open portals.” Hmmm, what else is this? Sweeping across the ad in black ink. “For the child – a nanny, for the mother – brains!”

I rushed to the professor's desk. Somewhere here lay his work diary... No, I don't have the bad habit of rummaging through other people's notes, although sometimes it can be very useful. But look at the handwriting...

Yes. Exactly. Although I could be sure: behind the short but very poisonous note, the intonations of Doctor Norwood could be heard. Well, well... Some people have fun with crossword puzzles, but the professor seems to be resting his brains on free advertisements? I understand – you won't find anything there!

She put the diary back in its place, adjusted it so that it lay just as smoothly, strictly parallel to the edge of the table, and returned to the newspaper. Absentmindedly, she took a sip of the cooled coffee.

"Required! Part-time necromancer. Flexible schedule. Contact the caretaker of Kensington Cemetery." Brrr... Indeed, there's so much you won't find! It turns out there are necromancers here too? Although... Sabella said that they tried to accuse Dougal of trying to raise zombies. So this is basically real?! Oh, mummies. It seems that I somehow didn't fully understand where I was headed.

The note in the same black ink in Dr. Norwood's sharp handwriting: “there are no places for new dead, it's time to

disperse the old ones” did not make me laugh at all. Who knows, maybe it’s true!

But now I began to look through the sheet purposefully in search of announcements that attracted the professor’s attention and received his special valuable opinion. There were few such people, and not everywhere did the “especially valuable opinion” ooze poison.

"The hit of the season! Gloves, handbags and accessories made of ostrich, alligator, python, and dragon leather. Buyers of the full collection get a discount!" I thought about the cute juxtaposition of ostrich and dragon, in which Dr. Norwood apparently preferred the ostrich (“gloves! ostrich. 9.09”). Even strange. It seemed to me that the dragon was cooler, even in the form of skin. I wonder what will happen on September 9th? Besides, it's Saturday and our fifth day? Someone's birthday? Picking up a gift?

“I’m selling ruined Nasturtium. She’s healthy, but she’s spitting!” Oooh, and here’s another dose of poison: “Idiot. Buy fertilizer.” ?x yes, Dougal doesn't like botany, but he understands it. A screaming nasturtium that also spits... yeah. ? It would seem such a cute flower.

“I’m looking for an advertising manager! Please apply only to people with three higher specialized educations! It is mandatory to provide a portfolio, a standard package of documents, statements from all existing accounts, and recommendations from four well-known professionals in the world of advertising!”

However, requests! The funny thing is that these types of figures who demand “stop-size” recommendations and a portfolio worthy of a Nobel Prize are themselves, as a rule, absolute zeros. Here, apparently, too, judging by the malicious “I forgot the key to the safe in the Swiss bank” in the same black ink.

The same sharp and black-inked “Miss Blair” caught my eye. What? Was he not really... that is, noticing Charlotte after all? Maybe everything is not as hopeless as I thought?

I read the advertisement, then the professor’s sharp handwriting. “I’m looking for models to star in commercials. Textured girls are welcome, beautiful eyes are a must.” By the way, Charlotte’s eyes... now mine... are truly beautiful, unusual, with a magical green. “They write “eyes”, they think “chest”. Just right for Miss Blair. Good use of its texture and, of course, the eyes.”

Yes, yes, I did, I did. I imagined my reaction if I found out that our editor-in-chief considered me a brainless slob, good only for shaking my tits in advertising. I would quit right away! This is, after all, humiliating! But Charlotte... She couldn't be that idiotic?! Still, they took her here, to this “most prestigious” educational institution! although... what did she say about her rich father? Maybe it was not only or not so much for your own merits that you were lucky enough to be in this place? Or does the professor simply have excessive demands on his assistants? But what is there to exaggerate, if even I, knowing nothing about the world in general and the academy in particular, can cope quite

well? Or have I not encountered any difficult tasks yet?

I looked at the even lines of the advertisement and the slanting, sharp, flying handwriting of Dr. Norwood and could not understand what to do now. Because, to be honest, the first and so far only option that came to mind was stupid and hysterical – to grab the professor by the lapels of his immaculately pressed jacket, shake him and scream: “I’m not her!”

Okay, no need to shake. And don't yell. But something needs to be done?! Because now my-Charlotte’s chances of getting attention from him are close to absolute zero. And I can't even blame him for that.

Nightmare.

The coffee ran out, I looked in surprise into the empty cup – I didn’t notice how I drank it. And no fun.

Should I do more?

No. Useless. I’ll drink one more or ten more and nothing will change. Neither this stupid ad nor Dougal Norwood's opinion of Charlotte will go away. Hopelessness.

I put the leaf down, pressing it with an empty cup.

– Sydney. Five days, even a half. “Great,” she said out loud and didn’t recognize her own voice. Oh yes. He's not mine anyway.

“Dream during your lunch break,” came a voice from the door. – You are needed in the lower laboratory. Workshop on sublimation with alchemists. “The professor walked to his desk and suddenly turned around. It seems that this was the first time he looked at me like that – directly and for an infinitely long

time, and his dark eyebrow slowly crawled up. Can a person actually arch his eyebrows like that? So what's going on? Not a single muscle moved on the professor's face, but for some reason it seemed that this was an extreme degree of amazement for him. – Since when are you interested in newspapers? And why wasn't the main flower garden covered with snow for such an occasion? – he asked venomously. – Mrs. Trunberry suddenly went on vacation? So find another healer.

“I already found it,” I chuckled. – I'll take this number, there's just a suitable ad here. Do you mind? If you still need it, I'll return it tomorrow.

– Not needed. And hurry up. In fifteen minutes, even Mr. Obley should be standing at the cauldron with a set of ingredients.

This is where panic overtook me. “I'm coping”? Well, of course, I managed until I was required to do anything more complicated than sorting through mail and making changes to the schedule. I don't even know where this lower laboratory is! Not to mention Mr. Obley and his ingredients.

“Charlotte, your mother, where are you wandering? That is, you fly! WHAT SHOULD I DO?!”

The mental scream was a complete success – Charlotte appeared nearby.

– Calm down, nothing bad is happening. Come down, the lower laboratory is next to the ritual rooms, in one of which we met.

The road seemed to magically appear in my memory. A

corridor, a staircase, an open gallery with marble statues, again a staircase and again a corridor, narrow and cold. A group of boys and girls appeared in front of the desired door.

– Open the storage room, tell the students to take the sublimation kits. You'll follow up. Mr. Obley, whom the professor mentioned, is an alchemist who was almost expelled from his first year. Almost expelled thanks to Dr. Norwood. He cannot stand careless treatment of his subjects. Look, he's disheveled, in a lopsided robe.

They made way for me, but from behind someone called out in an oily voice:

– Good afternoon, Miss Blair. Nice weather today, isn't it?

“Mr. Applestone,” Charlotte explained. – Likes to flirt. Nothing serious, don't pay attention.

“If you, Mr. Applestone, want to go to the beach more than to the workshop, I don't dare detain you,” I attached the key fob to the lock and was the first to enter the opened door.

Yeah, it's gloomy. Tables with tripods, vividly reminiscent of a school chemistry classroom. Three sinks right next to the doors. At the far end of the classroom there is a teaching table and a glass cabinet full of test tubes, flasks and some other chemical glassware, the name of which I did not know. Nearby is a door with a sign “Storage No. 4”. And cold. The students were in no hurry to plunge into this atmosphere, and I turned around and slightly raised my voice:

– What are we standing there, who are we waiting for? Let's



go in. You have a workshop on sublimation. You know where to get everything you need.

She leaned against the teacher's table, watching the lazy swarming of the students. They didn't pay any attention to me: they joked, discussed yesterday's party and tomorrow's football match between alchemists and healers, wondering whether "this beast Norwood" would give a test or immediately start with the "lab". Only Applestone glanced sideways and, for some reason, winked as he walked towards "Vault No. 4." His flirtations are strange. I wonder to what extent Charlotte encouraged them?

The thought distracted me, and a sudden roar made me jump on the spot. I immediately saw the cause of the noise – a lanky disheveled man in a lopsided robe was sticking out in the middle of the laboratory, confusedly looking around the cauldron lying at his feet, fragments of something glass and scattered... what? fruit slices? It seems like I don't understand something!

The others reacted as if they saw this almost every day. Most didn't even turn in his direction.

– Obley! – exclaimed a red-haired girl not far from me. – I spilled water because of you!

– Be glad that today we don't have anything poisonous! "The guy at the next table sighed and, with a wave of his brush, swept into a pile shards of glass, fruit, torn paper packaging and a dead spider that had come from somewhere. The next swing sent it all into the trash can that stood at the entrance near the sinks.

"But there are no more ready-made sets there," muttered this

bungler. – Ellie, can I work together with you again?

– Steve, again! – moaned the girl who occupied the table next to him – obviously the same Ellie. – Maybe you can at least sit further away, huh? I'll soon turn gray from your antics.

“Let him take the sublimation apparatus on the rack on the left, on the bottom shelf,” Charlotte told me. – And the basket of apples is in the refrigerator. There, in the closet.

Feeling like a stupid actor relying on a prompter, I voiced all this to Mr. Obley. Adding from myself:

– I hope you are able to complete this additional flight without incident? Enough for today. “You have,” she looked at her watch, “three minutes.” The rest, in their places.

“We have three more minutes,” Applestone cooed velvety almost right next to my ear. He walked past, clutching his cauldron tightly to his chest, brushed his shoulder, apologized with exaggerated politeness and asked: “How about we go to the beach together, Miss Blair?”

“Not until you stop staggering every step of the way, Mr. Applestone.” Or have you decided that Mr. Obley is not enough for all of us to provide the thrill? Go to your seat and get ready for class.

The lover of beaches and, apparently, boobs, was amazed. It seems I have behaved differently than Charlotte should have behaved again.

– Mr. Applestone, would you be so kind as to sit down and benefit our esteemed academy – at least slightly exercise your

brain, and not what usually replaces it for you? – The insinuating voice with velvety intonations absolutely did not fit with the usual professorial “don’t loom.” But the effect on the students was no worse than a warning burst over their heads from something very rapid-fire and very deadly.

The glass slipped out of the red-haired girl's hands. Someone, it seems, decided to try laboratory apples on the tooth and was now coughing hysterically. Applestone turned pale and disappeared. The younger generation's nerves were clearly out of whack.

? Dougal Norwood walked quickly towards his desk, waving his hand as he went – and the objects on the students' tables moved in some order known to him.

– I see you had a successful summer. If I ever need to return my brain to its rudimentary state, I will know who to consult. Let me remind you once what a laboratory bench should look like before the experiment. You're not at the market, Miss Gray, and this is not an apple stand. A cauldron, Mr. Savage, is not a top hat, and unless you're going to put it on your head, it shouldn't be upside down. Miss Smith, your passion for books has no place here. Stash this impressive stack in your bag if you don't want to sublimate the paper.

Okay, infection! Watching the flow of polite malice when, for a change, it was not directed at you, turned out to be a fascinating experience. I was tempted to ask for a master class.

“Mr. Obley,” the professor stopped at the table and now

looked at the unfortunate bungler, who had just come out of the storage room, like a boa constrictor at a rabbit. ? he froze on the threshold, gently pressing a glass structure made of a flask, a glass and some tubes to his chest – obviously, the same sublimation apparatus. A large red apple miraculously held onto the narrow neck of the flask.

– Good afternoon, Professor Norwood.

– You give me hope that there is still constancy in this world. Get off the floor and, please, bring this surrealist still life to the table intact.

I moved to the far corner of the class, again at Charlotte's prompting. "We will have to monitor safety, there could be an explosion. From the professor's place it is difficult to control the entire laboratory, this edge is on you. I'll help you today, then you'll be on your own."

"Explosion?!" – I can't say that the prospect of explosions made me happy. Moreover, Mr. Obley, from whom one should expect trouble in the first place, was sitting much closer to me than to the professor. And very close was the place of Mr. Applestone, who was already quite openly looking sideways at my, Charlotte's, tits.

"So," the professor walked around the class, and the students froze, afraid, it seemed, even to breathe. He knows how to... hold an audience. In fear. Perhaps it's a shame for Charlotte to complain compared to this. – I believe that even in brains that were baked or dried out over the summer, the idea should have

appeared to familiarize yourself with the topic of the lesson in advance. If you didn't even have enough for this, I'm sorry, but I can't help you. We don't have much time to spend repeating theory. Are there anyone in the class who did not receive credit for aggregate states? – the question struck so sharply that even I flinched.

“Y-yes,” squeaked the same Miss Gray, whose table at the beginning of the lesson really resembled a counter with apples.

– Retake the experience as soon as you pass. Now you can be free or be a spectator. The rest go to work. For those whose memory is too short, I remind you of the sequence of actions,” he turned to his table, on which the same design as the students had managed to appear. He moved his brush slightly noticeably and smoothly. – We're cutting it. – The apple flew into the air, spread out into even, neat slices, which fell into a glass of water. Another gesture, just as smooth, polished, and beautiful: “Let's freeze.” We place it in the container,” obeying the wave of his hand, apple slices in shiny ice armor flew into the flask one after another. – We're closing. We are creating a class “B” shield; those who have forgotten how to do this can be free until retaken. Then there is a vacuum under the shield. Mr. Obley, do you understand well? First the shield. Then vacuum. Under the shield, not outside.

“He'll be fine,” Applestone muttered.

– Don't forget to remove water vapor. The speed of the process depends on the invested force, the end of the experiment is determined intuitively. I hope it won't be difficult for any of you

to notice in time that your apples have turned into dried fruits.

“It sounds simple,” I thought, “for magicians. One, and frozen, two, and a vacuum. You can also store instant coffee at home for future use.”

“Naturally,” Charlotte confirmed, “coffee is made using the same technology.” You're not as stupid as most of them. Do not be distracted. Follow. Vacuum is dangerous.

Watching the rapidly drying apple slices was... perhaps not so much interesting as creepy. I have already used magic, learned to boil water or fry toast with almost a snap of my fingers, managed to appreciate cosmetic charms, portals, magical tailoring, but for some reason I only now understood the obvious. The fact that magic is a weapon more terrible than a nuclear bomb. If every dropout student is able to create a vacuum zone in a separate area... for a minute, someone's head may well be inside! What then can truly strong and skilled magicians create?

“Don't be distracted,” the familiar feeling of a jellyfish swallowing you, a short gesture with both hands at once – again, I didn't even have time to understand what exactly I did, but for some reason I knew that if necessary I could repeat it. Sharp shards of glass and ice, scraps of apples and, for some reason, paper hovered over Applestone's table, as if in a freeze-frame. Some kind of note or letter.

This shocked and offended expression will probably give me nightmares. Goggled eyes, a glance slanted towards the bridge of the nose – the fragments hovered literally an inch and a half

from Applestone's face. And he, it seems, could not decide now what should be more surprised: that he was still intact or that he had made such a mistake.

“Congratulations, Mr. Obley, you have a worthy competitor,” the professor appeared next to me, I felt him behind my shoulder – a feeling of strength and for some reason security. – Let go of the shield, Miss Blair. Follow the group while I deal with the effects of Mr. Applestone's brain softening. – A hand flashed in front of my face, taking a piece of paper out of the air. – Hm. You may be pleased to know that this worthy young man lost control of the experience because he was trying to impress you, Miss Blair, with his poetic talents.

“Oh yes,” I couldn't resist. – I was amazed. Right into the liver. She lowered her trembling hands – only realized that until now she had unconsciously, on a reflex triggered by Charlotte, been holding the shield. And I fell in love with Norwood. He now looked like a conductor or a surgeon. The fragments collided with a quiet ringing sound, gathering into a prickly sparkling ball, similar to a curled up hedgehog. Scraps of apples and scraps of paper were strung onto “hedgehog” needles, and then it all simply evaporated. All that remained was Applestone's stunned face – although no, no longer stunned, but frightened. I realized how it could end.

– If anyone else wants to hit the object of their dreams, please do not stifle your impulses. Alchemy lab is the perfect time. I will be happy to personally escort you to Mrs. Maskelyne's office

for your documents and with no less happiness will say goodbye to you forever. Mr. Applestone, gather your things and leave the classroom. Tomorrow after classes, I'm waiting for you at the department with all the knowledge you have. We will decide your fate thoughtfully and comprehensively.

I thought Applestone's face was scared a minute ago? I was wrong. The real horror was only now reflected in her. It seems that the “worthy young man” and connoisseur of boobs had no doubt: the fragments in the face would seem like a light breeze and a gentle caress compared to what awaited him alone with Professor Norwood.

Until the end of the lesson, there was such silence in the laboratory that you could hear the hiss of evaporating ice and the quiet rustle of drying apple slices. Honestly, it seemed to me that even these unfortunate apples were scared to death! The group barely breathed. And after class they left the office in silence, almost on tiptoe. No jokes or giggles.

I wasn't laughing either.

In hindsight I realized that if it weren't for Charlotte, everything would not have ended so well. Will I be able to repeat it myself, if suddenly? Yes, I didn't even have time to understand what was happening! By the way, she disappeared after the explosion, and I didn't notice exactly when. And why? It's okay if you just got bored and decided that now you can leave everything to me. What if she spent a lot of effort on intervention and never appears again?



Professor Norwood was the last to leave. He paused on the threshold and said into space:

“What happened doesn’t deserve such a funeral look.” But the reaction is commendable. Come to your senses, you are on your lunch break after all. Cupcakes are waiting.

I involuntarily snorted. She muttered:

– Thank you.

I probably didn’t hear it—the door closed too quickly. It doesn't matter. The main thing is that he really calmed me down. And even, miracle of miracles, he praised me.

And only in the dining room, having already had lunch and drinking a chocolate cupcake with fragrant tea, I realized one more thing: he knows that Charlotte loves cupcakes!

Is that so, Dr. Norwood? Did you still pay attention to your assistant, at least sometimes?

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– Now you will be called to see Director Maskelyne.

I think I jumped along with the chair, so sudden was Charlotte’s ghostly whisper in my ear. It’s good that I just managed to swallow the tea, otherwise I probably would have spat all over the table.

“Where did you come from?! And why like that, above the ear?! While you were alive, didn’t you learn that you don’t talk to people from behind their backs?”

“Professor Norwood is in London,” Charlotte responded as if she hadn’t heard me. “And the director hasn’t received news for

a long time.” Be careful. She is a strong witch, she can’t guess everything. So just repeat after me. The memory of Charlotte is not yet lost in me.

What?! “Did I understand you correctly? You wanted to make him fall in love with you, and you yourself reported him to the director?! Oh no, tell me I’m wrong.”

– Gossip and news. And in return – prestigious work and respect. For many there is nothing strange about this. Maskelyne holds Professor Norwood tightly, very tightly. This is not a friendly or even a working relationship, everything is more complicated. Charlotte didn't care. She didn't know the details. And you don't need to know about them yet.

I remembered Sabella’s words that Dougal was not at the Academy of his own free will. There was definitely some kind of ugly story lurking here!

“Don’t get into it,” Charlotte seemed to have heard my thoughts. – This doesn't concern you.

I just wanted to ask why suddenly the affairs and problems of the one I should fall in love with do not concern me, but then a tiny bright green bird hovered right in front of my nose. ?on appeared out of nowhere, and I almost jumped again, and the bird scattered into sparks and folded into a note: “Miss Blair, I’m expecting you at my place in the next 20 minutes.”

There was no signature.

– No signature is needed, this is Maskelyne’s personal spell – the messenger. Nobody sends these anymore. Go, Charlotte was

always in a hurry. She was flattered by the director's attention.

Yes, thank you for having lunch. "Lead." If you remember, I don't know the way."

It didn't take long to look for the headmistress's office; it was located not far from the main entrance. A pretentious double door made of mahogany with two white marble statues on the sides looked quite organically in the chic hall, I had even seen it before, but for some reason I thought that there was a conference room or something like that there.

The luxurious, spacious office smelled of cinnamon. The sun poured down on the soft, creamy, long-pile carpet that sank your feet into, and was reflected in the thick golden ruffled curtains and massive chandelier. Award cups were crowded on the shelves under steep-sided, obviously rare vases. The walls were covered with framed diplomas. Every cabinet, every chair here seemed to say: "Well, look, look how good we are! We are here for a reason, we help light the stars." And in the middle of this, either a museum or a living room, a lady was sitting at a massive table.

She was as perfect as her office, and just as... not lifeless, no, but... I froze, trying to find the right word. Decorative? Representative? A formal suit in the color of café au lait – I hate this shade! A snow-white blouse, a large jasper brooch under the collar – exactly the same reddish shade as the hair styled in a high, strict hairstyle. There aren't many cosmetics at first glance, but that's exactly what appears at first glance. Very expensive, and the face was "painted" by a very skillful stylist.

Slightly plump, sensual lips formed a welcoming smile, and Charlotte prompted in my ear:

– Good afternoon, director.

I repeated after her, the headmistress nodded favorably.

“Come on in, my dear, don’t stand there.” Tea?

Friendliness and benevolence oozed from her. Don't get poisoned by this artificial sweetness.

“No, thank you,” I wanted to answer, but Charlotte got ahead of me.

– Thank you, director, with pleasure.

I no longer felt like an actor with a prompter, but like a brainless parrot who repeats what he is told.

Cups appeared in front of the headmistress and me. Only the pudding was missing; instead there was a plate of strawberry roll and a bowl of jam. The picture was painfully reminiscent of yesterday. Only now it wasn’t Sabella sitting opposite me. This woman, unlike that one, did not evoke any positive emotions.

“Well, my dear Miss Blair, we haven’t seen each other for so long.” Surely you will please me with something interesting?

"How? Explosion in the laboratory?"

– This is small for her. Speak: yesterday Doctor Norwood received a letter from Munich. His publication came out there. Invited to the conference. And two days ago a package arrived from Isolde Svenson. With agreed upon clinical trial protocols and calculation of a refined formulation for an anti-hangover mixture. Everything is approved, you can apply for a patent.

– Anti-hangover? – the headmistress asked with a slight hint of disgust. “But by the way...” She thought for a moment, sipping her tea in small sips, and Charlotte prompted me:

– You drink too. Take the roll and praise it: it’s a wonderful sponge cake. She bakes them herself. A little innocent hobby.

The biscuit was indeed not bad, but the amount of sugar in the filling exceeded all imaginable limits.

“A wonderful biscuit,” I repeated, trying to put as much sugar into my voice as there was in this very biscuit. You can’t quarrel with the headmistress, I understood that even without Charlotte. Not yet. And then we’ll see. I didn’t like her attention to the professor at all – and the fact that Charlotte was being used to spy on him.

“But you can’t talk about business all the time, right, dear?” We both know how important it is that every teacher and every student at our amazing Academy feels comfortable. So what about Dr. Norwood? Do you think he’s doing okay? I hope that you, for your part, dear, contribute in every possible way to his positive mood.

“I’m trying,” she answered without prompting this time. I don’t know, maybe Charlotte would have expressed it differently, but she either disappeared once again, or simply switched out of the conversation. It would be strange to look back to check; she did not respond to the mental cry. Calling on all my acting talents, I tried to portray the Charlotte as I saw her from Sabella’s words. – Dr. Norwood is an amazing specialist! Meeting his high

demands is not always easy, but I hope I can do it. And, of course, I do everything so that he does not have to be distracted from his favorite work by some annoying little things.

– Wonderful, my dear, simply wonderful! – the headmistress was very “sincerely” happy, stretching her lips in a smile, but her eyes remained absolutely cold. A frightening contrast. – If something important happens, or you just want to run to me for a biscuit, I’m always happy.

– Thank you, director! – I stood up: it was clear that the audience was over. – I will be happy to take advantage of your kind invitation. All the best.

– Have a nice day, my dear.

I don’t know how I managed to walk to the door calmly and even turn around with a sweet smile goodbye. But I jumped out into the corridor on trembling legs.

“You did it,” Charlotte said in her ear.

“Did you disappear on purpose to make sure of this?”

– You weren't in any danger. The director got what she wanted and relaxed.

“And before that, did you threaten? What exactly?”

– Exposure, of course. But now all the thoughts of Director Maskelyne are occupied with a patent for a new anti-hangover potion. In order to formalize it as the invention of the Academy, and not Dr. Norwood personally, Maskelyne will have to negotiate long and painfully with Mrs. Svenson. They can't stand each other.

“Who is this Svenson?” – I became interested. I looked at my watch – there was enough time left until the end of the third class, there were no urgent matters. And instead of returning to the pulpit, she turned towards the exit. It will be useful to expose your face to the wind and cool down a little.

– Isolde Svenson heads the patent commission. She respects Dr. Norwood very much, but according to the contract, all his inventions during the period of work at the Panacea Academy belong to the Academy. Anti-hangover potion is not exactly what Director Maskelyne would like to receive, but she will not refuse this either. It sounds undignified, but financially it is extremely promising.

“Yes, I can imagine! And does he have many such inventions? One anti-hangover drug will probably be enough to give up on the job you don’t like and live in peace, without denying yourself anything.”

“The inventions of Dr. Norwood during his work at the Panacea Academy...” Charlotte began to repeat boringly.

“I understood! I wanted to say that Maskelyne has settled down well: she has attached herself to the professor like a leech and is enjoying the fruits of his labors.”

– Dr. Norwood is a genius. Therefore, she will do everything to keep him here as long as possible. Panacea Academy needs those who can maintain its prestige.

And it would seem, what does it matter to me? And for Dr. Norwood, although he himself does not know it, something

completely different is vitally important now. But for some reason I felt so angry! I remembered something similar. Let me not be kept at work by force or deceit, as, judging by Sabella, happened to Norwood. But how many cases have there been when they brazenly appropriated what I achieved with great difficulty! “Freya, dear, of course, ?nders is your client, we all understand that without your excellent persuasiveness he would not have agreed to the interview. But you also understand, because the material will go to Lizzie’s section! We have a contract, that’s her topic.” Or, even more scathingly: “Freya, dear, we always paid you twenty percent of the advertising that you brought, but this time Fulman had to unfasten half, otherwise he would not agree...” I still don’t know what exactly I didn’t agree to the owner of the lousy newspaper for which I was writing at the time didn’t listen, she just left. She slammed the door. And I never regretted it. But even then, even in much more reputable and respectable publications, I encountered such situations more than once. Those who like to appropriate other people's work are found everywhere, and a luxurious office is not at all a guarantee of the honesty of the one who sits in it. More often than not, it’s even the other way around.

“You’re nervous,” Charlotte said distantly. – This is good. The living must show emotions. “And she suddenly added: “Meeting Sabella Norwood was one of hundreds of possibilities.” You were in the right place at the right time. Now it may become easier, or maybe more difficult.



“How do you know about Sabella, you weren’t there?”

– I told. Now I know a lot. Also, I can hear your thoughts.

“This is where we should have started,” I almost snorted out loud. I would have said right away: I see your reflection in the coffee pot.

– In the coffee pot?

Yes, she not only hears my thoughts, she eavesdrops on them in the most brazen way!

“This is from a book. About one great detective who also knew a lot thanks to his powers of observation and ability to think logically. She probably doesn't exist in your world. Or Charlotte didn't read it. And if you know a lot, tell me better, why can't Norwood leave the Academy? What kind of contract is this, a slave contract or what? Any contract can be broken if the work goes wrong!”

– This is not my secret, and it has not yet become yours, but everything can change. Wait.

“What to expect? – then another thought struck me, and I asked: “Why do I need to be afraid of Maskelyne’s exposure, but it turns out I can tell everything to Sabella?” Maybe the professor has the right to find out? After all, it directly concerns him!”

– I don’t know the future. No one knows. But the probabilities are visible. Sabella Norwood is the best chance. Director Maskelyne is the worst. Dougal Norwood,” Charlotte fell silent, as if right now she was peering into these incredible probabilities of hers. – Difficult. This truth can turn into a win-win

opportunity, or maybe death for the two of you. It's up to you to decide.

Yeah, wow, Russian roulette.

"I'll wait," I decided. And I went to the department – I've been walking for too long already. It is unlikely that Dr. Norwood will appreciate that nothing is ready for the fourth pair, and his assistant has gone to get some fresh air. Whoever this assistant actually is.

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I opened the portal to Sabella while in a strange, twilight state. Norwood didn't return after the third class, and he had to hastily sort out his schedule, check for urgent mail, reschedule senior counseling sessions, and even accept a few debtors who came to retake tests. Luckily, Charlotte showed up again. Just for a few minutes, just to say:

– Take the forms in the left cabinet, second shelf from the bottom. Make sure that they don't cheat or talk over each other. Don't be so nervous.

"But where is the professor?!" – I couldn't stand it. "I should have returned a long time ago!"

"Not everything in the scientific world is done quickly," Charlotte explained indifferently. "But he didn't even report!"

– For what? He knows he can rely on Miss Blair. Without him, nothing here will collapse. The students are not the most important part of his job. The Academy needs other things that Dr. Norwood can provide.

Well, yes, I realized, patents. Publications, conferences, consultations, participation in some commissions, defenses, examinations – what else is happening in the scientific world? The prestige of the Academy, which Maskelyne cares so much about. It is clear that for the sake of this, fussing with students can and should be transferred to the assistant.

But I was still nervous. There is less and less time left, Norwood hardly looks at me, and if he spends another half of this time somewhere else...

– Sally, you have no face! – I heard from Sabella instead of a greeting. – What's happened?!

“No, nothing,” I shook my head. – Busy day. What could happen when the professor was not at the department after lunch. Although... oh yes, the alchemists had an explosion. On the second pair. Meeting with the headmistress... Why does it seem to me that not half a day has passed, but at least a week?

– There are too many new things around. You have to get used to everything too quickly. And, unfortunately, I also have nothing to please you with. Come on in, Sally. Tea? Coffee? Or maybe we can have dinner together? I just returned from Quebec. We managed to meet the Ghost Bear, he is a shaman, he knows and understands a lot better than our ritualists.

I knew little about shamans. But for some reason, a giant ghostly bear in Indian clothing, with a tambourine in its clawed paw, suddenly clearly appeared, and Charlotte was next to him, tiny, like a lapdog at the feet of a mammoth. The leaflet with the

announcement in my purse seemed like childish nonsense.

Is that why Charlotte hardly showed up today?

“Let’s have dinner,” I agreed. – And then tell me. If it makes sense to tell.

The kitchen in Sabella’s house turned out to be small, but very bright, with a soft, cozy sofa and a round wooden table. While dishes and cutlery appeared out of nowhere, I couldn’t take my eyes off Sabella. The polished, smooth, beautiful movements were mesmerizing. This is where Norwood adopted the conductor’s style of casting spells that amazed me during my class with the alchemists!

And the kitchen was filled with the delicious aromas of homemade food. The shepherd’s pie was fragrant and steaming, veal chops were brightly surrounded by stewed carrots and green peas, and two types of sauces were waiting nearby, which I could not even identify by eye. Baked potato slices in a golden crust, traditional scrambled eggs and bacon – but, honestly, even scrambled eggs seemed something incredibly delicious.

I swallowed my saliva. I couldn’t help but remember the time when my parents were alive and I spent weekends with them. Mom loved and knew how to cook. I don’t know how and I don’t like it, and my habit of eating on subways and grabbing coffee from vending machines on the run could only be shaken by a neighbor with her signature Yorkshire pudding.

“Now you look like a normal girl,” Sabella said with a smile, sitting down opposite. – With burning hungry eyes after a long

day of work. And not on an exhausted sufferer under the weight of all the world's problems at the same time. It's much better this way.

It seemed that we were both equally hungry – until the table was at least half empty, the silence was broken only by the soft clatter of cutlery. I was the first to speak.

– Sabella, everything is amazing! You cook wonderfully, simply incredible!

– Thank you, Sally. I don't have too many activities, but cooking is interesting. Especially if you are a mother, and your son eats mostly coffee and only occasionally, thanks to you, remembers that there is some other food in the world besides sandwiches from the academic cafeteria.

Tiny cups, a basket of homemade cookies, sugar and chocolate appeared on the table.

– With milk? – Sabella asked. – Or black?

– Black. “I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, absorbing the aroma. – Honestly, just the smell clears up your head. Magic! And not at all in the sense of “magic”. – She paused and took a tiny sip. And yet she asked: “You said you wouldn't please me with anything.” So, it's pointless to turn to ritualists?

“The best thing you can do, Sally, is to accept what happened as a fact that cannot be changed.” There is a curse. The only way to remove it and stay alive is known to you.

The cookies melted on the tongue and were not at all cloying. It had distinct notes of lemon and ghee. Perhaps, by contrast, I

remembered the headmistress's biscuit.

– Why is Doctor Norwood at the Academy? What is keeping him there? – I put the cup down and clasped my fingers together. “Director Maskelyne called me today. I asked questions. It turns out Charlotte was spying for her. It's all so... disgusting!

– Since childhood, Regan Maskelyne loved to control everything. – Sabella smiled, but the smile came out forced. “Dougal knows about Charlotte. And that his every step at the Academy is monitored in one way or another.

– And he tolerates this?!

– He has no choice. I...” Sabella stopped short, put down her coffee and looked carefully, as if she was looking for an answer to some important question on my face. – This is not a very pleasant topic for conversation over a cup of coffee. But I'm afraid neither you nor I have a choice. This means that you should know about my exceptional naivety and even, probably, stupidity.

I couldn't believe that Sabella could be “exceptionally” naive or stupid. But... that doesn't happen. First you need to listen, and only then draw conclusions.

– This story began a very long time ago. Even before Dougal was born. And even in my worst nightmare I could not imagine that many years later her son would have to pay for the mistakes of a sixteen-year-old girl. – Sabella stood up. – Let's go. I'll show you what we were like then.

We moved from the kitchen to the already familiar sofa in front of the “TV”, and she commanded:

– Me and Regana, high school.

Under a spreading oak tree, so huge that only the lower branches were included in the frame, sat a very young Sabella. Blonde hair covered her shoulders, huge blue eyes looked at the photographer with such undisguised tenderness that it was clear that someone close was taking the picture. She held the open book with one hand, and with the other covered the fingers of the then headmistress, but of the same young schoolgirl Maskelyne. It also turned out to be not at all difficult to recognize her, despite her perky youth haircut and not yet fully formed figure. All the same plump, sensual lips and a cold, appraising gaze that seems to be calculating benefits. She hugged Sabella from behind and smiled predatorily.

“We’ve been best friends since elementary school,” Sabella said. – common hobbies, common friends, common thoughts. Or so I thought. Now I don’t know anymore. I was sixteen when Norman, Dougal’s father, died. “An accident,” she added briefly, as if it still hurt her to remember it. – My mother was never distinguished by meekness and gentleness. You know, there are people who value someone else’s opinion and good name more than their loved ones. And I couldn’t lose the only thing I had left of my loved one. Norman died in the spring. Dougal was born in the fall. And all this time I lived with Regan. I had nowhere else to go. My mother refused to let me go home and waited for me to come to my senses. I also couldn’t count on any funds until I came of age. So I owed a lot to Regan and her parents. And such

a small thing as a magical oath did not seem too high a price to me. Yes, and I swore by trifles. The only request that I will fulfill one day. Nothing impossible, illegal or inadequate.

Sabella looked at me with a sad smile.

– That's the whole story. The oath was remembered twenty-nine years later. Regan wanted my son to work for her.

And she can still smile! Yes, I would be for this...

– In my opinion, this is no longer adequate! – I was indignant. – Is he a commodity to her?! Or a slave? Why couldn't it be refused? Sabella!

– Five years of contract work in exchange for those six months... For Regan it sounds reasonable and sane. If it were just me, I wouldn't even think of objecting," she sighed. "But Dougal and his life have nothing to do with my stupidity and the imprecise wording of the oath. So I was going to refuse or make another request. But such things are not to be joked about. You see what happened to Miss Blair, and this is for the only mistake in the ritual. And here is a violation of the oath. Maybe it wouldn't have stopped me, but Regan had foreseen this outcome, so Dougal found out about everything first. And, of course, he agreed.

"Magic is not only wonderful, but also scary," I muttered. I remembered my thoughts in the laboratory about the vacuum available to dropouts. – You can do so much... So, five years. And Maskelyne wants to get the most out of them. Has it passed?..



– Since August last year. The second year has just begun.

– Tell me, Sabella, but why does he allow this? Monitor, try to take away inventions?

– Inventions are included in the contract. A professor at the Academy must conduct scientific work, publish in specialized publications, and attend conferences. Of course, everything comes with the seasoning that “the basis for these achievements was provided by the Panacea Academy.”

– Prestige and benefit? What does this give her? Money? – I involuntarily became interested. In my native world I never dealt with scientists – this topic is not very interesting to the reading public, scientific sensations are usually understandable only to a narrow circle. But, judging by Maskelyne, exactly the same squabbles are going on in the academic environment as elsewhere.

“Money too, but something else is more important to Regan.” She's ambitious. He wants to be the director of not just an Academy, but the best academy in Europe, and even in the world.

– And in fact? The academy seemed to me...prestigious, perhaps, although I'm already starting to hate this word. But I have nothing to compare with. Is this a true impression, or did I buy into the external shine?

“Quite true,” Sabella confirmed. – There are truly outstanding scientists working there and research is being conducted. Some of the discoveries made in recent years have the potential to change the world. Graduates have no problems finding work;

they will be gladly hired anywhere. Regan has a lot to be proud of. But – you probably know how this happens? – there are only a few lines left to the top of the rating, and there is no way to reach them. They are too high. Unattainable. Some are humble, because being in the top ten, or even the top five, is also an honor. But Regan hates losing. I always hated it, but now I hate it even more. Apparently, this is why her methods have become somewhat... tougher.

Sabella fell silent, and I thought. If Panacea Academy is close to the top of the world rankings, and Dr. Norwood is an outstanding scientist, it is clear why Maskelyne needs him, but the question remains, why is he himself dissatisfied with this place of work? Out of pride? Or did he have better options?

– What does he want?

It came out by accident; I wasn't at all sure that I wanted to ask Sabella about this – not today, not after such a difficult conversation for her. But she answered.

– I would ask differently – what does he not want? Living by someone else's rules and working in the interests of a woman he deeply dislikes. And as for teaching activities... – Sabella shook her head. “Before the story with Regan, Dougal saw her only in nightmares. He occasionally, in exceptional cases, consulted, but never intended to teach. Alas, not everything in life depends on our desires. Dougal loves the work he devotes himself to, but would prefer to do it alone, in his own laboratory and interacting with those who interest him. And one more thing – over the

past year Regan has made him one of the most public people in Britain. And it would be okay if these were only symposiums or conferences, but no, social events, in her opinion, are just as important. But if you prefer solitude and a narrow circle of friends to society, this is not an easy test.

“I liked the way he taught,” I again remembered the refined movements, the short introduction before the lesson, the quick screening of those who should not be allowed to participate in the experience. Everything is to the point, although not too friendly. But if Panacea Academy is so prestigious, the professors have the right to demand that students study and not fool around. I smiled involuntarily: “Perhaps if I were his student, I would think differently.” I think Professor Norwood scares them half to death. Sabella, have you read his contract? Are there loopholes there that could be used for early termination? Or is five years mandatory because of your oath?

– I did not read. But Dougal drafted it together with a lawyer he knew, this was his condition, and literally bargained every point from Regan. So if there is even a minimal opportunity to end this ahead of schedule, Dougal will take advantage of it, no doubt. And my obligations will disappear with the expiration of the contract.

And perhaps then Maskelyne will have an enemy – if Dr. Norwood is vindictive. And if not, it is unlikely that he will ever do anything else for her or for the academy. No, for all her cunning and cunning, Maskelyne is stupid. After all, she and

Sabella were friends, and as a friend of her mother, she could probably establish some kind of business relationship with Dr. Norwood? Exchange long, albeit not so close, cooperation for five years of contract slavery and a complete break in the future?

But this is definitely not a topic that makes sense to discuss now. And I asked:

– Have I tired you, Sabella? Let's see some more photos?

This is what we did for the rest of the evening. I thought there was sadness in Sabella's voice, but she was smiling. And she told it in such a way that I burst out laughing every now and then. Dougal the schoolboy, Dougal the student, a promising bachelor, a promising master... With friends, and sometimes teachers. Most often, next to him was the already familiar Chester Fully, a round-faced, easily blushing genius in botany and healing. Sometimes they were joined by a thin, thoroughbred blond man, even at first glance, with a short haircut and a youthfully touching string of mustache over his pale lips.

“Edward Williams, youngest son of the Earl of Derby,” Sabella introduced him. – During his studies, he swore that administrative work was not for him, but now he heads the public relations committee under the Minister of Health – and, as I heard, he does an excellent job.

Girls flashed nearby, different, funny and serious, blondes and brunettes. There was also one redhead among them. She appeared most often. There was even more of it in the photographs with adult Dougal. Red curls were now pulled into

a tight bun, and frivolous blouses and shorts were replaced by formal suits. Sabella named her only one to me.

– Elsa Gill. She and Dougal had dated since high school and then lived together. But in the end they decided that they were better off being friends.

I suppressed a twinge of envy. Someone knows how to part like a human being... I cut myself off: I'm not thinking about that. It's time to leave the past in the past and another world in another world. Much more important is that this Elsa is not at all like Charlotte. Never a Barbie, although she also clearly pays attention to her appearance. Business style suits you, and not just suits you, but is clearly familiar.

– Who is she? – I asked.

“Dougal's colleague in some ways,” Sabella smiled. – She has her own laboratory, small production and several salons. Therapeutic cosmetics, skin, hair, nail care products are something that interests almost all women and many men.

“And therefore it's always valuable,” I nodded mentally. Dr. Norwood's social circle consisted of successful, self-sufficient, enthusiastic and socially significant people. Perhaps, quite capable of causing Maskelyne a lot of trouble – if there was a desire. Does she really not think about it at all?

We sat in front of the screen with photographs until almost midnight. And, like yesterday, when I returned home, I was only thinking about how to get my head to the pillow as quickly as possible. On the living room table, among the business cards and

bonus cards that I never collected back into my wallet, there was an oblong white envelope.

Miss Blair

I'll be waiting for you tomorrow at noon at the main entrance. You don't have to show up at the department at the start of the working day. Thank a well-known lady for this on occasion. I think that at the opening of the Hope in Children charity fund with the support of the Mayor of Edinburgh and at the banquet after it, I need your company.

D.N.

For several minutes I stared blankly at the flying black lines of a short letter. What charity? Which well-known lady? Oh yes, probably Maskelyne. But she didn't say anything today about any fund or banquet.

"I'll deal with this tomorrow," I decided in the spirit of Scarlett. – After all, there is plenty of time before noon. And now – sleep.

## CHAPTER 3. Day three: Thursday

The morning began with home-brewed coffee, ordered delicious pizza and a conversation with TV. Out of ingrained professional habit, I wanted to look through the available information about the fund to the opening of which I was suddenly invited.

Nothing particularly interesting – the charity of the authorities in any world is probably similar. If I had gone there as a journalist, I would have written an article in advance, and on the spot I would have concentrated on finding funny details about what was happening and about the guests. I had no idea what Charlotte should do there. But I understood very clearly what I needed to do. Almost all day with Dr. Norwood, not at the Academy, without correspondence, scientific work and students taking up his time and attention. At the most boring event for him, and for me too. Surrounded by people who, one hopes, are even less interesting to him than Charlotte.

It's time to move from viewing photos to personal contact.

I finished my pizza and asked the sociable TV the following request:

– Clothes for girls, social events.

Pages of advertising catalogs flashed on the screen. I had a rough idea of Dr. Norwood's tastes in women's clothing, and, in principle, my new black trousers with any of the white blouses

more or less corresponded to both them and today's occasion. Although a jacket or vest would be desirable with the trousers. But, as far as I understood, trousers were more appropriate for a journalist reporting, and it was more appropriate for a companion of a high-status guest to appear in a dress.

But none of Charlotte's dresses fit.

"It's time to break the pattern," I sighed and went along the beaten path – to Grisella's salon. Considering that there are two hours left... all hope is for magic!

Grisella and magic did not disappoint. It was five minutes to twelve when I opened the portal and stepped towards the Academy, wondering if the professor would recognize his assistant at first sight. Strict updo, extremely neat, not a single stray hair. A closed dress below the knee made of patriotic tartan suited to the occasion, in a business style, but perfectly outlining the figure. Shoes with small heels, stockings a tone darker than the skin. A clutch taken for lipstick and a handkerchief. The notepad and pen I had stuffed into it out of habit, I realized, took it out and left it at home: they didn't match the image.

I have never looked so perfect in my life, neither this nor the last.

Judging by the indifferent look that the professor who appeared a minute later gave me, and the absence of malicious comments, I was not mistaken in anything. Even though the upcoming banquet depresses him more than Charlotte's company. a luxurious black tuxedo and a snow-white shirt only



further emphasized his gloomy mood.

“Let’s go,” he said briefly and opened the portal, letting me go forward.

I took a step and fell knee-deep into the water. My foot became slippery and I waved my arms, trying to regain my balance, but in vain. There was no support.

The clutch flew off into the unknown. Time stretched out. I fell with a loud and absolutely obscene scream – and could not do anything. Just yell.

But they didn’t let me crash.

“What the…” the professor appeared just in time. Instead of an epic fall into the water, or even onto the rocks, they lifted me up, and then grabbed me around the waist. The situation was precarious – it seemed that he, too, was struggling to stay on his feet. – The devil is going on here!

“This is not Edinburgh,” I stated the obvious.

We stood in the middle of an endless swamp, gloomy, overgrown with patchy grass, with rare pools of open water. Signs of human presence included low, sometimes collapsed fences made of granite boulders, and sheep grazing on the hillside in the distance. The Grimpen bog, and that’s all, except that the Hound of the Baskervilles is missing.

I hope we don't drown here.

“You are amazingly observant,” it should have sounded with the usual sarcasm, but it seemed that Dr. Norwood was too puzzled by what had happened. And the warmth coming from

his palms blurred the impression. He held me tightly, as if he was afraid that without his help I would instantly be sucked in.

– Professor? How about you let me go and open the portal again?

– If you don't plan to perform aerobatic maneuvers here again, I'll do so. I don't have the slightest desire to fish you out of the quagmire by your hair.

He actually tried to open the portal. And for this he didn't need to let me go at all, just hold me with one hand instead of two. But nothing came of it. After the first attempt, the air in front of us thickened and there was a noticeable smell of ozone. After the second, a silent lightning tore the sky, struck a dry tree nearby, and it burst into flames. I imagined what would have happened if this discharge had hit the water in which we were standing. I wanted to climb into the professor's arms.

He extinguished the tree with one careless stroke. He said thoughtfully:

– Magic is listening. Portals – no. What's happening? Portal system failure? Almost unbelievable. But probably.

Was it imaginary, or was there actually research enthusiasm in his voice? Well, if so, I understood him – this problem is probably more interesting than the sugary drudgery that awaited us in Edinburgh. But it's better to deal with any problem without knee-deep mud and the risk of drowning in a swamp!

I wonder if I can levitate? I wish I could fly... well, at least to that hill with the sheep. Sit on the grass and let the professor do

his research. I can even help as much as I can.

I imagined myself soaring upward. Uselessly. Either the power of imagination needed to be supported by something more significant, or the local magic was not mature enough to defeat gravity.

Charlotte did not respond to the mental call. It's probably better not to rely on her help. When was the last time she appeared? While talking to Maskelyne? No, after. But she left me in the director's office without warning. She has her own ideas about when I need her and when I don't.

Dr. Norwood, meanwhile, also practiced magic. And he did much better. At first, the swamp around us was covered with a thin film of ice. Then, for some reason, large leathery leaves spread out on it, and a second later they were covered with something resembling forget-me-nots. But they immediately disappeared, and in front of me stretched a wooden flooring made of planed boards, which even smelled like freshly cut wood. And it also dissipated almost immediately. Either the professor canceled the spells, or...

– Anomalous zone. Near Edinburgh? Where? Ms. Blair, if I were you, I'd focus on making shoes that fit. We'll have to walk.

I didn't know how to create shoes, whether they were suitable or not. A short immersion in herself – in search of the necessary spell, or gesture, or whatever it was that could turn shoes into waders in Charlotte's memory – brought only a nagging pain in her temples. Surely Charlotte knew how to do this, she should

have been able to do this. But not me.

“I can’t concentrate,” I squeezed out, hoping that this explanation would be enough. And at that moment, as if ordered, something dug into my leg. I squealed and kicked, splashes flew up, the professor’s grip became tighter.

– Calm down. There are no piranhas here. – Obeying his gesture, a black branch covered with mucus and mud slowly stretched out of the water. – Only saber-tooth snags. They are, of course, extremely dangerous, especially in the fall, but not fatal.

“What disgusting,” I shuddered with disgust, and then, belatedly, I was covered with shame. I started a panic-hysteria out of nowhere!

“S-sorry,” I barely managed to squeeze out a single word.

“Pull up your dress, it’s tight,” the professor commanded, and my legs were put on thigh-high boots. I secretly felt the material: not rubber, but something waterproof, slippery and smooth. Of course, they didn’t add dryness to the feet that had gotten wet, but at least they should protect them from such “non-lethal” snags. And I wouldn’t want to lose my shoes and walk around barefoot. Not to mention the fact that I selected the shoes for a parquet event, and not for walking on water, swamp mud and slippery bumps.

– Try to support them with magic. Spells dissipate too quickly. I’ll go ahead. Follow the trail. It was still not enough to really fall into the quagmire.

So we wandered off, slowly and sadly. Dr. Norwood, wearing

the same boots as mine – looked killer combined with a tuxedo! – he walked carefully and, it seems, before each step he was testing the ground under the water. I lifted my dress high so that the tight skirt would not interfere with walking and maintaining my balance. It's good that Norwood is looking ahead and not at me. Such a defiant “mini” was not even in Charlotte’s wardrobe.

I had little idea how to support the boots with magic. She acted on a whim, in much the same way as Charlotte taught how to maintain the desired temperature when brewing coffee – she imbued her swamp pioneer equipment with a thin “stream” of energy. I hope this is enough...

The sun was creeping lazily behind a curtain of clouds, and, apparently, we were completely and hopelessly late for the official part. This is something I didn’t regret, but I wanted to be in time for the banquet. Looking at swamp water and swallowing with a dry mouth is not at all joyful. And hunger made itself felt – it was a shame that I didn’t have lunch.

“Freeze,” the professor suddenly turned, walked ten steps to a pinkish-purple mound sticking out of the brown peat water and plucked something there. I barely heard him say quietly, “Chester will be delighted.” – Come here, Miss Blair. It's drier here.

Indeed, when we walked a little further in a new direction, the pools of standing water disappeared completely. Although it was still wet and greedily slurping underfoot.

“Here the danger of entering a quagmire is minimal,” the professor rejoiced. “You see, the sphagnum has been replaced by

cotton grass and heather?”

“Of course,” I muttered. Should I not admit that for me both sphagnum and cotton grass are identical strangers? And I only know heather from pictures, and not in its original natural form.

“Hold it,” he handed me some stunted pink bush, pulled out by the roots. I hastily adjusted my skirt, although Dr. Norwood didn't seem to care what I looked like, as long as I didn't drop his find. Making sure that I was holding it firmly but carefully, he rushed towards the thickets of whitish grass that looked like thick threads. Or not herbs? I was sure of only one thing – this next thing would bring a lot of joy to Chester Fully. For sure.

The whitish thread-like “something” was followed by a purple one with thick, fleshy stems. Behind him is a tangled ball of something soft and fluffy, similar to a bird's nest. Next is a bouquet of lush green trefoil leaves, but definitely not clover. I resignedly accepted the next prey, and the professor seemed to have forgotten where we were going and where we ended up, and was completely carried away only by botanical research that he understood.

– Well, where are you? Come on, show yourself, I know you're hiding,” he muttered, examining a large hummock overgrown with brown moss. – ?ha! Gotcha! – he suddenly exclaimed excitedly and pulled a thick crimson stem into the air. Most of all it looked like a vine. How I imagined them. Only the vines in my reality could not wriggle, trying to entwine their arms. – Shh-sh-sh. Calm down, baby, nothing will happen to

you. “The professor wrapped the stem around his elbow like a coil of rope and pulled. A bright red bunch of petals came out of the hummock with a loud smack – I couldn’t dare call this strange crumpled misunderstanding a flower – swayed from side to side in bewilderment and, trustingly clinging to it, settled on Norwood’s shoulder. – Yes, smart girl, that’s it.

I remembered a sentient rose with twelve, or so, rhizomes. She also clung. She smiled: students are afraid of the professor, and all kinds of vegetation are clearly crazy about him. And now he doesn’t look at all like a strict dry-haired teacher, a stern department head, or even a world luminary. Rather, he resembles the young Dougal from the photographs, enthusiastic, passionate... and very handsome.

The petals touched his cheek, he moved them away, tickled them with his finger, as if comforting, and suddenly looked straight at me. He raised an eyebrow in surprise.

–What is it, Miss Blair? Are you having fun? Yeah, I can imagine what it looks like. Look, baby, this woman standing in rubber boots and an almost-evening dress with a whole bouquet of botanical rarities in the middle of an unknown swamp finds us funny.

“And cute,” I didn’t deny. – You know, Doctor Norwood, I stop regretting that we didn’t get to Edinburgh. It would be much more depressing there than here. By the way, the dress is not evening at all.

“Not at all evening,” he agreed. – And very patriotic. Just right

for the Scottish moors. ? Meanwhile, I never cease to be amazed at the strange things happening to you. But now something else is more important. Purple stemworts do not live without suitable soil for more than two hours.

– Who is stopping us from collecting soil here? Can you make a container?

– It won't save you. There is too little magic in this soil. She needs more, so let's hurry.

“Then go ahead,” I agreed.

If I knew what speed he was capable of developing over these bumps and in these terrible boots, I would be careful not to agree! From the outside, we probably looked extremely funny, but I was not laughing. The professor rushed forward like a high-speed train, while I reminded myself of a carriage dangling behind an ancient steam locomotive, bouncing and tilting pitifully at every junction of the old rusty rails, that is, every bump or puddle. My feet were dry in the boots and then sweaty, and I think I blistered both heels. There was no longer any strength to look around or even forward; everyone was focused on not tripping and scattering the “bouquet of botanical rarities.”

I realized that we had arrived somewhere only when we ran into the grayish-white woolly side of a fat, phlegmatic sheep. The sheep stretched its muzzle towards the stems and bushes in my hands, I pushed away:

– Where are you going? Chew what's under your hooves! – and finally raised her head, looking around.



We stood on a gentle slope of a hill overgrown with emerald grass. There was no squelching or slurping underfoot; the swamps spread out below as an endless brown-purple plain with mirror-like glimpses of water. Sheep approached us with interest; there were about two dozen of them grazing here. And, honestly, if it weren't for the pile of greenery that was probably tasty by their standards in my hands, I would now hug the first sheep I came across, sit next to it on the grass and say: "The final one. The train is not going any further!"

– Well, shall we take a risk? – the professor asked when the portal finally opened in front of us. – Hand, Miss Blair. I hope this time we won't get carried away somewhere to Kilimanjaro.

"I'll scatter it," I said briefly. He chuckled, seemingly with a hint of approval, and took me firmly by the elbow.

We stepped into the portal at the same time.

I don't know what I was expecting, but it's unlikely that we ended up in Kilimanjaro. However, if so, the spacious, bright greenhouse was certainly not the place from which one would have to escape with adventure. I couldn't hold back my sigh of relief, and the professor rushed off somewhere, saying:

– Wait five minutes!

He probably ran to arrange the purple plant in suitable soil.

It's unlikely that the entire armful of curiosities in my hands required the same immediate attention, but still there was no point in throwing it anywhere. Otherwise, would the professor have asked me to wait? He must understand that after such an

adventure the girl needs to wash and change clothes, and not stand like a fool in the middle of someone else's greenhouse, dirty, wearing waders and stinking of swamp mud. Although he may not have understood, his priorities were clearly set differently.

“Rejoice,” I besieged myself, “in your priorities, unnecessary communication with Dr. Norwood should now also be higher than a hot shower and strong coffee. Otherwise, within five days, showers, coffee, and other joys of life will forever cease to be relevant.”

– Exactly. Therefore, think better about something else,” said a voice over your ear. “I couldn't keep you in the swamps longer.” But now you have a chance to intervene in the situation yourself. So go ahead.

“So you arranged this?!” – I almost screamed with indignation. Although almost immediately I realized: why be indignant? I must say thank you! Charlotte saved both of us from a boring official event, lifted Dr. Norwood's spirits by giving him the opportunity to do botanical research instead, and I have the hope of chatting with him in a non-work environment. But... – “At least help me put myself in order! I don't know how to clean myself of dirt, put my shoes back, or heal my feet! And they hurt!

– It's simple. Your hands are full, so channel your magic mentally. To do this you need to concentrate. Focus on the desired outcome.

I closed my eyes and remembered my reflection in the mirror

before heading to the academy. I want to be the same again.

– Not this way. Step by step. Details.

“I could show you!”

– You must understand the principle. I won't be able to show every little detail.

Fine. First the shoes. We remember the fitting, the feeling of soft leather comfortably enveloping the foot, the sole being stable despite the heel. The pleasure of extremely high-quality shoes, which in a previous life I could not afford.

The boots flowed off her feet in a misty haze and turned into shoes – clean, without a trace of swamp mud, exactly the same as those she stepped into the portal in. It worked, I did it!

Now chafed feet. It turned out to be very easy and somewhat reminiscent of yoga classes. Although I did not reach any heights in yoga, I remembered something. Imagine the warmth running through your body, focus on the painful areas... What a relief it is when your legs stop burning with fire! It seems that even the fatigue has passed.

– Fine. Remember how you did it. A useful skill. Just practice and you won't have any problems. I have to go.

And she disappeared.

"Where?! Why do you keep disappearing?"

I might as well have been asking questions of the wall.

Loud, excited voices were heard – Dr. Norwood and someone else. I focused on the dress. Clean and fresh, as if you had just put it on... I remembered Grisella's words: “Magical, Miss Blair!

Few people suit the cage the way it suits you,” – undisguised flattery, of course, but it really suited me.

Chance, then? Great. Let's get it here. Now I'm ready.

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I couldn't help but recognize Chester Fully even if I wanted to. In life, the contrast between these two was even more striking than in the photographs. Chester, round-faced, comfortably plump, looking like a ruddy donut, ran, exactly ran, almost skipping, in front, Dr. Norwood followed.

“Miss Blair, this is Mr. Fully.” Mr. Fully is Miss Blair and your beloved grass. Urgently get rid of one from the other before they enter into a wonderful symbiosis.

– What symbiosis?! – I looked with new feelings at the greenery occupying my hands, it suddenly seemed suspicious and unpredictable.

– Oh, for God's sake! Dougal! You are as usual! Don't worry, Miss Blair, he's only joking. I'm extremely glad to meet you. Extremely!

“Mutually,” I agreed somewhat nervously. – But, if you can, really, take it all?

– Yes, yes, of course! “Something like a ditch appeared in Chester's hands. – Put it down! Carefully! Don't remember the antennae of Arenarius! He won't survive this!

I was about to say that the forced march through the swamp was unlikely to provide the antennae with proper treatment. Norwood got there first.

“Chester, Miss Blair crushed your arenarius for two hours, he didn’t mind.” And he doesn't look like he's dying.

– He is in a state of passion. The consequences will come later.

– We are also in a state of passion, if you remember.

– Yes, yes, you were thrown into a swamp and the portal network jammed. Nonsense! Maybe you just didn't want to go to Edinburgh that much? You know, there is a theory...

– Spare me from anti-scientific nonsense!

I carefully put the “bouquet” into the cuvette – it seemed not roomy enough for such an armful, but suddenly it expanded in breadth and depth, adjusting to the required volume.

“Wonderful,” Chester whispered reverently. – Look! He trembles to the rhythm of his heart. This makes it easier for him to perceive your magic. And they will still claim that this is not reason! – the last exclamation sounded pathetic and indignant, as if from a podium.

“It’s an elementary survival instinct,” Norwood objected, however, quietly and, it seems, solely out of a sense of contradiction.

“You never took the diverse and amazing world of flora seriously,” Chester waved it off.

– Well, why not? This world looks great in the form of tinctures in test tubes.

– Incurable pragmatist! Miss Blair, but you! You see? Do you feel it?

“Honestly, I only feel the desire to sit down,” I admitted. “But

it's unlikely that my amateur opinion matters.”

– Miss Blair, you can go home. I don't think they're waiting for us in Edinburgh anymore.

– How's it going home? – Chester perked up. – For what? I didn't even have time to offer coffee! Dougal, Mrs Ferguson is having mince pie today! I haven't tried it myself yet! You pulled me right out of the consultation! But this is fortunate – such wonderful specimens!

“The pie is enough for the two of us.”

It seems Norwood is determined to get me out of here. Even if this is a kind of concern in response to my complaint... No, that won't do!

“I'd love to try your pie, Mr. Fully,” I tried to smile sweetly and sincerely, although I wanted to show my teeth more. – And especially coffee.

– Oh, please, no misters. Just not at home. Dougal, come into the living room, I need ten minutes.

“Twenty, if not thirty,” the professor stated gloomily, looking after him. And he added: “Well, let's go.” Just don't complain later.

– For what? – I was surprised.

“You will understand when you begin to drown in the abyss of his plant enthusiasm,” he held the door, letting me go forward. – Sit down, any chair is at your service. Although I don't recommend sitting under the spitting milkweed, Chester allows it too much.

I stepped into the living room and froze, looking around in shock. The only free space in the center was occupied by a tea table and chairs around it. But behind the armchairs, and near the sofas standing against the walls, and on the walls themselves, on the windows and even on the ceiling, there was a jungle. All shades of green, crimson and gold, all imaginable shapes of leaves, interweaving of stems, trunks, vines... Bright spots of flowers and even – incredible! – fluttering butterflies.

Something tiny, azure blue, hovered before my eyes for a moment, and Norwood chuckled behind him:

“You were mistaken for a flower, Miss Blair.” Beware of cross-pollination.

– Is this a hummingbird?! – I exclaimed, looking at the tiny bird with a long curved beak.

– Of course. Chester took a very careful approach to recreating the biome.

–Can I have a look?

–Look, just don't touch anything with your hands – they might bite it off.

I forgot about fatigue and even the presence of Norwood. I wandered around, looking at the bizarre curves of the trunks, the mesmerizingly beautiful leaves and flowers, butterflies, hummingbirds... I didn't recognize any spoiled milkweed or anything that could bite off my hand, of course. Of all this wealth, only orchids were familiar to me, but even they very vaguely resembled what I saw in the flower shops of my native

world.

I can't imagine how you can do this at home! Charlotte's well-groomed front garden immediately ceased to seem too magical.

– While you are taking in the beauty, the coffee is getting cold.

I turned around. The professor was sitting at the table with a cup in his hands. Although I didn't hear anything, the table had already been set for three, in the center was a tall, rosy cake, and the sides of the coffee pot, sugar bowl and cream jug were shining. I immediately remembered that it was high time for lunch.

I sat down opposite the professor. I poured myself some coffee. Asked:

– What about Mr. Fully?

– I have no doubt that it's wonderful. And we deserve food no less than the tendrils of arenarius deserve care and attention.

“Well, if he's not offended that everyone ate it without him...”

I took a piece, my mouth filled with saliva from the mind-blowing aroma. She sank her teeth. The most tender, hot, incredibly appetizing! Chester is definitely at risk of being left without a pie!

I crushed the piece in a few seconds and immediately took another. Wandering through the swamps awakens a beastly appetite – I'll say so if the owner comes to an empty table. Or again the professor will be there first. Moreover, he almost kept up with me and also took the second piece.

“Your face, Miss Blair, reflects an amazing mixture of



emotions.” From pleasure to remorse. Don't worry. I'm pretty sure this isn't the only one. Mrs. Ferguson loves feeding everyone too much to deprive Mr. Fully of food.

“You calmed me down.” Laughing with your mouth full is bad manners, but I couldn't resist. – At the very least, he'll bake some more. It's terribly delicious, and I'm terribly hungry. Impossible to resist!

– Let's write it down. The invigorating air of Scotland has a positive effect on appetite and a negative effect on the number of pies in the surrounding area. Tested on two experimental individuals.

– Does the presence of Arenarius nearby preserve the pie for the mentioned individuals?

– Arenarius, scaly verbena, swamp pseudoclover, three magical varieties of heather, and you forgot the most important thing – purple stemwort. I think she may be the deciding factor in saving the pie.

And together we took another piece.

As expected, Chester came to the empty dish. And the coffee pot – the professor and I just filled another cup each. I felt almost happy – well-fed, dry and warm, enjoying the rest after the idiotic, there is no other way to put it, run through the swamps. Dr. Norwood seemed to feel something similar; he was almost complacent. I slightly teased Chester, who exchanged pie and coffee for an arenarius mustache, built theories about the reasons for the failure in the portal system, which were quite logical and

beautiful, I even felt ashamed that I knew the real reason, but could not say.

“Here you are,” he saluted Chester with a cup of coffee. – Made it just in time for the wake.

– What are you talking about? – It seemed to me that Chester’s thoughts were not yet here, but with the same Arenarius and the rest of our prey.

“About the pie,” Norwood pointed to an empty dish. – As you can see, there are only a few sad, lonely babies left.

“Then I’ll ask Mrs. Ferguson to bring some more!” – the hospitable host was delighted. – And coffee?

And he ran away without waiting for an answer.

“Let’s hope he doesn’t confuse the way to the kitchen and to the greenhouses,” Norwood chuckled.

“All these,” I moved my hand, “magical heathers, arenarius, purpurea, what else, verbena?” Are they really that rare? If your friend is a botanist, he probably himself knows where they grow? I have a feeling that we brought him some incredible treasure, and not an armful of grass. It’s nice, of course, just a little awkward.

– Of course he knows. And, of course, they are not that rare. Except for the purple one – it’s not easy to lure it into the light. But sending Chester to buy herbs is like forcing a snail to pass a speed test. He will be lost to society for at least a week. And this is if it goes no further than the neighboring lawn. So the herbs for it are usually collected by trainees or graduate students. If it

is justified by their work, which happens less often than Chester would like. Therefore, you can, with a clear conscience, consider yourself a treasure hunter and gift-bearer.

I laughed and then shook my head.

– At first glance it's funny, but in reality it's sad. It turns out that he would be happy to go somewhere himself to collect all these herbariums, but his work won't let him go?

– He loves his job no less, so don't waste your pity and sympathy. This is not a suitable object for them. Just look, is this disgustingly satisfied and radiant individual worthy of sympathy?

As if to illustrate Norwood's last words, two dishes, a coffee pot, and Chester, who was conducting this parade of goodies, floated into the living room, truly glowing with contentment and happiness.

“Here,” he proudly announced, “another meat one and, for dessert, plum.” Ah, my friends, how good it is that you were able to keep me company! Otherwise, I would have been left alone against the culinary genius of Mrs. Erguson, and this is an obvious defeat.

“Given the size of your belly, my friend,” Norwood mockingly mimicked, “you could easily cope with this minor difficulty.”

– Dougal, no! Not again! – Chester put all the wealth he had acquired on the table and settled down on a chair. – I won't die from obesity, I won't have a stroke in my prime and won't have a heart attack. Of the two of us, I'm the healer, I know better, don't even start.

– Oh well.

At the last moment I refrained from asking about the role of magic in preventing heart attacks. What would be the topic? Sensation. “Yes, yes, for THAT world,” a piece of plum pie helped to restrain first curiosity, and then the sudden melancholy. We would like to figure out what could become a sensation here, but first we will have to resolve more pressing issues. Life and death, so to speak.

“Tell me, Miss Blair, didn’t this impossible, callous man traumatize the purple girl too much?” I mean exclusively the moral side of the issue. Purple girls are gentle, trembling creatures, they love affection and cannot stand rough treatment. How did you pull her out, barbarian? – he turned to Norwood, – she has a constriction on the third internode. The juice circulates in slow motion. And this is an even lesser evil, it could break!

– Oh, I was all tenderness and trepidation. I have a witness.

“I think the purple girl would have gotten it if she was a student.” And since she’s just an innocent plant, the professor was really gentle,” I smiled into my coffee cup.

– Here you see. In this case, through the lips of the well-fed and peaceful Miss Blair, the truth speaks. So leave me alone with your internodes. I don't know and I don't want to know. Better eat before we repeat our previous feat of gluttony.

“Oh, yes,” Chester looked at both pies with an attentive, weighing and appraising glance and reached for the plum one. But, as soon as he transferred the piece to his plate, he perked

up again: – ? time? How long did she stay without soil?

– Probably about half an hour? – I responded uncertainly. – Maybe less. We were rushing so fast that I definitely couldn't have withstood this pace for more than half an hour.

– Thirty to forty minutes, no more. And by the way,” Norwood looked at his watch, “five minutes ago the second year of alchemists finished their classes. Since we're not in Edinburgh, it's time to do good and spread justice. Miss Blair, as I understand it, you are not in much of a hurry to get home today, so perhaps you will continue to bring gifts and inform the dear Mr. Applestone that he has a written test awaiting him first? In the left drawer of the desk under the Gregorian reference book. Will you give me exactly twenty minutes and make sure that this genius of poetry looks at the questionnaire? and only into it. I'll come to the end. We must inform Madame Headmistress about the sad portal incident.

“It's true,” I finished my coffee in one gulp. “I completely forgot about our swamp adventures.” Chester, thanks for the treat. Please convey my admiration to Mrs. Ferguson. I have probably never eaten such delicious pies in my life.

She stood up and opened the portal as usual.

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Applestone hesitated in front of the locked door of the professor's office. He looked at me with the eyes of a wounded kitten and seemed to want to say something, but I was the first to do so. There is no point in depicting a dying doe here, I too,

an unrecognized poet.

– Good afternoon, Mr. Applestowe? Come in,” she opened the door and entered first. “Professor Norwood will be here soon, while you sit down and write the test.” You have twenty minutes, time has passed.

She placed a sheet of questions in front of him and looked at her watch.

– Is he really going to kick me out?! – this home-grown Romeo asked tragically.

– When he comes, ask him. But I think the answer will depend on what and how you have time to write, so don’t waste your time.

Applestone let out a heavy sigh worthy of a half-strangled bison – why is it that zoological pictures pop into my head?! – and buried himself in work.

A pen creaked, a clock ticked, and a spreading linden rustled with leaves outside the window. I suddenly thought – Charlotte gave Norwood and me a great gift. Even if wandering through the swamps cannot be called a pleasant activity, it is certainly more exciting than a social event. Norwood was... perhaps interesting? He looks not like a dry-haired professor, but like the Dougal that Sabella showed me. I remembered the time spent with Chester with a smile. Thanks to Mrs. Ferguson, her pies were a great conversation starter.

I didn’t look at Applestone and he probably took it as an indulgence. The creaking of the pen died down and was replaced by the rustling of pages. So-so. I went up to the table – the office

was not an auditorium, the trembling young man did not have time to react – and took the thick reference book from his lap.

– Miss Blair! – Applestone was indignant in an offended whisper.

– What?

– Don't you feel sorry for me at all?!

– No. Should it?

– Certainly. I'm not some Obli. I have one of the best overall results in the course. But if Dr. Norwood is seriously mad at me, he will find something to complain about. I have to check!

– “Easter Applestone.” I would like to remind you that it was you, not Mr. Obley, who caused this deadly situation. Because of my own frivolity and conceit, and not ineptitude. What do you think is worse? Ineptitude goes away with experience, if only there was a desire. And your best results and the negligence they generated almost landed both you and me in a hospital bed. Best case scenario. It's a shame if you don't understand this.

– I understand! But... – Applestone rubbed his face and stared at his sheet with an unseeing gaze. – Okay, it's good that it's in writing and not verbally. He would have smashed me!

“Four minutes,” I said. – Add what you know.

Norwood came in at the last minute.

– Good afternoon, Mr. Applestone. I won't say that I'm glad we met.

– Mutually, professor. I mean... kind. Hope. – He moved his long-suffering sheet to the edge of the table. – All is ready.

– if you also hope that everything will be limited to this writing, then in vain. Hoping is harmful to a growing organism. Tomorrow you will come for the results, they will become admission to the oral examination.

– When? – Applestone asked sadly.

– After classes, of course. Or do you expect to amaze me with the depth of your knowledge during a ten-minute break? This is possible in the only case – if you have no knowledge at all.

“Got it, at half past six,” Applestone nodded and disappeared. Forgetting, by the way, my reference book, which I put on the edge of the table.

And Norwood turned out to have a keen eye for other people’s books – he noticed right away. He opened the flyleaf, admired the library stamp of the Academy, and asked:

– Really? Should the radiance of Mr. Applestone's irresistible charm have hidden this unromantic little book from you? Maybe he was also trying to pity you?

“Of course,” I walked to my desk and quickly looked through my mail. Nothing urgent. “Professor Norwood is such a beast that he will certainly find something to complain about, and without checking the reference book, the unfortunate young man will immediately become doubly unhappy.” But he has some of the best results on the course, not like some Obli.

– Did he say so? – Norwood’s eyebrow rose.

– Not literally, but close. For some reason he decided that I should feel sorry for him. After he almost hit both of us with



sharp glass!

“Probably because his verses and fiery glances were supposed to melt your already not too icy heart.” But you and Mr. Applestone, of course, know better. Goodbye, Miss Blair. Be careful with portals. No Scottish moors will cancel tomorrow's working day.

“Anomalies are just anomalies because they don't repeat themselves twice,” I answered frivolously. – See you tomorrow, professor.

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"My home is my castle". Only when I found myself in Charlotte's almost native living room did I give vent to my emotions.

– answer, unfinished Barbie, were you flirting with this... this trembling male doe? Also, probably, in front of the professor?! ? Now I have to sort it out!

– It's hard to call this flirting. He showed signs of attention. Charlotte accepted them, nothing more.

“I accepted it favorably,” I clarified. – And now one thinks that he can afford too much, and the second...

I couldn't even imagine what the second one was thinking. But hardly flattering for Charlotte. And I only have four days left to correct the impression, to somehow interest him, to make him fall in love... and to fall in love myself, but this may be easier than I was afraid. All the more offensive.

“Sending you into the swamp turned out to be a good idea,”

the ghost said thoughtfully. “But it won’t work a second time.” There is another opportunity, but it is not me who should give it to you.

“You should think of sending me to the North Pole,” I snapped. – With one blanket for two. Four days. And he was running around this damn swamp for herbs. What’s the point?!

“You turned out to be not such a burdensome company for him as expected.” He turned out to be more humane to you than usual. There is a point. But the North Pole... No, too many magical costs.

God, she also took it seriously! Never joke with ghosts.

“It was a joke,” I explained, just in case. Otherwise, if she digs up magical reserves somewhere, she will be done. And Norwood and I will have to act out a scene from a romantic comedy: “two Indians under one blanket did not freeze.” – What other possibility were you talking about?

– Sabella Norwood’s birthday. Day after tomorrow. It is quite possible that you will be there. But not with my help.

September ninth. Ostrich leather gloves noted by Norwood in the ad. God, Sabella...what a terrible birthday she’s in for. She knows everything...

– She knows. I think that if she celebrates, she won’t even have to impose herself, she herself won’t miss the opportunity to let us talk outside of the academy. But is she really interested in the holidays now?

– Precisely to give you an opportunity. Of course she will

celebrate. And he will call you.

But it will be the day after tomorrow. And there will be two days left. Just two.

Melancholy and hopelessness – that’s what I felt now. And no amount of tricks and assurances from Charlotte could interrupt this.

– Everything is not as bad as you think. “Don’t despair,” she said finally and disappeared.

Otherworldly comforter! "Don't despair"! It's easy for her to talk. It seems that during these three days, Charlotte's ghost managed to forget what it was like to be alive and experience emotions. And I didn't want to become the same at all! Dead and soulless. They also say that ghosts are a cast of the soul. Or am I confusing something? I have never been interested in otherworldly mysticism.

To somehow distract myself, I decided to spend the evening in front of the TV. At least I'll look at the magical new world this way.

She sat down in front of the screen and commanded:

– Turn on. Show me Sydney. Otherwise, it seems like I won't really get there anymore.

“Inexpensive last-minute trips, order a guide, rooms in the best hotels...” the announcer tried to suggest, and I barked:

– No. Can you show a banal panorama of the city or not?! Without advertising!

It would be better not to ask. The Sydney of this world

was beautiful. A white-green city on the shores of a blue-blue ocean. The famous opera house seemed a little different, but also impressive. And the damn too smart unit brought it closer and showed the portal platforms, so I probably could even now take a risk and open the portal. No airline tickets or long flights. You can generally spend the evening there, and go to work from there tomorrow. What's stopping me? Fear of getting confused with a portal halfway around the world? So I don't lose anything. Absolutely nothing. The remaining four days are such a small thing compared to the whole life that could still be lived, is it worth taking them into account at all?

Leaving the TV to show the beauty of Australia to the empty room, I went downstairs to get a beer. I had a picture of Circular Embankment in my mind's eye. Skyscrapers are reflected in the blue water, and someone waves from the side of a snow-white boat. And really, what is it worth to move there? One hand movement, one step. It couldn't be simpler.

But I don't know if it will be as easy to open a portal halfway around the world. I don't know anything about the visa regime and how they ensure border security here, if every child is able to open the portal. Maybe some kind of anti-portal "iron curtain" is standing, and without a visa it will smear it like... unappetizingly, in general, it will smear it. Or it will immediately transfer it "where it needs to be." I mean, to the "competent authorities". I just didn't have enough problems like this.

In four days I'll take the risk, then it won't matter.

Tears welled up in my eyes. Beer, TV and thoughts about a possible imminent death – a wonderful evening awaits me.

I wonder what Norwood is up to?

No, what's interesting is that after Elsa, with whom he remained friends, did he have someone? Is there anyone now? Sabella probably knows, but this is where she could have been lying and remaining silent. Although, since he still believes that I will be able to interest him... I will assume that he is free now. So there remains at least some hope.

The TV showed a bird's-eye view of Sydney while I drank beer and tried to imagine what Norwood was like with women. It seemed like a slightly softened version of the usual poisonously ironic mode. "Saber-tooth driftwood" and "almost-evening-dress" are even cute, if you don't expect any special tenderness from a man. Because Norwood seems to be capable of tenderness only in relation to the purple girl. "Look, baby"... on the other hand, if he called me "baby"... well, no, don't!

But he also only has four days left, although he doesn't know it yet. It's probably bad that I didn't tell him. Not fair. What if he also has some kind of dream that it would be a shame not to fulfill? You never know... maybe grow some more super turnips? Or take a yacht ride to the Great Barrier Reef – why not, after all? Should he have some hobbies besides science?

I would even keep him company. Surely it would be interesting. Although it is unlikely that he dreams of spending his last remaining days with Charlotte.

It's a pity.

Stop. What happens – I would like to spend these days with him? Not because it is necessary, but...

And because it would be nice for me? Am I suddenly attracted to his company? Are his sarcastic remarks interesting?

I finished the bottle and immediately opened another. It turns out that pirogues and swamps are very easy to bring together. Or rather, swamps and pies, but who cares. This kind of news definitely needs to be washed down.

And eat it. Beer is good, but beer with pizza is better. Down again. There are definitely some restrictions on moving the portals back and forth; it's not for nothing that in Sabella's house, like Charlotte's, the portal leads to the living room. So for Sydney you will have to find out how things are with visas here.

I placed my order and sat in a chair to wait for my delicious pizza. She took another sip of beer and closed her eyes...

The lacy arc of the Harbor Bridge was reflected in the blue bay. Large and small boats cut through the blue surface, yachts were white, tourists were noisy around. And there is the roof of the Opera, looking like sails in the wind.

I jumped into a nimble boat standing at the pier, and it rushed across the bay, leaving a white foamy trail. The wind tried to tear my wide-brimmed hat off my head, I held it with one hand and grabbed the handrail with the other. She breathed the salty and iodine freshness of the ocean, so different from the musty air of the swamps, and regretted that Norwood was not nearby.

The boat brought me to a beach with white coral sand, and from the beach I was somehow carried into a bar, for some reason with German cuisine. Charcoal sausages and cold beer... isn't that enough beer for me today? I want some wine. Definitely Australian. I read somewhere that it is even better than Italian. It turned out to be true!

After a thoughtful tasting, I was whisked into the artist's studio. I knew his name was Jake and he was eager to draw my portrait.

– Full-length nude? – I asked just in case. He burst out laughing.

– If you want, why not? But I only meant what I said. Portrait. A face in the moonlight against the background of the ocean. In blue tones. Do you know that there is something otherworldly about your face? It's like you came from a completely different world.

“I hope this is not your way of courting girls, because I only agree to a portrait,” I pretended that I had not heard the words about another world.

And there really seemed to be something otherworldly in the portrait. Not me and not a ghost – but as if both me and her at once. ? Blue, it turns out, has so many shades...

“You're a wonderful artist, Jake,” I said, looking at my Charlotte's face on the canvas.

It wasn't scary or deathly, it wasn't the face of a ghost. But it seemed to reflect another world. In subtle strokes and pale blue

color. Strange, alien, as if illuminated from within. Consisting of thousands of different shades.

And it seemed that this frightening world was about to call the girl from the portrait. Will pick it up. It will absorb and will not release anymore. And against the foggy, barely traced background, almost invisible to the eye, strange dark silhouettes appeared, either mountains with sharp peaks or rocks. And they, too, were frightening.

– I don't understand... How did you see all this? Did you feel it? You're a fucking genius.

“Empty,” Jake waved it off. – I'm just an artist.

– Yes. You have shown more here than any words could say.

“Thank you, Sally,” he nodded. – Come back tonight, we need to work on the details.

– Today? – I looked at the clock, out the window. The sun was rising over the ocean. – I have to go to work. But... I don't care. There's nothing to worry about, right?

He laughed and kissed me – lightly, almost in a friendly way.

“No need,” I asked. – I have Norwood.

“You talked about him half the night,” Jake said. – The half when I was drunk. Everything will work out, Sally. Don't be afraid of me, I only claim your face in the moonlight, one more night. Although I will be glad if you invite me to the wedding.

“Oh, what a wedding,” I waved my hand and opened the portal.

And she opened her eyes.



I was sitting in a chair, the ordered pizza was waiting on the table next to me, and outside the window it seemed to be deep night.

“Good morning, Sally,” I stood up and stretched. The body is numb, the chair, although comfortable, cannot be compared with a bed. – Go get some sleep like a human being. I'll dream about something like this... in blue tones.

The face of the girl from Jake's portrait, mine and not mine at the same time, was clearly remembered, although I usually don't remember dreams. And for some reason it was scary.

## CHAPTER 4. Day four: Friday

The morning was blessed with light autumn rain and a wind too cold for September. No joke, I was pleased – moving through the portal would not allow me to freeze and get wet, but I immediately imagined what yesterday's swamp adventure would have turned into in such weather. I dug out a more or less decent formal jumper in Charlotte's closet. A bit bright, but at least not crimson. A pleasant turquoise hue, reminiscent of today's dream, Sydney Harbor under the bright sun and a "portrait in blue."

Why is this portrait so attached to me?!

Yesterday's stormy day, evening with beer and sleep in a chair echoed with aching muscles, a sore head and general lethargy. A heavy dose of coffee helped partially, but the brain asked to actively ventilate it in the fresh air. The usual morning runs were missing. I imagined myself jogging through the village with my hair down and my tits hanging out. ? the neighbors look and cannot understand what came over Miss Blair and what kind of fly bit her. The witch is hereditary, completely strange. What difference does it make to me who thinks what? It's worse that Charlotte's body is probably not used to the stress, but that doesn't matter. I'll teach you. And I myself will finally get used to moving normally with these boobs, without losing my balance at every sharp turn. And it really calms the nerves.

maybe we should start right now?

There was something more or less suitable for sports in the closet... but nothing was found. Tight beacons don't count. Of course, there were no sports stores among the scattering of business cards. And it's time – it's not dawn, don't wake up Grisella.

Well, okay. Then today, instead of an energetic jog, take a long walk. Also good. I'll sort out the tracksuit in the evening.

I put on boots and an insulated raincoat, put my shoes in my bag, took an umbrella and went to work on foot. Luckily there was enough time.

Probably, in good weather, many people liked to walk to the Academy slowly, rather than being transported there by a portal – the path was well-trodden. But there were no people willing to walk in the rain and wind. I walked in splendid isolation, boots squelching through puddles, and remembered today's dream. Too bright, too... alive? I want to go there. In the warmth and sun. And so that nothing saddens you, and no terrible prospects. Why can't you just walk along Circular Quay with Norwood without thinking about...

Stop. "With Norwood"? Is that what I thought?

Well, yes. If only he would want to take a walk with me, that would be fantasy and magic rolled into one.

A gust of wind hit me in the face, turned the umbrella inside out and almost carried me away. Turning my back to the wind, I tried to straighten the umbrella's spokes, and the downpour that fell on my head was as sudden as snow in the Sahara. Hey, we

didn't agree that way. It was a fine, boring and safe rain, why did it suddenly turn into a monster?!

I opened the portal and fell out of it in the Academy courtyard. She slipped and... would have fallen, but she ran into someone tough, smelling pleasantly of tart men's perfume. She grabbed the slippery waterproof raincoat and raised her head.

What is this? Norwood!

“Deja vu,” he said, holding me with one hand and a huge black umbrella with the other. Such a giant is probably not afraid of any wind. – True, yesterday you tried to throw me off balance with your back. Nice variety. Is there something you haven't shared with the portals, Miss Blair? They are clearly not in a good mood for the second day.

“Sorry,” I muttered. I can imagine what a wet chicken I look like now! – I accidentally. I thought about going for a walk, and... here I am.

– Interesting choice of weather for walking. Did the ashes of the Scottish moors knock so actively on your heart? Come on, a puddle is not a good place for small talk.

He grabbed me by the elbow – it seems that in this world they have not yet come to the point of declaring any help to a girl as sexism and sexual harassment – and dragged me into the building. I was painfully ashamed of my wet appearance and “friendship” with the portals, because of which, indeed, for the second day in a row I was trying to knock the professor off his feet. And how did he so delicately say about yesterday – “back”,

or rather it would be “ass”.

My hair was dripping, I didn't even think to put it in a bun at home, having decided to air it out. His cloak dripped onto the marble tiles of the floor, and his boots left ribbed dirty footprints. It's good that the umbrella was carried away by that terrible squall, otherwise, with my “luck,” I would have definitely hit the professor in the eyes.

And what bad luck. Okay, Norwood's raincoat is waterproof, but he himself is almost dry.

– ? Don't you use umbrellas at all? – Norwood asked with a noticeable amount of interest, who, it seemed, was also looking at me. Although the marks on the floor interested him perhaps more.

“He flew away,” I announced gloomily.

– Impressive unanimity with portals. It looks like he's also unhappy about something.

We had almost reached the stairs when a wave of dry heat washed over me from head to toe.

“You were cold to look at,” Norwood explained.

“Thank you,” I think I blushed. Or is this the effects of a drying spell? Which I shamefully and stupidly forgot about. Still, it's not enough to learn the charms, you have to get used to them. On the contrary, I'm used to living without any magic. I was already thinking about whether the department would have something to change into, or whether I would have to return home. Well, isn't it stupid?!

On the other hand, in three days you cannot relearn how to live with fundamentally different possibilities. And in a week too. I'll get used to it... if I have time.

The thought that it's already the fourth day, and with all the successes – every now and then I'm showing myself to be a fool, I wanted to cry. Fortunately, the director's newsletter, already familiar to me, distracted me from mental torment. Even two, one hovered in front of Norwood, the second was intended for me.

"Miss Blair. I hope you have already arrived at your workplace; if not, hurry up. Doctor Volger came to us from the London Academy of Higher Alchemy, we need to meet him and escort him to the small conference room. Lecture on the influence of tidal cycles on the alchemical properties of metals. We are taking two senior alchemist courses there, and, of course, the presence of all members of the alchemy faculty is mandatory."

The messenger disappeared, conveying instructions to me.

"What amazing news," said Norwood. Maskelyne also enlightened him, but he looked anything but happy. "Miss Blair, before you lose yourself to society in the rays of the charm of the highly respected Herr Wolger, be kind enough to take me a place in the last row, closer to the door." I will certainly pay attention to this event. Tidal cycles. What could be more exciting? But later.

"I'll have to escort him to the conference room," I admitted sourly. I didn't want to accompany some unknown Herr Volger.

“Students will probably have time to occupy the last rows.”

– Students – perhaps. And all the students will be drawn to the first ones, so there will be a place.

“As a last resort, we’ll round up someone,” I suggested. – Will they really not give in to their professor?

“You can scare them with me as you like,” Norwood approved. – It will work.

– Agreed. Well, I’ll go accompany the guest.

“Go,” the professor agreed, looking at me with some strange look.

And what did he see in me to look at me like that?

I received an answer to this question very quickly. Fortunately, she had not yet reached the director’s office, where the guest was waiting. Out of the corner of my eye I caught my own reflection in the dark glass of the door of a large conference room, stopped, looked closely... My hair, wet and dried by the spell, stood on end, and I also forgot to take off my cloak and change my shoes. Well, Norwood! What an infection! And I’m good, the last of my brains were blown out by the wind and washed away by the rain!

Okay.

I went into the restroom next to the conference room. I changed my shoes, threw my raincoat and boots right there, if someone is suddenly flattered, then I don’t care. Standing in front of the mirror, I concentrated and repeated the styling charms I had learned on the first morning. High, strict hairstyle, black trousers, turquoise jumper, snow-white blouse collar. Great.

Now you can pretend to be the face of the Academy. Where is your Herr Voltaire, that is, Volger, bring him here, we will escort him in the best possible way!

Maskelyne looked at me appraisingly, nodded slightly and said cheerfully:

“And here is our Miss Blair, she will take you to the conference room.” Our students and staff look forward to hearing from you. I'm sure it will be brilliant.

Tellingly, she didn't even think about introducing the guest to me. Either Charlotte already knows him, or is it assumed that everyone already knows this blond guy? I don't like blondes, there's something fishy about them. Although this specimen is certainly above average. Blue-gray eyes under dark eyebrows, golden hair pulled back into a short ponytail. The lips are beautifully outlined, but he smiles very broadly and sweetly. But overall, it's clear why Norwood predicted that female students would flock to the front row.

– It's good to see you, Doctor Volger. Let's go, I think your listeners are already waiting,” I gave a routine smile, and Maskelyne nodded approvingly again.

– The joy is mutual, dear miss. If everyone at Panacea Academy is as amazing as you and Mrs. Maskelyne, I can see why Dr. Norwood is entrenched here. And perhaps I'm even jealous. By the way, where is he?

– He's sorting out today's schedule so he can listen to your speech without any problems. He asked me to take a seat for him.



– Well, of course. As always, extremely busy and unbearably gloomy. Although he gathers quite a large audience, he is still a well-known person in narrow circles. However, he is far from my training camp. Have you ever listened to my lectures, Miss Blair? I would definitely have noticed you. Such a memorable face!

There was an acute lack of information. I couldn't even ask if it was his first time at the Academy, because Charlotte should know that without question. But the jealousy towards Norwood would be hard to ignore. "Famous in narrow circles", of course! ? then your "circles", Herr Volger, are much wider!

"I believe that during your speeches you have no time to look for interesting people in the audience, Dr. Volger," I answered vaguely. – Still, keeping the attention of the audience is a task that requires some effort, right?

– ?, you are mistaken, dear miss. – Volger waved his hand frivolously. – Keeping an audience is not at all difficult if you love what you do and know how to instill this love in your listeners! But immersing yourself in the subtle realms of alchemy is especially wonderful while looking into the eyes of a stunning woman. I would definitely remember your eyes.

"Face", "eyes", and he looks askance at his chest. I wanted more and more to respond with a barb. Luckily, the conference room was nearby.

"They've arrived," I said. – That way. I think there will be a lot of interesting eyes in front of you today. "And revealing cleavage," I thought when I was almost swept off my feet by a

senior student with the top two buttons of her blouse undone.

– Is it really you, Doctor Volger?! – she exclaimed, devouring him with a loving gaze.

That’s great, now I can calmly disappear – he won’t even notice.

The back rows, as I thought, were packed to capacity. I didn’t look for empty chairs, but went to the last ones near the exit.

– Gentlemen, these two places were occupied by Professor Norwood.

There was no need to scare me with anything else, the name was enough. Not even two, but three guys in this row and the two in front of them jumped up and disappeared into space, as if they had never existed. This is the authority Norwood has! They are afraid to show themselves once again.

Meanwhile, through the high door intended for the lecturer, Volger floated in, surrounded by beautiful and not so beautiful maidens. The one with the buttons undone was clutching a notebook to her high chest. Did you ask for an autograph in your notes, or what?

– Is everyone here? – he asked. – Can everyone see me, can everyone hear me?

“We hear you, O Kaa,” someone muttered from the side.

– It’s your luck that the bandarlogs from the first row don’t hear this.

I glanced sideways at the voice, looking at the students with a sense of humor that seemed to be stolen from Norwood. It's

probably worth remembering them.

Meanwhile, Volger went on about his role in science, the epoch-making nature of his discoveries, and the importance of every person “both in this room and outside it” (honestly, he said so!) to be imbued with the historical significance of the moment. All this was not much like a scientific report, as I had imagined it. I wonder if Norwood will even come? He probably knew what to expect from this, so to speak, “colleague.”

– And so, when I asked myself a question, a very important question about what kind of subtle influences such an intractable and ossified material as metal can perceive... – no, I am not able to listen to it. Even if in fact this is not a heresy, but a topic that is really important for local science – not in the same presentation!

Norwood’s appearance could easily have been missed, because he entered absolutely silently and silently sat down in the chair next to me. But he was noticed. A lively whisper swept through the back rows, someone even whistled quietly, and now that was interesting. It seems that Herr Volger and Professor Norwood in the same hall are a reason to expect something more entertaining than a lecture on metals and tides. Volger Norwood also noticed and grinned smugly, without interrupting his next florid remark.

“It’s strange that you’re not in the front row, Miss Blair,” Norwood said quietly. – Didn’t the shine of the diamond from alchemy reach your heart and enslave your brain? Marvelous.

“I value my brain not being enslaved,” I joked.

– Envidable rationalism.

Norwood crossed his legs, placed a clipboard with blank sheets of paper on his knee, and pulled a pen out of his pocket. Was he going to take notes on this nonsense? Can't be.

“Even the ancient alchemists knew about the secret connection of metals with the planets,” Volger said, “but what, I ask you, are the roots of this connection hidden? What? Has anyone, anyone, taken the trouble to think about this exciting topic? Are you, miss? Or you? Or maybe you, colleague Norwood?”

– Only you, colleague Volger, are capable of thinking about exciting things. Please continue, I have your full attention.

I wonder if Volger didn't appreciate the irony or managed to let it fall on deaf ears? But the students definitely appreciated it; restrained and not very laughter rang through the back rows.

“You shouldn't be laughing, gentlemen,” Volger remarked with gentle reproach. – Science, all science, all progress, and not just our beloved alchemy, rests precisely on such reflections. For where does it begin, how does any discovery begin? With thoughts! Since the mind thirsting for activity asks itself: “What trace can I leave in the centuries? What seeds should be planted in the tremulous minds of young talents?” Do you agree, colleague Norwood?

“Oh yes, colleague Volger, of course,” with spare strokes Norwood depicted on the sheet of paper a lady in a short laboratory coat, hip and busty, with a mane of hair suspiciously

similar to Charlotte's, with a test tube in one hand and a cauldron in the other. Something like overgrown hailstones with the inscription "grains of a thirsty mind" were poured into the cauldron. Below it read: "Beloved Alchemy. The key word is beloved."

I snorted, barely holding back my laughter.

"For the ancients said that reflection is the mother of understanding," Volger raised his finger to the ceiling. – So, what can the affinities of planets and metals tell a thoughtful mind?

A giant brain appeared on the sheet with one convolution, for some reason across it, and covered in lace. "The thoughtful mind of Herr Wolger, eager for action. Scary".

Below, Norwood wrote: "Miss Blair, come to your senses, you are not in an art lesson. Listen! I can. I am already a professor."

"Painting is more interesting," I answered in a low voice, leaning closer to Norwood. – I shouldn't be a professor. My mind is not thoughtful enough for such exciting heights. Or the depths?

"And you can clarify. He will rejoice."

– I'm afraid.

"In vain. Who doesn't dream of diving into the depths with Volger? Or rise to heights. With him. Take a look at the front rows. Everyone is already floating there."

"That's it," I agreed. She glanced sideways at the guys further down the row who had pricked up their ears and took a notepad and pen out of her bag. She moved closer to Norwood, as far as the chair would allow, and put the notepad on the armrest. She

wrote: “We were soaring even before the lecture started. Don’t let your beloved alchemy end up in such company!”

“Our sunshine. Darling. Sweetie. Sweeties. Cutie. Pretty girl. How was it... Blue Eyes! Brilliant.

When I decide to write my memoirs, a series of enthusiastic epithets dedicated to Herr Wolger by the floating maidens will take pride of place in them. Join us. The list must be impressive, otherwise it will not reflect all the depth and height.”

“Bunny,” I suggested. – Kitty. You can also gopher. Yes, gopher. Every day my brain produces exclusively zoological associations. Cute touching meerkat. Exciting, like the thrill of the tip of a steppe fox’s tail.”

We sat with our shoulders pressed tightly together, and I suddenly thought that Norwood’s penchant for malice was transmitted through touch, even through clothing. Otherwise, why do I now take such pleasure in slander?

“Yes, you are a poet, Miss Blair. I give a standing ovation. But we haven’t touched on botany yet! We need to consult with Chester. *Leusolia tremulous* and chaotic is not suitable.”

If only I knew what this same *Leuzolia* is! And why is she not only reverent, but also chaotic.

“As far as I have come to know Mr. Fully, no botanical association with Herr Wolger will be favorably received by him. His plants don’t deserve such comparisons, do they?”

“Who’s going to ask him? This is all for the benefit of science! That part of it that is loved by a thoughtful and activity-hungry

mind.”

“I passed.”

– And then I thought – why the Moon?! Yes, the beautiful Selene, sung by ancient poets, is our closest companion, but why not Venus, the embodiment of beauty, born from sea foam? The goddess Cypris, who excited the minds of more than one young creator! Why not the great Saturn? Not the mythical Phaeton, the son of the Sun, and not the Sun itself?! The Great Cosmos is interconnected, and it would be madness to deny its influence on the earth’s surface and especially on the tides, this is the embodiment of the elements!

“Kingdom for earplugs! I lived a great life without hearing this nonsense!”

“Be patient. Difficulties strengthen you.”

This time, Volger appeared on Norwood’s sheet with a massive crown on his head, sitting on a hummock with the inscription “Great Cosmos”. I reached out to the sheet and bloodthirstily drew a wave hanging over it with a concave crest. She whispered in Norwood’s ear:

– The embodiment of the element of verbiage. Sorry, I’m not an artist by any means.

– Me too. But with such a background, you won’t want to, but you will become a “young creator.”

My whisper did not bother Volger, but he reacted instantly to Norwood’s phrase spoken only a little quieter than in an undertone.

– Is there something unclear to you, colleague Norwood? There is time allotted for questions after the lecture, but I will be happy to answer you right away.

“What are you saying, colleague Volger,” he responded, “everything is very clear.” I am reciting the main points of your outstanding speech to help me remember it better.

I had a hard time suppressing the urge to do the classic “hand-face.” She just asked, again switching from a whisper to a pen and notepad:

“You don’t know how long this will last?”

“Given the element of verbiage? At least two hours. And if you add to them the floating maidens with questions and delight – all three. Be strong.”

I just sighed. “What should I do?” Norwood twirled the pen in his fingers, almost like a cowboy twirled a revolver. And I spontaneously added: “Are you playing “battleship”?”

He glanced at me with something like cheerful disbelief.

“The last time was a long time ago. Let's get started.”

I quickly outlined the field and ships. She tore out a piece of paper from her notebook to record moves. She whispered with only her lips:

– Start.

From that moment on, Volger could talk as much as he wanted about tides, elements and young creators; we had no time for him. Nothing helps brighten up a boring lecture more than excitement and two pieces of paper, ask any student. In addition,



we had fundamentally different approaches. Norwood “shot” chaotically, sometimes it even seemed to me that he was poking at the sheet without looking and only then looking to see which cell fell out. I combed the field methodically, leaving no chance for the large ships, and along the way I also touched the small ones. With my system it was difficult to hit only single-decks, but overall it was superior to Norwood’s approach. I wonder when he will notice my strategy and how he will react?

I noticed it quickly. He grinned and wrote: “Your system is bad because it is too easy to calculate.” And he began to “shoot” according to the same pattern. I thought about whether to tell him my second secret of the game, and decided – even if it’s not interesting, the chances are too unequal. I wrote along with the next move: “Invent your own, you won’t find my ships using this system.”

“Have you taken into account that the enemy can adopt tactics on the fly? Not bad, Miss Blair!

"Experience, Dr. Norwood!"

"And if so? A8"

“We got it!”

“Yeah! I will make you together with your system!”

"Let's see!"

Very soon, both he and I had only our single-decks left intact. Norwood has two, and I have one. As sports commentators would say, the game has entered an acute phase. Pure luck – no system will help you figure out single-deck boats. Who's going to be

lucky?

"D9"

I looked at my last ship in disbelief. How, how, Holmes?!

– Killed.

A deathly silence suddenly reigned in the hall, which I felt with my whole being, to the point of goosebumps. Like Volger's gaze, and the students who turned to me, it seems, everything was as if on command.

– How?! – Herr Volger asked confusedly.

"A shot at cage D9, and not you," I thought gloomily. How awkward it turned out. You had to get so carried away.

"Of course, with your progressive approach to intertidal pebbles and intertidal pebbles," said Norwood with a surprisingly serious face. – I must admit, I was almost killed too. On the spot.

"Pebble?!" – I wrote when the reassured and inspired Volger began to broadcast again. What side do pebbles generally face towards metals?!

Probably the same as Venus and the young creators. Yeah. I'm killed on the spot, that's right.

"Another game?" – Norwood replied.

"Let's".

When Volger finally finished with the ebbs and flows and questions from enthusiastic students, the score was three to two in Norwood's favor, and I was desperate for coffee. Preferably with a cupcake, but the main thing is coffee. Clear your mind after the ebb of thoughtful intelligence. ? which is what I said, completely

losing sight of the fact that there was a crowd of students around. I hope they won't give me away; in the last rows, it seems, the fans were gathered not of Volger, but of Norwood.

Yes, it turns out that he has fans in his senior years. They don't take autographs, but they are ready to take notes on his naval battle strategies. And they even asked when there would be a lecture and colloquium to replace those that were canceled for Volger. The most persistent were not frightened even by the "Sunday" voiced by Norwood.

But it scared me. Sunday will be my, our, sixth day. For some reason, it persistently seems that it is the last time, when it is really still possible to achieve something and do something. The seventh is already a line, summing up.

Well, thank you, Maskelyne! Not only did she force Norwood to work here through sheer meanness, but she also loads him with work on the weekends. Maybe we should spend some of the remaining time giving the headmistress some nasty "farewell gift"? How, for example, do they treat revealing articles in the press here? At home, I could easily start a very good hot scandal, not even on all the available material, but only on that which is easy to prove without rummaging through someone else's personal life. But then at home, there I know all the moves and all the right people...

With these thoughts, I didn't even notice how we reached the buffet. A crowd had gathered at the counter; it looked like everyone from the conference room had rushed here. I wasn't

the only one whose brain needed recharging after such a global outburst.

“The life-giving influence of alchemical genius,” Norwood commented. – Urgently cheer up and refresh yourself.

I looked doubtfully at the seething students, reminiscent of rush hour in the subway. The staff generally serve you without a queue, but you have to squeeze through!

– I can make coffee at the department – not that I really want to do this, but maybe it will really be easier?

But Norwood solved the problem radically. He walked to the counter like a hot knife through butter. They made way for him and didn’t even try to express displeasure. Some guy from the front rows handed him a huge, almost liter mug, apparently his own. He said, baring all thirty-two teeth:

“It still won’t help wash down the tidal pebbles, Professor.” But drink, I don’t mind!

– Thank you, Mr. Airsey. Your kindness and responsiveness goes beyond all conceivable limits. So make sure you also get some coffee for Miss Blair. She was also impressed by the pebbles.

“Deadly impressed,” I said plaintively.

Someone else handed me a mug, just as huge. Solemnly, like a medal for the torment experienced. He also shook hands with wishes not to kill himself anymore. I thanked him from the bottom of my heart and hurried to get out of the crowd following Norwood – he seemed to have spotted a free table.

But my skills in moving in a crowd failed me, and in the most treacherous way. I tripped over someone's foot and fell nose-first into the floor. She waved her arms, trying to find support, grabbed someone, but, probably, this someone was just pushed from the other side, and the two of us fell. Well, at least not in a hug!

A student I didn't know sat down, shook his head, rubbed his forehead and said:

– Alive. ? I thought, too... that. Killed. Hey Miss Blair, how are you?

I hit the floor with my elbow, the pleasure was much below average, but what was terrible was not that, but Norwood, drenched from head to toe in my coffee. A mug split in two was lying on the floor, and coffee was dripping from his jacket and soaking into the shirt of the professor, who apparently turned around at the wrong time.

“An amazing ending,” he said after a pause that lasted what seemed like an eternity. – A hot coffee shower has never happened in my experience.

“S-sorry,” I muttered. I didn't have the strength to get to my feet; I only had enough strength to sit up instead of lying in a heap on the floor. I rubbed my elbow, and the world around me blurred with tears.

This is all an unusual body! Try playing around with these buffers! Charlotte even seems to have a slightly different center of gravity, although I always thought that only men and women

had different centers of gravity. It probably also depends on your body type.

–Are you okay? Can you get up? – Norwood pushed his mug to someone and extended his hand. – The painting “Miss Blair in a Coffee Puddle” is not suitable for an academic cafeteria. Now all connoisseurs will come running to take a look.

That's for sure. It's good that I don't wear Charlotte's favorite miniskirts and cleavage.

I took the professor's hand with a strange trepidation, as if in the depths of my soul I was waiting for her to disappear. Didn't disappear. Norwood pulled me to my feet, held me, made sure I didn't fall immediately as soon as I lost my footing. Said:

– You better sit down. What do you want with coffee or cake? Chocolate?

“Yes, please,” I asked, burning with shame.

He returned quickly, this time with a tray. Coffee for both of us, and four muffins. All are chocolate. The clothes were dry, but the stains on the shirt looked terrible and caused me a new attack of shame.

“I shouldn't have suspected the portals of malicious intent.” You can do just fine without them.

“It was an accident,” I muttered, clutching my mug like a life preserver. – And I apologized!

– As I noticed, accidents haunt you with enviable frequency. This can be life-threatening. If you had not fallen on Mr. Miller or together with him, the damage would have been greater.

“Dangerous for life”... He himself doesn't know how right he is. I hurriedly took a sip of coffee and took a bite of the muffin, as if that would quell the tears that were welling up. I'll cry at home. Or better yet, there's no need at all, what's the use of tears. But telling yourself “don't cry” is much easier than doing. I'm not a crybaby or a hysterical person, but who could manage to remain calm? "Life threatening". Damn four days, already less. And Norwood, who doesn't know that he and I are in the same boat, rapidly rushing towards the waterfall.

I ate a cupcake, but for some reason it was salty. From tears, perhaps?

It's good that Norwood was silent. Now I could react too violently to even the most innocent remark.

But cupcakes can still lift your spirits even in such a terrible situation. I ate all four, and the last one no longer seemed salty. Great chocolate cupcake.

Before the couple started, Norwood had just time to change clothes – no, it's still a good thing, portals. When they are not remembered in the context of accidents and danger to life... The picture of a boat rushing rapidly towards a waterfall without oars never left my mind. I once read a similar story: two people in a boat and a waterfall, something from American science fiction. There the heroes managed to escape. Will we succeed?

Time was passing, and I was almost glad that Norwood was at the lectures. Because men don't like women's tears and transfer this dislike to crying women. The “sea battle” turned out so well,

there's no need to interrupt the impression. Although what am I talking about, I already interrupted with my epic flight to the floor. The painting of Miss Blair in the Coffee Puddle, oh yeah.

The work was falling out of my hands, I couldn't concentrate on anything. Maybe also because the mail belonged to the next week, but will there be that week? UK Pharmacists' Conference, Wednesday to Friday, on what date should Dr Norwood's talk be scheduled? ? is there a difference, which one? The conference is not going anywhere, but will there be a report? Or will they publish it with the author's last name surrounded by a black frame? Invitation to the presentation of a new line of medicinal cosmetics next Saturday. Ingredient supplier advertising brochure. VIP invitation to a new exhibition at the Royal Botanic Gardens with a note from Chester. Oh. He sent two invitations for me too!

I pushed the mail to the edge of the table and buried my face in my crossed arms. An invitation from Chester – so nice of him! – became the last straw. Just don't cry. There is very little left until the end of the working day.

Time generally tends to fly by too quickly. Just this morning it was four days, but now we can already say that it's three.

– Miss Blair! Please tell me that I am admitted!

I raised my head, looked into Applestone's worried face and said:

“For now, I can only tell you one thing: you have to knock.” The professor didn't say anything about admission. I'll see now,



he should have checked your work.

Indeed, yesterday's questionnaire was lying on the professor's desk, inserted into a reference book forgotten by Applestone. Across the front page, in red ink, was written, "Acceptable for the start of the year." I gave the sheet along with the reference book.

– Wow, he really did. I was already thinking – that's it, pack your things, transfer somewhere to the botanical department. Thank you Miss Blair, you literally bring happiness!

– As far as I understand, before you are happy, you will also have to pass an oral examination.

– It's a tragedy, right. But if he didn't kick me out right away, then there's a chance!

I didn't want to answer. I looked at my watch – there were still five minutes until the end of the class, how did my trembling doe gallop up in advance? Doesn't it matter though? I shielded myself with a newspaper and pretended to read.

Suddenly I remembered the first morning at the department, Norwood, fenced off with a newspaper in the same way. Could it be that he was hiding from Charlotte? No, it's me. Why should he hide? There is nothing surprising about a man who reads the latest newspapers in the morning. This is fine. Unlike the girl who, in the middle of the working day, has her face buried in a flyer from the day before yesterday, and even holding it upside down.

And I wouldn't even notice if it weren't for another note in

black ink across the ad.

I turned the newspaper over.

“Salon “Eternal Youth”. New arrivals of elixirs. From the best masters! ”

The little lady-vignette of flowers and leaves, as for me, in combination with the name “Eternal Youth”, rather evoked cemetery thoughts. Or is it my current mood that is to blame? Okay, what did Norwood write here? “Remind Chester. Elsa. Check dates and echinops tincture. Bart is a fool and a charlatan.”

Elsa? The same ex with whom they remained friends? This is her salon, isn't it? Or competitors? Maybe that same Bart, the fool and charlatan?

Or does that no longer matter?

– Miss Blair, what are you reading that is so interesting? – Applestone unceremoniously sat down on the edge of the table. – Ads? Oh, look: “Exchanging coordinates of portals for outdoor recreation.” Don't you think this is a sign of fate? You and I definitely need to spend this weekend somewhere under the bright sun and sultry sky, on the shore to the accompaniment of the rolling waves. If, of course, I have a reason to celebrate. But even if it doesn't, you are already an extremely good reason!

– If you have a reason, you, of course, will celebrate, but how did I get involved in your plans? I have my own plans, Mr. Applestone, and they do not include your company.

– But if your plans do not include the azure sea, the rustling of palm trees and a couple of glasses of mojito, you can change

them! Think for yourself, Miss Blair! You only live once!

– Mr. Applestone, the seating in this office is chairs, not tables. And be so kind as to discuss your grandiose plans with Miss Blair in a more appropriate place.

“Yours and Miss Blair?!” I jumped up:

“I already told Mr. Applestone that my plans do not include his company!” Not in any place or in any form! I don't dare disturb you! – opened the portal and rushed home. My home is my fortress, and I don't care that it's not really mine at all, the main thing is that I can finally let myself go and wear myself out to my heart's content. Sometimes it is necessary. And I certainly have a reason. Lots of reasons. A mountain of reins the size of Fuji and Everest, stacked on top of each other. A sea of reasons, the tides of which will reach the top of this mountain. And let it all go to waste!

I sobbed, sitting on the floor in front of the chair and folding my hands on it, stupidly, awkwardly, but I had no strength left to walk to the bedroom. No washing, no changing clothes. Why is everything so stupid? Why are men so... like this? And Charlotte, the real one, is so... so that all sorts of... all sorts of wrong people flock to her!

And why is there no time at all to do something, fix it, improve it? Three damn days. They will flash by just as stupidly as today, with Applestone's thoughts about life and Norwood's remarks about my joint plans with this idiot. "You only live once"! What do you know about life, brat?! I found a great tragedy – a survey

with a professor! And that one... too...

My thoughts completely ran away, leaving only sobs, and then I had no strength left to sob. I sobbed and howled, then it was as if I heard myself from the side and... got scared.

I've never been so unstuck before. Even when the sneaky asshole Mike traded me for Sydney. Even when I had to leave the first good job in my life. Or is this also a greeting from the real Charlotte? But it wasn't enough to become a hysterical fool!

Although... I won't have time.

And I cried again, this time quietly, horrified by the overwhelming feeling of hopelessness.

I don't know how much time passed when I realized that some kind of obsessive noise that distracted me from tears and suffering was a knock on the door.

And who could be there? I wasn't expecting anyone, except perhaps some acquaintances or friends of Charlotte? Do I need them here? I don't know them, so how am I going to get out?

But there really is enough crying. There was a handkerchief somewhere in the bag. Or should I still make it to the bathroom? Or some tea first?

– Miss Blair, open up! Don't force me to yell at the whole street and tear down your doors.

What? I mean... who?! Norwood is here?!

By the time she reached the door, she crashed into the door frame and almost knocked over a hanger in the hallway. My legs couldn't hold me up. And what brought it now? I would like

some strong sweet tea, maybe even throw in a sip of cognac, and go to sleep. Don't explain yourself to your superiors. Probably dissatisfied with my sudden departure from my workplace.

So I'll take it and tell him the whole truth. About three days. Let him also understand, why should I suffer and worry alone?

I opened the door and silently stared at Norwood's face. No, it doesn't look like he came to scold me. Why would you, really? I could speak out about discipline and working hours tomorrow morning. And what does he need then? Silent. He just looks at me like he first saw me. Well, yes, such a roaring and probably swollen beauty, perhaps for the first time.

"I see," Norwood finally said. – Bag. – He shoved my own bag into my hands – I only now realized that I had run away from work, leaving behind both my bag and my raincoat with boots. Taking him by the shoulders, he gently pushed him out of the way. – Where do you have the potions?

– What potions? – I remembered the first point of my plan, took a handkerchief from my bag, furiously wiped my eyes, blew my nose and stared at Norwood.

– different. First aid and others. First aid kit. Medicines," he explained, as if mentally retarded.

"I don't know," I answered indifferently. – I think it's in the bathroom. Or in the kitchen.

"Great," Norwood entered and closed the door behind him, as if he doubted that I was able to do this. He opened a portal and disappeared.

Well, why did you come? Okay, I'll find out later. Or I won't find out what the difference is. So, what's next in my grand plans? Wash and tea? I also don't know where Charlotte gets cognac and whether she has it at all. So, we'll look. Just like a first aid kit, you really need to find out where it is and what it is. Maybe there's something there for a hangover, then I'll get drunk.

Then Norwood appeared again, with a flat black case, and silently walked into the living room. And from there, it seems, to the kitchen. What is going on? Ask? No, wash your face first.

I locked myself in the bathroom and splashed my face for a long time with either warm, then cool, or completely icy water. She was flushed as if from the cold, but the general swelling had not gone away. Nightmare. My eyes wouldn't see this. No, crying is still a disgusting habit. I'll go have some tea. By the way, you should offer Norwood too, if he hasn't left. If he refuses just like that, it will be as compensation for spilled coffee.

Tea was waiting for me on the table. And Norwood is at the window.

“Drink,” he said without turning around.

– Pour it for yourself too. Drinking tea alone when there is a guest in the house is, to say the least, unsightly. I'll look for cognac now. Or I'll order it.

– Sit down and drink. You won't want cognac after this tea. And don't worry about me. Today is my coffee day.

“Then coffee,” I agreed easily. She took out a jar from the cabinet. – Here. Ground, Arabica. Now. And I wasn't going to

drink cognac after tea, really. A sip into the tea. By the way, how much sugar did you put in? I put two spoons.

– Miss Blair. “He finally turned around, was next to me in a couple of steps, took the can from me, took it by the shoulders and sat me down on a chair. – Drink, I say. What kind of attack of verbiage against the backdrop of hysteria? Did you get infected from Volger? Let's. Should I spoon-feed you?”

“The hysteria is over,” I said, wrapping my hands around the hot cup. – Perhaps temporarily. She didn't report.

– I already understood that.

The tea smelled strange. No tea. Did he add something there, or what? That's why I asked about potions. I took a careful, very small sip.

It's unusual, but you can drink it. Perhaps no worse and no better than with cognac.

I drank slowly, trying out the new taste. About halfway through the mug I decided – no, I don't like it. Some kind of non-sugar and non-honey, sticky sweetness. Asked:

–What did you pour in there?

– Do you want all the ingredients in alphabetical order?

– Let me think. If you ask a person what kind of book he is reading, would you be satisfied with the answer: “Do you want all the letters in alphabetical order?”, or would you prefer the title?

– Name of all potions in alphabetical order? – Norwood grinned distinctly. – It's a mixture.

“Mixture number three, with pepper,” I remembered a quote

from the film. I wonder if Lemonade Joe was filmed here?

– Without pepper. Number two thousand two hundred and forty three. Fifth prototype. Very valuable information, isn't it?

“Informative,” I agreed. – If you are interested in the impressions of a guinea pig, then it is too cloying.

“Otherwise it would be too bitter.”

– Maybe we should really add some pepper? Although, in tea... But in coffee it would be a different matter.

Even I don't drink coffee with herbs. Disgusting taste.

– And coffee with pepper is unique. I was treated to something. Is it possible to eat this mixture of yours? By the way, can I ask you? If you don't want coffee, just sit down. It's not very convenient to talk to someone who looms behind you.

– It's easier to control the process while standing. Although it is unlikely that you will manage to blow up anything now.

Judging by the sound, Norwood opened the refrigerator. He chuckled and closed it.

– And in any case, you have nothing to eat, so accept it.

– You can order pizza. Do you know how delicious the pizzas are in Little Italy?

– Judging by the number of boxes in the living room, they are very tasty. I'll take your word for it. – He still poured himself some coffee and sat down opposite.

– Why the word? I still need something for dinner. Four muffins all day is not a diet you can be proud of.

–Have you decided to starve yourself to death? For what, I



wonder?

– I decided? I think you're the one trying your best to get away from pizza.

– You don't have breakfast, skip lunch and don't have lunch when you come home from work, of course, it's also because of me. – Norwood pulled his wallet out of his pocket. He turned the light green business card over in his hands. – We'll have to atone.

– What nonsense! – I was indignant. – You know about today's lunch as well as I do, and breakfast... I just had a nightmare, and I got drunk on coffee and decided to take a walk before work.

“In the rain,” Norwood nodded understandingly. – The umbrella flew away. The portal failed. Herr Volger has arrived. The coffee spilled out. Well at least there are some cupcakes left. What about lunch?

“Depression,” I answered vindictively. – Belated search for the meaning of life.

– To be or not to be? To eat or not to eat?

I grabbed the mug. My hands began to tremble.

– You didn't guess. And we won't. ? then your mixture number two thousand two hundred forty-three without pepper will not help.

– Mine will help. Otherwise, I wouldn't be sitting here, but gaining experience somewhere in Tibet. And I also searched for the meaning of life.

The food appeared right there on the table. And even served, and not in boxes or plastic containers. A huge steak, emanating

with fragrant steam, golden slices of potatoes, green peas. Sweet rice pudding topped with jam. Toasted croutons.

That is great. No talk about the meaning of life. Because I can't tell him. I just can not. For some reason I feel like this would be wrong.

The first normal meal of the day awakened a ravenous appetite. I downed my portion in no time and was seriously considering supplementation. It seems in vain that I limited my acquaintance with local ready-made cuisine to “Little Italy”.

Although, okay, eating too much at night is harmful. And to be honest, I was quite full. And somehow I even quietly finished the tea with the experimental mixture.

“It’s delicious,” she told the professor the obvious. – Thank you.

– Now continue to satisfy my professional curiosity. Describe feelings and desires.

“Satiating,” I grinned. I listened to myself: isn’t I feeling hysterical again? Of course, there is no reason to have fun, but you won’t be able to cry either. Even if I want to. “I don’t know whether to consider it an achievement of your mixture that I no longer feel the urge to cry; you came when the tears had already ended and I was about to wash my face and drink tea.” But it doesn't work. What was left was... devastation, I guess you could say. Not even sadness, because being sad is an emotion, and emotions have all disappeared somewhere. Or no, don’t share it, but... how to put it...

I fell silent, thinking about how to most accurately describe my feelings. Norwood waited, looking at me with interest.

“It’s like looking at a solar eclipse through smoked glass.” Yes. That’s probably true. And I almost didn’t want to sleep at all; for some reason I thought that all the sedatives were making me sleepy. And I want to chat. And... – I thought again and for some reason yawned. – I want it somehow rationally. With the understanding that chatting now is useful, because otherwise the very thoughts that make you feel hysterical will begin again. Here. Probably everything. Was there anything else you should have paid attention to?

“Give me your hand,” the professor ordered. – Pulse.

I didn’t pretend to be pretentious, my pulse was just that. He counted and nodded:

– I wouldn’t launch you into space now. But for a different reason. But the mixture does not affect the desire to “chat”. This is your own reaction to stress, obvious even before tea. Well, what are you so drawn to rationally talking about?

I thought: really, about what? In fact, thoughts about the damned three days can arise now from any topic. Even just because Norwood is nearby. But maybe it makes sense to take advantage of such a kind invitation to communicate?

– Tell me, do you have a dream? Not in the sense of “becoming a world-famous pharmacist”, but... how to explain... – Thoughts flowed too sluggishly, inhibited, as if half asleep. – Something that you definitely want to do, try, or visit somewhere,

or say something to someone. Something that is scary not to have time.

“A desert island,” Norwood answered instantly. – For personal use. At least for a week. At least in old age. Palma. Hammock. Cave-laboratory. Coconuts and shark fins on the horizon. I would become a kind romantic, communicate with Venus and Saturn and would probably be inexpressibly happy.

“It’s sad,” I agreed.

“As you’ve probably noticed, I don’t like people very much.” Especially some. And these some have the marvelous ability to reproduce at the speed of a fruit fly.

– I noticed. Well... you won't be sitting at the Academy forever, will you? Maybe not even in old age, but sooner, you will have your own island for personal use. If you take it seriously, this is probably not the most difficult goal.

– ? yours? Extremely difficult?

– No. Too simple. It probably can't even be called a dream. Just a place, a city that I really want to visit. An obsession, yes. That's more accurate. But it will be all the more offensive if... – I fell silent and looked into the empty cup. “I could walk around Sydney all this week, but I have Volger, Applestone, piles of daily mail and melancholy. And you, dear Doctor Norwood. And in a week it may be too late. It's hopelessly late.” No really. I'm not ready to go to that level of frankness. – You know, there is something else. I would leave the Academy. Travel the world and write. About everything. It would be great.

– So leave. True, some dreams are better off remaining dreams, but I wouldn't guess in advance which one shouldn't come true.

“Let's get out of there together,” I yawned again and shook my head. Drowsiness was creeping up, overtaking, and for some reason I thought: I wonder if I will see a continuation of yesterday's dream? ? What details did Jake say? – It seems your mixture still works as a sleeping pill.

– Very gentle, but effective and without side effects. Come on, get up, sleeping with your nose on the table is not what you need.

He appeared next to me and pulled me out of the chair. Very opportune, because I reminded myself of a piece of the same pudding that I had recently eaten. I can flutter, but I can't move meaningfully. I would actually fall asleep with my nose on the table – amazing progress after sleeping in a chair yesterday.

I grabbed the professor, almost hugged him. Somehow, lately he has often served as my support – in the literal sense. Thank you, it doesn't flinch. He even grabbed me around the waist. Probably to make it more convenient to guide my carcass in the right direction.

“The bedroom is upstairs,” I said.

“Extremely valuable and timely information,” noted Norwood, who had just stopped near the stairs. Why are there such steep steps here? I haven't noticed it until now, but in my current state the only way to overcome this climb is by crawling! Probably, the house was built for teetotalers and people leading

a fashionable “healthy lifestyle” in my world. The professor also appreciated the obstacle. He chuckled and said: “So, we solve the problem in the most acceptable way.” Hang in there.

And I took off into the air. Oh! I grabbed Norwood by the neck, and he held me under my back and knees, like a child. And with such a load he cheerfully stomped upstairs. Strong.

“No one has ever carried me in their arms,” I said for some reason.

– Enjoy. So, where to now?

– To the left. I'm enjoying it. It's a shame that this is a one-time event. I'm not the type of woman you like, am I?

– Yes, I just like to carry all the suffering ladies up the stairs in my free time. You know, miss, if you weren't in a faint state, I would think you were flirting. Yeah. Here she is!

“I'm not flirting,” I objected offendedly. – Honestly, I'm deadly serious. By the way, you can already put me on my feet.

– Well, I do not. You in an upright position and without mixtures can be dangerous to yourself and others. Our goal is the bed. The most reliable and safe place.

I didn't understand how he threw back the covers and blanket. A movement of his eyebrows, no less – what would have happened to him? He laid me down. Said:

– The shoes are definitely unnecessary. The rest can be dealt with.

I didn't care anymore; I would have fallen asleep in my shoes if he hadn't taken them off. It was as if the contact of the head with

the pillow had triggered the hypnotic effect of the mixture of two-thousand-and-so-on in full force. Through the approaching sleep I heard a quiet voice:

“Good night, Miss not-Blair.” Rest.

And I fell asleep. Softly, smoothly, as if rocking on the waves of a warm sea and slowly plunging into them.

## CHAPTER 5. Day five: Saturday

That night I didn't dream of any blue portraits, I didn't dream of anything at all. Or did I just not remember? But I slept surprisingly well. I'll have to tell Norwood. By way of feedback from a grateful experimental patient.

My head was clear, I immediately remembered that today was a day off, I didn't need to go to the Academy. It's completely unclear what to do with the day. Although yes, I was going to start running. You still need to find a sports store and get a suit, sneakers, and maybe also buy dumbbells for a set.

“Yes, yes, dumbbells. Definitely. ? also a hula hoop and a yoga mat. – For some reason, my inner voice sounded with the poisonous intonations of Dr. Norwood. – Lost her mind. Three days left, what kind of running, what kind of dumbbells?!”

I groaned and buried my face in the pillow. Was it necessary to remember this right in the morning?

? Today is Sabella's birthday. Poor woman, how can you even organize a holiday, knowing that the life of your only son hangs by a thread?

However, I was not invited. But maybe he'll invite you again? No, I'll ask myself. And not even because it is necessary! After last night I wanted to see Norwood. It was as if something had happened between us, something unexpectedly good... and there was still something misunderstood.



Did I dream or not about his “Miss not-Blair”?

Ask when we'll meet? No, I won't. A slippery topic in which if you say “a”, willy-nilly you will have to reach the end of the alphabet.

Didn't she ask you in a dream that I wasn't his type of woman? Nightmare. It seems that this mixture is also liberating. The effect of talkativeness and slight intoxication. I hope I didn't say anything completely inappropriate.

Okay, it's a day off, but we have to get up. And the first thing is to undress and take a shower. Sleeping in the clothes you wore all day at the academy is a very below average pleasure.

? then – coffee. And not with pizza! It's time to join some more masterpieces of local cuisine.

A great plan to start your morning, no matter what time it starts. I'll decide what to do next after coffee.

There was no need to decide. I had just taken my first sip when I heard the melodious ringing of bells from the living room. And what could it be? I went out to look, and a narrow yellowish envelope flew up to me, faintly smelling of lilies of the valley. I extended my hand, the envelope fell onto my palm like a trusting bird and opened.

“Dear Sally, I'm expecting you today at two o'clock in the afternoon. Dougal and some of his friends will be there. I think you'll fit in well with the company.

Sabella.”

Not a word about the birthday. So, there is no need for a gift.

Sabella is not in the mood for a holiday, that's understandable. Dougal, several of his friends – and I, as the last hope for a miracle.

The clock struck half past twelve. I fell asleep! The sleeping pills in Norwood's mixture are indeed effective. It's okay, I'll make it in time. Thanks to the portals and my gigantic order at Grisella's salon on the first evening – there were several very elegant blouses, I'll choose the most frivolous one. And black formal trousers, for contrast. And your hair... maybe put it in a ponytail? A compromise between a working, strict bun and a loose mane. In total, it will take at most half an hour to get ready. You can slowly drink a second mug of coffee... and think about Dougal and yesterday.

So, one wonders, why did I flare up so much in response to his remark about Applestone? After all, in fact, he said correctly: the tables in the office are not for students to sit on, and it was also not the place to discuss plans for the weekend.

This means that it was not the words that hurt, but what stood behind them. Dougal's thought is that it's not Applestone who's hitting on me, but that we're discussing joint plans. Or the fact that I didn't even understand how he himself reacted to this option? He doesn't care – or does he?

“Well, well, Sally, you're already hoping for jealousy,” I looked into the cup and thought: “Are they telling fortunes on coffee grounds here?” This seems to be the only way for me to guess what Dr. Norwood is hiding behind his impenetrable work

façade. Because my ability to read faces doesn't work with him, and to get him to open up is easier to make Maskelyne dance a jig on the buffet table. Only if he wants to. It's like a desert island. It was definitely revealing. And... cute? I think, yes. It is unlikely that he shares his dream with just anyone.

So why did you share it with me? Or with Charlotte? Did I really dream or not that he realized I was not her?!

But what else is interesting – how did Applestone's survey go? I cried violently, but perhaps not long enough. Certainly not the hour and a half required to properly drive a careless student. One of two things – either Norwood got away with a short survey for the sake of it, or he quickly and cruelly failed Applestone and advised him to spend the weekend not on palm trees and mojitos, but on repeating what he had learned. I'll bet a hundred to one on the second.

And then you decided to bring me a bag? Why suddenly?

No, I don't understand. There are some pieces missing in this puzzle.

I looked at my watch, finished my coffee and, out of some hooligan impulse, turned the cup on the saucer upside down. This seems to be the way they do it. There is no point in guessing now, and there is no time, but you can ask Sabella. I'll come back and see what happened there.

I got dressed, tied up my hair, and put on light, almost invisible makeup. I think I look good. Before leaving, I went out into the front garden and cut flowers for Sabella. A simple, not too

formal bouquet – pink, purple and white phlox and a few sprigs of asparagus. I don't want to come to her completely empty-handed, but this... this is not a gift, just a sign of attention, right?

I looked at my watch again – it was exactly two in the afternoon. I imagined Sabella's living room and opened a portal.

The room turned out to be quiet and empty, but there was no need to look for the hostess or look around. Almost immediately I heard light footsteps and I saw Sabella. Today she was wearing a soft, surprisingly summer dress, muted lilac, and she smiled as usual – softly and calmly. Only there were noticeable shadows under the eyes, either Sabella did not pay attention to them, or did not consider it necessary to hide them.

“I'm so glad you came, Miss Blair,” she said with a barely noticeable hesitation. I held out the bouquet and answered, accepting the rules of the game:

– Thank you for the invitation, Miss Norwood. Sorry, I... I thought the gift would be inappropriate. And flowers suit you.

– Thank you. “So you knew,” Sabella nodded and added a little quieter: “I can even guess where.”

– From one chatty ghost. I'm really glad you called me. Otherwise today would be a very sad lonely Saturday.

From somewhere deep in the house, a simple glass vase flew into Sabella's hands, filled with water and sat on a low table. Sabella placed my bouquet in it and straightened out the delicate asparagus branches. Asked:

“Would you mind being Charlotte for me today?” We're

almost having a family evening. – She waited for my nod, took my hand: – Let's go. As I understand it, you already know Chester.

A step – and we were transported from the living room to a small garden. Or rather, a piece of the garden around a gazebo entwined with blooming clematis – as if torn out of autumn and returned to summer, or even spring.

I couldn't help but sigh in admiration. Under a gust of wind, pale pink apple tree petals fell onto the green carpet of the lawn. The white clematis flowers at the edges also shone soft pink, and in a tiny pond framed by the sharp leaves of a marsh iris, three pink water lilies bloomed. A waterfall flowed into the pond from a small alpine hill; the plants on it were unfamiliar to me, but I appreciated the combination of colors. From pale green, almost white, to bright lilac and purple. And the stones in the hill are red-black granite and yellowish sandstone. Stunning contrast.

A huge tea rose bush was blooming near the gazebo. The bees were buzzing. And further, just a few steps away, the fallen leaves were getting wet under the fine autumn rain and the bare branches were bending in the wind.

“Magical,” I whispered.

“Oh, that's Chester's work,” Sabella smiled. “Climatic charms are his strong point.” Like biomes of all stripes.

Chester emerged into the light from under the curtain of clematis and smiled joyfully:

– Miss Blair, here we are again. I am glad! And don't listen to

these praises, the kindergarten turned out not bad, I don't argue, but it is as far from a full-fledged biome as the unleavened cake from the diet is from Mrs. Ferguson's pies.

I laughed:

"You are also a master of visual comparisons, Mr. Fully!"

He spread his arms and bowed theatrically.

"Besides, as you can see, the climate spell does not benefit the surrounding area. It's warm here, and behind the dome it's not September, but, perhaps, the end of October. Unfortunately, even magic is subject to the law of conservation of energy.

"And even more so, hot tea obeys him," a ringing voice was heard from the gazebo. – He's getting cold, Chester.

"It's true," he realized. "Ladies..." he stepped aside, letting Sabella and I go forward.

I immediately recognized the guest sitting at the table in the gazebo. Red-haired, bright, catchy, self-confident – Elsa looked much more impressive in life than in the photo. Green eyes looked with cheerful interest. I couldn't believe that Dougal could leave such a woman.

"Nice to meet you, Miss Blair." Sabella said amazing things about you. I never would have thought that she might need help choosing a dress.

"I didn't say a word about dresses," Sabella noted. – Charlotte, this is Miss Gill, an old friend of my son.

– What else can you do in Grisella's salon? And don't miss. Today I'm just Elsa. – She smiled, but something in her

gaze was dissonant with this smile. And it became clear that Sabella's explanations, whatever they were, did not convince her of anything. – Take a seat, Miss Blair, we've been waiting for you.

– Indeed? – Professor Norwood's sharp voice made me shudder. – It seems that I am the only one for whom this sudden phenomenon came as a surprise. ? As almost everyone present knows, I have not liked surprises since childhood.

Well, of course. He has enough of Miss Blair at work, yesterday for some reason he spent the evening wiping my snot, and here today – surprise, we smile and wave! You can understand. I didn't expect it to be easy, right?

– Who is to blame that you are late? – Elsa shrugged. “I was probably carried away by some experiment and forgot about time.”

– Dougal! – Sabella turned around impulsively. “Are you ignoring the living room again?”

– Of course, mom. There are a lot of beautiful places around this house that bring back pleasant memories in me. The living room is not one of them.

He hugged Sabella, and I hardly suppressed a convulsive sigh. Next to her son, she seemed small and fragile, airy and vulnerable, like a forest fairy. She needs him. Not protection, no – support. Love and hope. Sabella stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek as he leaned towards her. He kissed back, carefully, with a smile.

Then he turned to his friends.

– Elsa, you just blossomed in a week and looked seven years younger. It seems my new balm formula has worked wonders. We still need to come up with something for your belly, Chester.

– “For” my belly, you won’t come up with anything that will surpass the skill of Mrs. Erguson. And “from” – don’t bother. I do not agree to change my physique for body subtraction.

“It’s like someone is asking for your consent.”

“You’re especially kind today,” Elsa grinned. – Is this the influence of surprises?

“Perhaps,” Norwood agreed, pulling out a chair for Sabella. He waited until she sat down and looked at me. – I would assume that your conflict with the portals has taken a fatal form, but I suspect that everything is not so simple. Enlighten me?

I caught Sabella's questioning glance. She seemed willing to step in and explain, but only if I couldn't block the blow on my own. Still, the point of this adventure is not for Dougal to politely ignore me for the rest of the day. We need to find common ground – why not start now?

But still, ugh to be so impolite!

“Return visit, Doctor Norwood,” I said in my most businesslike tone. – Guinea pig report on the effects of mixture number two thousand two hundred and forty-three without pepper. Interested?

– Wonderful! – Elsa admired. – I see, Dougal, even during working hours you manage to replenish the number of your



guinea pigs. Unique talent.

– Innate. True, some rabbits manage to exhibit unauthorized activity and choose strange places for reports,” Norwood responded, looking at me thoughtfully.

“Unauthorized activity is called “initiative,” I enlightened. – They say it is very much appreciated. In certain circles.

– In certain cases, no doubt. I would like to know who defines them. Well, serving science requires sacrifice. Where's the lemon pudding, Mom?

He seemed to stop paying attention to me. I joked with Elsa and Chester, gave Sabella pieces of her favorite pudding and pretended that I wasn't there. But I felt quick, searching glances. ? not from him and, it seems, from Elsa too. Sabella frowned and tried to draw me into the conversation, but Dougal took over the initiative, and I only managed to insert a meaningless “yes, of course” once.

How disgusting it is to feel like a guest who, without meaning to, spoils the holiday! It's painful and very disappointing.

Only Chester did not notice the thickening tension. He ate pies enthusiastically and just as enthusiastically talked about his sweet purple girl, who had finally come to life after Dougal's “barbaric” treatment.

– This is a new word in science! Until now, it was considered an immutable truth that purple grass dies on magically poor soils and is extremely poorly absorbed by artificial replenishment of magic. But it's not that simple! – He waved the teaspoon, like

a pointer, almost hitting Elsa on the forehead, and she, slightly grinning, moved away from him – moving closer to Dougal. It's strange – why does it seem to me that this was played out especially for me? And Chester continued, not noticing anything: “I must say, Miss Blair gave me the idea.” I don't know how long she and Dougal wandered the swamps, but you, Miss Blair, constantly fed magic into your swamp equipment, am I right? – I nodded, and the teaspoon triumphantly rose to the heavens, that is, to the roof of the gazebo. – Here! Alien magic, not aimed directly at the purple girl, but as if enveloping her, creating a background from which you can take as much as you need! Two-stage feed, do you understand?!

“We understand, we understand,” Dougal grumbled. – You found the perfect nanny for your poor babies. And “Miss Blair” has been extremely suggestive lately. The most varied.

For some reason, I clearly heard irony in his “Miss Blair.” And, it seems, not only me. Even Chester, carried away by his ideas and discoveries, suddenly became distracted and gave me a very strange look.

– Indeed! – Sabella suddenly exclaimed. – How could I forget! Charlotte brought me some wonderful phlox. And I wanted to show her mine. But now... Dougal, maybe...

“Oh, I'll be happy to show Miss Blair your garden, Sabella,” Chester responded brightly. “Besides, if I don't take a walk now, the rest of this magnificent chocolate cake won't fit into me.”

I'm afraid that my facial expression has become somewhat...

goofy, as they would say in my world. Here such expressions are not accepted, and sometimes you don't know what to adequately replace them with. That's what it is, huh?! Chester liked the idea of a "nanny" and decided that it was worth luring me away from the Academy to his greenhouses? Or is it he who so selflessly saves Dougal from my company? How can I politely refuse him now? Because his company, of course, is pleasant, and, perhaps, should be much more pleasant than Norwood's sarcastic company, but...

But only if it's friendly. ? If I'm being honest with myself, Dougal's poisonous irony appeals to me more. And he himself... Sometimes... At certain moments... Yesterday, for example.

I remembered our "sea battle" tournament, which miraculously brightened up Herr Wolger's "tidal pebbles". But for some reason, almost immediately the memory switched to something else. The exciting feeling of Norwood standing behind me is very close. An instant feeling of flight when he suddenly picked me up in his arms. A dream – or not? – "Good night".

if only we had more time... not the remaining measly two and a half days, but... I don't know, a month, two, three? Maybe something would really work out? I would like to. In fact, I wanted to, and the curse had nothing to do with it.

The situation was saved, oddly enough, by Norwood himself. He stood up faster than Chester could let go of the spoon.

– Well, I do not. Your walks with phlox will obviously not be limited to, and I'm not going to catch you all over Yorkshire.

In addition, it is vital for me to accept the report, since it came with home delivery. Mixture two thousand two hundred and forty three cannot wait. Let's go.

I slowly stood up. What is going on? I don't understand! I caught Chester's amazed glance at Dougal, and Elsa's mocking glance at herself. Only Sabella looked encouragingly.

Norwood waited for me at the exit and let me go ahead. The dead silence behind me got on my nerves. Is everyone in shock?

No wonder, I'm shocked too. But it hardly matters.

– So, professor? – I asked when we went beyond the boundaries of the spring kindergarten into the chilly autumn that was not according to the calendar. She shivered: gusts of cold wind chilled to the bones. If I had known that I would have to walk, I would have taken a warm raincoat. She wrapped her arms around herself: this helped at least a little. – Phlox or report?

– Cloth. Until you turn blue and have pneumonia. What is this strange desire for self-destruction?

Soft fur fell over the shoulders and enveloped the body to the knees. I looked at myself. Wow! Norwood conjured up a real poncho for me, with an authentic Indian pattern, with fringe, but most importantly – thick, completely unsaleable!

“I didn't know you were a fan of ethnic style,” I muttered. – Thank you.

However, only I shone with ethnic style. For himself, Norwood created a classic cashmere coat. And a cap, in which he became subtly similar to Sherlock Holmes.

“There’s something mysterious and strange about him.” Suits you. But I’m more interested in why a hereditary witch has become so radically disengaged with magic in just a few days that she can’t even conjure boots for herself or dry herself. Very strange, isn't it? To the right,” he put his hand on my back, guiding and slightly pushing me towards the path covered with fine gravel.

“And where do you fly, Charlotte, when you need it?” I shrugged:

– Amnesia? Bet? Experiment?

The distinct, clear feeling that Norwood understood everything and would now begin to expose and expose me was frightening. After last night I didn’t know how to behave with him. I didn't know what to do. To speak or to remain silent. To hope or not.

– Amnesia in our world is curable, if you suddenly forgot that too. And no bet will force a person to forget how to breathe, or a magician to forget how to cast magic. Here, admire it. Phloxes.

“What remains is an experiment,” I agreed, looking at the flowerbed with colorful phloxes – white, scarlet, lilac, even blue. There don't seem to be any blue people in our world. Incredibly large flowers were collected in huge lush inflorescences. The cold wind did not affect them. Chester must have worked hard. – Although I could easily formulate a suitable bet for you, but... Perhaps you would have to completely lose your brains to do something like that simply out of boredom. Only if something

extremely important is at stake.

“However, how do you know what could be at stake for me?” This did not sound – if you stop in time, the interlocutor himself will think of what he needs. However, Dougal knows how to draw the right conclusions. And he probably sees right through all my attempts to keep a secret. Maybe because I’m tired of storing it myself?

“First, formulate your own name,” he suggested caustically. – Be so kind. After talking with you a little longer than necessary, anyone with ears, eyes and the rudiments of a mind will understand that you have nothing in common with Miss Blair. Apart from her appearance and shape, of course.

Well, I was not mistaken. And yesterday I didn’t dream. Norwood was not so blind as not to notice my obvious mistakes and differences in behavior. As Sabella predicted on the first evening.

Surprisingly, it became easier. It was as if a stone had been lifted from my soul. Still, it was difficult and unpleasant to wear in front of him the mask of a narrow-minded, ambitious girl who had done such a great job to both of us. Even if I wasn’t always able to match this mask.

“Unfortunately, I have,” I responded gloomily. – Although I would prefer... well, what difference does it make now? Freya Sullivan.

– Wonderful. – He put his hands in his coat pockets and slowly moved along the path further, seemingly confident that I would

follow. Well, really, what else was left for me? – It's time to draw intermediate conclusions. This is not an illusion, a hoax, a unique resemblance, or even cloning. You don't just have problems with magic. I think I won't be mistaken if I assume that you are not a sorceress at all. And what periodically turns out to be tolerable is obtained solely thanks to the memory of the body. You do not feel any attachment to Miss Blair, but most likely experience the opposite feelings. The current state of things does not suit you, but it seems that you cannot change anything. From here, or not only from here, are your heartbreaking hysterics and thoughts about your cherished dreams. The main question that interests me at the moment is no, two questions: why on earth and for what are you trying to live someone else's life, and how did my mother get involved in this story. Which, without a doubt, is aware of what is happening.

He really does look like Sherlock Holmes.

“I feel like a literary character,” I forced a smile. – A narrow-minded assistant to a brilliant detective, introduced into the plot solely in order to ask, after solving the case: “But how?!” Your conclusions are probably based on strict logic, but I don't catch the intermediate constructions. Why, for example, did you discard the hoax option? Or an experiment?

– You are not her. What kind of experiments can there be? Norwood shrugged. – And for hoaxes of any kind you need to have at least acceptable acting skills. You don't even have them in their infancy. And the participants in such impressive deceptions

are paid well. And they don't cry as if someone took away their most precious thing. However, at first I was leaning towards the hoax option. But only if Miss Blair herself had undertaken to arrange it. Absolutely mediocre preparation of a double, not a single chance of success.

I chuckled: in a way it was. My "preparation" was limited to a lesson in beauty care, making coffee, opening portals, and providing backup in several particularly difficult cases. Like that explosion in the laboratory or the visit to the headmistress. Norwood is right, anyone who knows how to look, listen and think would have instantly seen through the substitution, and then what did it cost Charlottenino "no one should know"?

–You're right, I'm not a sorceress. I don't understand magic at all. That is why I cannot answer your questions. I was told to keep quiet, I don't have enough information to judge when to follow this advice and when to break it. ? Sabella...you have a very wise mother, Dr. Norwood. And observant. She guessed that I was not Charlotte within about ten minutes of a chance meeting. We ran into each other in a fashion salon; Charlotte dressed terribly. I couldn't come to the Academy in crimson trousers!

Norwood chuckled audibly.

"They not only could, but had to appear in them if they were going to play someone's role."

– Never! – I resolutely objected. – There are some limits. In the end, any girl has the right to radically change her style.

"And this once again proves that you know Miss Blair very



poorly.” By the way, where is she? Or is this information also in the zone called “I was told to remain silent”?

“To be honest, I don’t remember exactly,” I admitted. – I think I was in shock then. It's all pretty vague. Do you know what happens when a bunch of disgusting news is dumped on a completely unprepared person? – I hesitated. This is pretty much what I'm doing now. Or I'm about to do it. Although... perhaps Norwood cannot be called completely unprepared? In any case, it seems like I have nowhere to go. I'm tired... endlessly tired of carrying this load alone. – Where is Charlotte... so I know where she is! Last appeared the day before yesterday. She said that the problems with the portals were her doing. Ghosts have a strange sense of humor, if they even have one.

Norwood stopped so abruptly that, by inertia, I managed to take a few steps before turning around. I have never seen such an expression on his face before. Not shocked, no, rather petrified.

“She was performing a ritual,” I explained quietly. – I messed something up. The result... well, here it is. True, I didn’t understand what happened to me; I didn’t perform any rituals. But she said that I was drawn after an astral transfer. A completely random coincidence. Otherwise, they would have found her body in the morning, and that would have been it.

“The farther, the more beautiful,” Norwood said slowly and suddenly rushed forward so quickly that I had to almost run to catch up with him. – Brainless idiot. An extremely logical ending, if you think about it. Wild. ?absurd. But logical. What is she

trying to achieve? Why does no one still know about her death? If she sets conditions for you, it means she has a goal. Thanks to which she hangs around here in the form of a ghost. Problems with the portals, that means. Why suddenly? What do they have to do with it? No, it doesn't add up. What kind of ritual was this, do you know?

– Only from her words. – I hesitated. Now the moment has come when you have to decide whether to tell the truth to the end or continue to remain silent... about the worst thing. I didn't tell Sabella about the curse, but she guessed it herself. Dougal is no more stupid than his mother. Part of me was terrified at the thought of him finding out the truth. For some reason I was sure that this would cancel out everything. A self-respecting man will not fall in love on pain of death. And, to be honest, I would be offended to know that I was chosen only as an alternative to quick and inevitable death. But... But is it really fair to hide something like this? He has the right to decide for himself. And also... Another question is whether I trust him or not. I consider him capable of making independent, correct decisions, or I'm ready to decide for him all my life, even if everything suddenly works out.

I wrapped my arms around myself and confessed. The feeling was frightening – as if I was stepping into the abyss of my own free will.

– Love spell. On you.

– What?! Are you kidding me? Is she crazy?

“She wanted attention,” I explained. – She wasn't in love, if that's what you mean. Just an ambitious fool.

– Attention? From me? Yes, I would turn her life into hell faster than the consequences of any ritual love spell! No. Not an idiot. This cannot be defined in words.

Norwood hardly expected any answer or explanation. It was as if he had completely forgotten about me, switching to Charlotte and her ritual. He kept speeding up and speeding up his steps, and out of stubbornness I didn't even understand, I stayed close. Although we had to catch up with him, breaking into a run every now and then. Where are we going like this? Somehow it seemed that Norwood himself could not answer. The wind whistled in my ears, pushed me back, threw withered leaves and rare, sharp drops of rain into my face. I didn't look around, trying to keep up, and only caught my breath when he suddenly stopped.

We stood on the very edge of the cliff, and below us lay a black, almost perfectly round, rippling lake. Quite a bit, I could clearly see the far shore – boulders at the water's edge, flying trees on the hillside. But perhaps because of the dark surface, which reflected the cloudy sky, or because of the dank cold that gripped me, it seemed very deep. Even bottomless, and I don't care that it doesn't happen that way. In this world, this is not possible.

For some reason, I immediately remembered the legends about water evil spirits: kelpies, grindylows, water maidens. Maybe here these are not legends at all, but harsh reality.

“I see,” Norwood said suddenly, and I shuddered, returning to reality. – This is not a whim, not a goal, but an attachment. On your own, miraculously surviving body and on the object of the love spell. How bad is it, Miss – or Mrs? – Sullivan? How much time is left? How much was it initially? A week or more? Is it time to write a will?

He still didn’t look at me, looking somewhere into the distance, across the lake. And the voice sounded much calmer now than at the beginning of my revelations.

“Miss,” I answered. – And, sorry, but I again missed the thread of your reasoning. However, it doesn’t matter... just interesting. I have always admired people who can draw the right conclusions with a minimum of data. – He was silent. Waiting for answers and not agreeing to divert the conversation? I turned away. – It was a week. Left... Two days, not counting today.

– And you all intended to remain silent until the sad ending? Brilliant idea.

“As if that changes anything,” I muttered. – Do you know how to fall in love when necessary?

“I don’t know how to fall in love at all, Miss Sullivan.” But I can think rationally. And, of course, I would not waste the last week of my life on what I almost spent it on, by your grace.

This “last week” hit him like a baseball bat in the gut. He doesn't even consider the possibility of this damn true, sincere or whatever kind of love? Even hypothetically, even as a tiny possibility?! Just like that – a categorical and final “no”?!

Why am I so unlucky with men?! For what?!

– By my grace? – I turned around sharply. My hands were itching to hit me in the face... in this impassive face, indifferent to everything except my science! – Oh, thanks! ? I probably only dreamed of raking through your mail in my last days!

– So who stopped you from telling me right away, and not organizing this idiotic masquerade? Or send Maskelyne and the Academy to hell?! You did neither, instead crying in the corners. Why?

– These sobs were given to you! I didn't invite you to my home!

– Yes, you were on the verge of hysterics from the very morning. The damned cupcakes almost shed tears! And then a loving idiot at the same time!

“Oh, yes,” I suddenly calmed down. Only it was some kind of wrong calm. Icy and ringing, evil. Requiring to strike back, to repay pain with pain. – It was only because of hysteria and clouding of my mind that I won only two games out of five against you.

I felt a pang of melancholy: but we played great...

“A pleasant, but not long-lasting enlightenment between hysteria and insanity,” Norwood pricked me, and I again internally bristled with icy needles. Why is he doing this to me? Is it necessary to insult and humiliate? – Which only confirms that I'm right.

– Of course, how can you be wrong! What a tragedy, he

was prevented from obediently folding his paws and thoughtfully preparing for death! Men! Cowards who blame women for everything.

I was carried away, and only some tiny thoughtful part, which probably did not get Charlotte's hysteria, mumbled and mumbled: "You know perfectly well why he is like this. And why? And what are you wrong about? Yes, you wanted what was best, but it was your "better." He doesn't have to agree with you in his opinions."

And it became increasingly difficult not to listen to her. If it weren't for Norwood... not his reproaches and my resentment... to hell with them, with reproaches, if he admitted that I deserve at least a tiny chance!

– You don't know men well. Or you don't know at all. But, as I see, the typical female desire to draw erroneous conclusions for another is characteristic of you.

– Of course! Like all other female vices and shortcomings. – But we both are carried... him too. What is this? What are we going to end up fighting like this?! "Of course, it's easier to die than to at least try to see something good in me!"

Here you go. For the first time in your life, you spoke out loud about the most important and most painful thing, the achievement is unlocked, congratulations... Freya Sullivan, once again rejected by a man. We bet he won't hear?

"Don't you think that in a week I could discover a little more than in two days?" If only I knew where to look and where to

look!

Did you hear?

He heard?..

And even... were you even ready to look for this hypothetical good? Same? As I?

But what's the point of that now?

“I don’t think so,” I almost cried from bitter, not even feminine, but some kind of childish resentment. On him, on life, on fate... the fact that a man heard me, after all, heard me... who doesn’t need me anyway. “You wouldn’t waste your last week on nonsense.” They just said it themselves.

And why do you so painfully, painfully want him to object, to refute? Convinced that this is not nonsense?

– Did you magically determine the volume, quality and structure of my nonsense? Considering that you understand magic like a pig in oranges, it is understandable why the result is so disastrous. For two days I thought that this was just another machination of Madame Headmistress! And I tried to understand why she needed it!

– Just two days? – I asked absentmindedly. Just so as not to remain silent, silence now would kill me more accurately than a curse.

– Of course. “I don’t know what was happening with Norwood, but he suddenly also spoke much calmer.” – Because she, unlike some, has a brain. And she would not have provided me with such a disastrous performance, even if she had set a goal.

And there was no reason.

– Of course it wasn't! She was quite happy with the state of things. ?since Charlotte was following you...

– Did you follow? – he winced slightly, “Don't make Miss Blair's person more significant than she was.” Did you report on my official movements and correspondence? About the brutal treatment of students? Yes, sure. And Madame Headmistress had much more compelling reasons not to change anything. So the initiator of such oddities could only be Miss Blair herself. I even thought about blackmail and a magical oath, but that's not about her, it's too complicated. However, we have deviated from the topic. You provided me with a pointless waste of time that lasted several days. At least try to explain why.

I turned away – I could no longer see his face, hold his gaze. Now Norwood stood behind me, and the lake spread out in front of me. Quiet, calm. But it also seemed to be looking and condemning.

“Out of female stupidity, why else?” I wanted to answer with sarcasm, but it turned out with bitterness. – No sane person would seriously hope that in a week you can fall in love yourself and evoke some feelings in another. Moreover, if this other person does not know how to fall in love in principle. But I couldn't help but try. – I wrapped my arms around myself. How cold it is. And disgusting. Why didn't it even occur to me that sooner or later Norwood would find out the truth, and the later, the more difficult it would be to explain his silence? Well,



really... just yesterday I was thinking about dreams that I would like to have time to fulfill... and that he probably has them too. "Sorry," she said quietly. – I was scared. It was "Russian roulette", is there such a thing in your world? Either – or, it could work, or it could ruin everything. Charlotte explained it this way: if I tell you the truth, it will either turn into a win-win chance or death for both, it is impossible to predict. I couldn't... I didn't have the strength to make such a decision. Moreover... even if you were not such a cracker, I think no man would fall in love on pain of death. It's humiliating. ? I still wanted... for us to succeed. I'm really sorry...

Just don't cry. Not after his contemptuous "crying in the corners"...

– I generally doubt that the fear of death can awaken at least some feelings other than, in fact, the fear of death. At least for women, at least for men. And judging by your mood, he didn't awaken anything else in you. – Norwood fell silent, as if he was waiting for some kind of reaction from me. Objections, perhaps? It was a question? I thought about it. There must be something other than... even if I was forced to pay attention to Dougal... try to fall in love with him... in the same way, on pain of death, as I considered humiliating for him? But... No. At some point it stopped mattering. I myself don't know when exactly, and even more so why, but... Without waiting for my answer, Norwood spoke, and the thought that was just born slipped away.

"I'm also sorry that you didn't tell me right away." Moreover,

the bad ending is the same with or without roulette. But the extra irritant in the form of Miss Blair and her oddities could have painlessly eliminated itself.

– And another one, in the form of an Academy? By the way, I never found out if I could just give up everything... stupid, right?

– No, it's logical. You decided to fight for life.

– I'm offended. – The word came out on its own, I was even surprised. Here it is! The very thing that I could not understand, that same escaped thought. If it weren't for this breakdown and the next attack of mutual frankness that naturally follows from it... I didn't even know what could happen – not understanding what exactly you feel until this feeling comes out with a random word. – You said – only fear of death. It's hard to believe, but the resentment is stronger. Why? As soon as you meet a man you really like, some kind of global ass inevitably happens. Now it's completely fatal.

“I hope, Miss Sullivan,” Norwood said after a pause, “that this is not about me.” Otherwise, perhaps, I will really decide that there is something seriously wrong with you.

– Why? – Is he kidding me, or what?!

“Because a reasonable woman with self-respect cannot like a man who treats her the way I treat Miss Blair.”

I shook my head.

– But I'm not her! And my opinion about her largely coincides with yours. I didn't take your attitude personally. Probably... until yesterday, yes.

– Yesterday you were no longer Miss Blair. And no matter what thoughts I had about you, I didn't plan to make you cry. I still don't understand what happened. Although, as I already said, yesterday you spent the whole day teetering somewhere on the edge.

– It's probably because of the dream. At first. – I remembered my own portrait in blue tones, and again I felt uneasy – to the point of chills. – And then... haven't you noticed that yesterday I was haunted by minor but annoying troubles all day? In the end, they're not even small.

– A flying umbrella, a treacherous puddle, a murderous Volger, an impressive fall in a buffet. Anything else I haven't seen?

– And all my coffee ended up on you. At least I didn't scald it.

– Consequences of a fall. This could easily be considered a nuisance.

– But big. ? then Applestone started hitting on me, and you decided that I was flirting with him. And this was the last straw.

– That is, you, with a heartbreaking look and in a deranged state, rushed to portal from where it was basically impossible, risking being smeared in a thin layer over the protective dome of the Academy – because... you decided that I decided. Amazing. Let's return to the issue of erroneous conclusions that can have lethal consequences.

His voice mixed with sincere surprise and malice, but that wasn't what shocked me. It shocked me so much that I even

turned back to Norwood and looked him in the face. Not kidding. Extremely serious... it seems.

“I didn’t know,” I whispered. – I didn’t know about the protective dome. I thought it was just... well, not accepted. As a common courtesy – people enter the house through the door, not through the window.

Norwood looked at me in amazement and silence for several seconds. Then he covered his face with his hand. Classic facepalm, no translation needed. Wow, it exists in another world too.

But is it really that serious?

– Could this protection really kill? But... it's just the Academy. Not some kind of military base, not a prison. Students. Almost children!

– Children will not break through the defense, the magic is too unstable. Yes, and there is not enough strength. There is no need for students. The protective dome can be felt physically; everyone knows why it is dangerous. Do you often stick your fingers into the fire, knowing that it burns?

I silently shook my head.

– Imagine that yesterday you jumped into it entirely. You were saved by a curse, no less. Paradoxical as it may seem. The allotted seven days means you will have them, regardless of any murderous extravagance. However, I don’t advise you to tempt fate again. Curses are no joke. Same with rituals.

“In order not to get into something again out of ignorance,

you need to know,” I looked at the lake, it beckoned, attracted my gaze, as if whispering something. – Where can I get all this knowledge? Who would tell an adult hereditary witch about basic things?

“I wish I could say that Miss Blair should have taken care of this if for some reason she decided to mentor you.” But, it seems, her ghostliness did not add to her intelligence.

I laughed. True, the laughter sounded somehow strange. Not happy at all.

“She taught me how to quickly do my hair, make coffee and open portals. And she showed that shield in time, in the laboratory. Well, at the very beginning I explained where I ended up and why. Oh yes, and offered to use her house and bank account. That's... that's all, actually.

“Brilliant,” said Dougal. Looks like he wasn't far from facepalm number two. – The ability to do a hairstyle is vital for adaptation to a magical environment. Where were you drawn, Miss Freya Sullivan? Judging by the name, not from afar, but the “your world” you mentioned suggests otherwise.

– From London. But the world is different, you understand correctly. Parallel? We don't have magic. The geography, as far as I managed to find out, is the same, but the life is completely different. I still haven't really figured out that thing you have instead of a TV. Or a computer? I do not even know. And these orders by cards, and portals, of course, and... yes, everything! Same clothes. They sewed my mountain in just an

hour, and it doesn't wrinkle! – Norwood rolled his eyes, and I was embarrassed and again looked away to the lake. A glare of sunlight flashed and disappeared on the dark water. But where does the sun come from here, because the sky is still gray, completely covered with clouds. – Purely feminine emotions, right? Clothes, orders, TV. But you have no idea... it's so strange. When at first glance the world is the same, but in reality...

– Now it's clear why you were so fascinated by the Chester biome. What, they don't bake pies there either? – he grinned.

“I don't know why, but yours tastes better.” Remember pizza boxes?

“I'm unlikely to soon forget such an exhibition.”

“I've just never eaten something so delicious before.” And the rest that I tried... The only food that didn't impress me in your world was Maskelyne sponge cake. Too sweet.

– Madame Headmistress is endowed with many talents, but cooking is not included in this list. Although I can't share my opinion about her biscuit. I haven't tried it. – And then he asked: “Do you like it here?”

“Yes,” I answered quickly. – Interesting. Incredible. Fabulous. There are so many new things that I always thought were impossible. And the most amazing thing is that there is a chance to learn for yourself, and not just watch.

– For example, what? And let's go from here, we will soon grow into the shore and remain here forever in the form of statues to ourselves.

“Yes, at least this one,” I tugged at the poncho. – I would like to go to school, not to the Academy, I don’t even know, in fact, what exactly I could learn.

There was a path along the steep bank, narrow and barely noticeable. Doesn't look like it gets walked around here much. It's even strange – such a beautiful, exciting, attractive view. Yes... attractive. I would look and look into the dark mirror of the lake. Until I see...

– Who were you there, at home?

“A journalist,” I answered absentmindedly. The thought, bright and alluring, wagged its tail and disappeared. What did I want to see in the lake? Something important. We need to remember.

“Well, yes, ‘traveling the world and writing about everything’ is understandable now,” said Norwood. Where is he from...?, well, yes, last night and my revelations. He asked mockingly: “Secular gossip?” Stock reports? investigations?

– Any topics of interest to our audience. First of all, of course, sensations, but you can't have enough sensations for every day. “I chuckled and admitted: “I can't stand the word ‘our audience,’ but it really stuck.” Why not just say “people”? But the owner, and after him the editor-in-chief, divide people into “our audience” and everyone else. What exactly are the signs, I still don't really understand. Is it just solvency? My favorite topics are pseudo-scientific nonsense and superstitions, medicine and health, and all sorts of random things that you can stumble upon while

just walking around the city. Well, you know... something like "Yesterday, hundreds of people at King's Cross Station saw a snowy owl and even managed to photograph this unusual bird for London. The owl flew off in a northerly direction, and none of the zoos or pet stores reported it missing. What is this – atypical migration? Or... Is it really true that you-know-what?!"

– Do you know what? – asked Dougal.

I laughed, this time heartily.

– We have a book, very popular. About the magical world and about a boy who goes to learn magic from King's Cross Station. The snowy owl is this boy's pet bird, and "you-know-what" is a reference to the main villain's nickname: "You-Know-Who."

"? there was also a lake there. Similar to this..." I turned my gaze to the dark, silky-smooth water. Wasn't it just covered with ripples? Strange. But beautiful, how beautiful! Why isn't there a castle like Hogwarts on the other side? Or... what if he is there, just invisible to strangers?

"Your boy wouldn't have gone far with us." King's Cross Station has long ago become an ordinary architectural monument. Retail area, cafes, auditoriums.

I shook my head, returning my thoughts to the conversation.

– Do you have train stations?! I thought portals were a great replacement for all transport.

– Not all. Large groups or cargo are transported by trains or barges. But traveling by river or rail is also popular among lovers of romance. Newlyweds, some teenagers. Or, conversely,



older couples falling into childhood. For a full-fledged cruise, you will have to charter a separate liner; this is not within everyone's means, but for short distances there are enough people willing. ? There are still those who like to go higher. Private jets, hot air balloons, hang gliders...

I imagined a liner similar to the Flying Dutchman rising from the depths of the lake. Well, yes, just like in the movie...

– ? Can ships travel through portals?

– Theoretically, undoubtedly. But it never occurs to anyone to line up a hundred, or even two, strong magicians around the perimeter and force them to work until they are magically exhausted. Fortunately. Moving living creatures requires much less magical infusions than large objects. For example, I can carry ten people without straining too much. Not across the globe, of course, but still. But with a yacht or even a small boat it will be more difficult. To the other side through this lake – yes. Further – it's unlikely.

I looked at the lake again. To the far shore, involuntarily assessing the distance. I stepped closer... more... I want... to look into this mirror... to see...

My leg went down, I waved my arms, trying to maintain my balance – like in a dream, because falling was not scary, maybe even necessary. I need to go down there, right? To the mirror? On the other side? There is magic... and there is someone waiting there, I feel it. Waiting, bored and calling.

– Be careful! – a sharp jerk almost twisted his arm from his

shoulder; Norwood pulled it towards himself and immediately grabbed it by the waist. An instant surge of pain brought me back to reality, I looked down, stunned, at the water covered with small ripples, in which the hills and gloomy sky were reflected, and at the stones under my feet: on one, at the very edge of the cliff, there was a blurry trace of my heel. – In your world, did you also constantly try to fall somewhere? Or is this our bad influence?

“I think it’s out of habit,” I responded slowly, emerging from a trance, as if from dark depths into the light. – Charlotte moves differently. Sometimes it seems like her center of gravity is not even in the right place! But now... now not only because of this. Another lake. It's like a magnet. Like fire is a moth. Attracts.

Norwood's grip suddenly tightened. Stronger.

“Kels,” he said incomprehensibly. – Looks like we were yelling at each other too loudly. They woke me up. It's pulling, that is. Interested. Curious beyond measure, as always. Or smelled a curse. Are you ready to look into the eyes of the living embodiment of ancient magic, Miss Sullivan?

– Is there really someone there? I didn't think so?! Alive and bored? Do you know him?

– As I understand it, this is consent? How many questions instead of one short “yes”.

Norwood didn't even think about letting go of my waist; we were transported to the other side. It was gentle, sandy, smoothly descending to the water itself, and this water got closer, swayed, caressed my feet, slightly touching the toes of Dougal's boots and

my shoes, leaving wet marks on them, but not seeping inside. The splash of the waves changed, became... sonorous? Distinct and as if alive.

– Come out, Kels. I already know that you are not sleeping. Why did you need Miss Sullivan, you could have called me.

And again I felt... not in words, not in images, but rather with emotion. Rejection? Mistrust? Whoever lived in the lake, I was a stranger to him.

I looked at Norwood: did he feel it too? I wanted to be away from the water... at least a few steps, although the question is whether they will save me if the “living embodiment of ancient magic” decides to attack. But Dougal still held him by the waist, firmly and confidently, and this gave him courage. He probably knows what he's doing?

“That’s enough,” he said impatiently. – I understand. You don't trust. But for some reason you needed to drag her into the water. So come out and let me look at you.

The lake began to swell with large, high waves. In the very center, one, gigantic, reared up, the ninth shaft, no less. The water began to bubble and foam around. A wind came whistling in my ears from somewhere and bent down the trees. On the shore from where we were transported, mossy boulders rolled into the lake.

A giant wave rushed, spreading around, towards the shores, becoming higher and higher, bending with a predatory foamy crest. Higher than the trees, higher than the steep far bank. Tsunami! We're about to be blown away! It will be carried

away, drowned, smeared on the rocks, and what remains will be dragged to the bottom of the lake... but we won't care anymore.

It would be logical to scream. Rush somewhere in a panic. But my feet seemed rooted to the ground, and the voice, although it seemed neither mine nor Charlotte's, but generally alien, sounded absolutely calm:

“It seems we don't have two days anymore.”

“Poser,” Dougal said just as calmly. – All possible effects for an unprepared beginner. All for you, Miss Sullivan! – And shouted towards the enraged lake: – Enough! We were absolutely impressed! We fear and bow!

Another gust of wind came, almost knocking me off my feet, and suddenly, as if by magic – although why as if?! – everything has calmed down. The lake was again perfectly smooth, quiet, mirror-like. And right in front of us, a translucent, gigantic horse, woven from water and foam, rose to the surface. A foamy mane flowed down his neck, his powerful wide chest shimmered black and blue, even the muscles on it were clearly visible. A back appeared above the water, a powerful rounded croup. A foamy tail waved over the waves. They hit the water surface, knocking out fountains of spray and huge hooves. I suddenly noticed that I had pressed myself closer to Dougal, clutching his hand like a child seeking protection. When? – Don't know. I wanted to open my fingers, but I couldn't. It became awkward, but... since he doesn't mind...

The long neck bent in an arc towards us. From the translucent

muzzle, absolutely alive, meaningful eyes, glowing with an eerie purple fire, looked at me.

– K-Kelpie? – the word seemed to float to the surface of consciousness, like this monster from the depths. Although I was sure that those kelpies that I read about in our fantasy or heard in legends were not so creepy.

– Yes. I will not undertake to pronounce his real name. There are one and a half hundred sounds that are poorly adapted to human speech. So just Kels.

? the horse kept growing. It pranced on the surface of the water, showing itself in all its glory, its height was equal to the edge of the cliff, to the tops of the trees...

– What about smaller ones? – asked Dougal. – Delusions of grandeur, I understand. But Miss Sullivan has already realized everything and is imbued with it; there is no one else to show off to.

I swear, if I were Dougal, such a derogatory and condemning look would burn with shame and fall into ashes. Or fell through the ground. And he stood there as if nothing had happened. Only, after a little hesitation, he grinned and said:

– Sorry. You know that I am not a connoisseur of your performances. Meet me. I won't interfere.

– Um... hello? – I asked uncertainly. The horse snorted contemptuously, clouds of steam escaping from its nostrils. – I wish I knew how to meet people like that... I hope they don't sacrifice girls to them.

– Don't give him such ideas. Suddenly he becomes interested.

The horse snorted again and stepped with its hooves, this time so lightly that there wasn't even a ripple in the water. And it began to decrease.

And thicken. When it became the size of an ordinary horse, it lost its transparency. In front of us on the surface of the lake stood a black horse with a shiny skin, a long white mane and tail, and lilac expressive eyes. Handsome! But if I didn't know its true nature, I would never have guessed it!

He came ashore to us. He poked his muzzle into my face, as if sniffing. It was wet and smelled of the lake – water and mud, rotten wet leaves, fish and algae. But I heard his breathing. And, daring to touch, I felt something hot and alive under my fingers. Smooth fur, strong muscles underneath.

“You are beautiful,” I said sincerely. – God, I never would have thought that I could meet a real live kelpie! And even touch him. Something as fabulous and unreal as portals and... everything else. Although no. More impressive.

“A timely clarification,” Dougal noted. – Kels is touchy and proud. Compare it with some portals, even if only in superlatives...

Kels clinked his teeth in a very demonstrative manner. It was only then that I noticed that the teeth were not those of a horse at all. Fangs like those of a predator. Inopportunistly I remembered that the kelpies from our legends are treacherous cannibals.

“No, I won't ask you to take me for a ride,” I clung to Dougal

tighter.

– In vain. It is educational and, perhaps, exciting. But Kels only rides those he likes and to whom he is accustomed. And even then after unbearably long persuasion. He believes that this is beneath his dignity. So it's still early for you.

– In the last few days, my life has been... educational and exciting. Even if... if it suddenly turns out that he and I have time to get used to each other. I'm afraid that it will take an unbearably long time to persuade both him and me.

Kels whinnied briefly, throwing up his head. My mane was smeared with wet coldness across my face. And... it was as if I was completely overwhelmed with the same cold, chilling disapproval.

– Was he offended? – I asked.

– He believes that any normal person, including you, should be eager to ride it. Yes, perhaps thirst is the most appropriate word. But he won't give you a ride now, although he even slightly wants to – out of a sense of contradiction, no less. First you have to earn his sympathy and approval. How? Don't ask. He himself doesn't yet know what useful and pleasant things he can get from you. In addition, you are not connected to the lands that he feeds with his power. – Dougal fell silent, but for some reason it seemed that this was not all. That right now he is listening to something that I cannot hear. – Yes, okay, I understand. And because you are not part of the family that he keeps. That is why he has to wait until I tongue-tied and incompletely translate into human what he could

easily put into your head. But he is not going to communicate with strangers like that. This is also beneath his dignity.

– So... it means he is protecting your family? It happens?! Or is this a common thing for you?

– Not quite ordinary. Rather, we can say: this happens, although extremely rarely. We are used to thinking that we are lucky. To a certain degree. Kels has lived here for more than a thousand years. I suspect that he is a product of this lake and appeared at the same time as it. And my mother's ancestors, who settled on these lands a long time ago, by some miracle, unrelated to magic in our understanding, managed to make friends with him. – Dougal interrupted again. – Okay, okay, not to make friends, but to appease.

Kelpie snorted, but this time I felt approval. Is this what I'm beginning to understand?

I again extended my hand to him and stroked the warm and lively horse's muzzle. And, as if on a whim, she said:

– If everything works out... if I come back here again. Then... – If... then... how I would like to at least hope! Maybe I was just deluding myself? Anchors in the form of vows and promises, this is such an old trick, familiar to everyone. But why not, after all? – I really hope that we will become friends. And I promise you won't have to persuade me to ride you. Only you.

Yes, the sea will probably be knee-deep to me! If... if it works out. Why don't you have the courage to even mentally call a spade a spade? What if an incredible miracle happens and Dougal falls



in love with me? A person who doesn't know how to fall in love? In two days? Even mentally it sounds too funny to believe. To maintain at least a shadow of hope.

Kelpie suddenly neighed, loudly and, it seemed, irritated. Demonstratively, there is no other way to say it, he turned his back towards us, splashed his front hooves into the water, managing to splash us with a fountain of water, and galloped across the lake.

“Extreme disapproval,” Dougal explained. “You reek of fear and hopelessness.” And... a lie, perhaps. Disapproval washed over me too,” he snorted almost in the same way as Kels, shaking off the water. – For company, or what? Yes, yes, don’t bother, I understand. People are stupid creatures anyway, but some are especially stupid. And he does not want to waste his endless time on such people. The curse didn't impress him.

– What can possibly impress a magical creature that lives for several thousand years? It is clear that human troubles for him are the same as for us the suffering of some insects. – I could hardly hold back my tears. I hate Charlotte's body! Why is it so prone to hysterics?

“He thinks my time has not come yet.” And if, contrary to his wishes, I still bring myself to the grave, he will curse my family for many generations to come. He will certainly produce something global and impressive, in contrast to this love-struck human nonsense. And he doesn’t care at all about the fact that my lineage will end with me. If you haven't realized by now, Miss

Sullivan, Kelce loves to talk. How can it, of course. I suspect that my ancestors were too talkative, otherwise they would not have been able to attract his attention.

The lake blurred before my eyes. I wiped away my tears with the edge of my poncho.

“Why is that, Dougal?” Why? There is so much around. New. Interesting. ? we... we... Is there really nothing we can do?!

– He thinks differently. Calm down, don't give him reasons for condemnation and gloating.

The kelpie reared up exactly in the center of the lake, thundered with its hooves, again sending out a huge, angry, tsunami-like wave. This time I wasn't scared at all. Either I felt that they really didn't want us to harm, or... it didn't matter? Whoever is destined to die from a curse will not drown?

The wave rose like a cloudy transparent wall. It looks like a thick layer of bad glass, interspersed with debris and air bubbles. In the depths of this wave a silvery fish swam, and on the other side a washed-out rocky shore could be seen. She stood before our eyes, as if wondering whether to devour us or not, and disappeared. Kels wasn't there either. The smooth surface of the water no longer seemed scary or magical. The most ordinary lake.

And suddenly Dougal... laughed. No, he laughed. Completely indecent, excitedly, with some kind of moaning or grunting. I did not expect this so much that I wriggled out of the weakened embrace, turned around and stared at him, trying to understand

what had happened. What could possibly be funny in our situation?!

“He said...” Dougal paused, grunted again, and shook his head. – Damn horse. – He snorted and explained almost calmly, only occasionally breaking into something resembling a strangled laugh. “Kels told me to tell you.” From the translated... When you stop smelling and looking like an uh... hopelessly in love mermaid during the first molt – nothing more precise comes to mind – he will come back and, so be it, take a ride, because you can come out good and ...probably even decent for bipedal foals.

“Thank you,” I muttered. – Molting mermaid, how... fresh. And... yes, visibly. Clearly.

“And I would like to know how this half-stud guessed about the hopelessly in love? Did you smell it? – the thought made me feel... uncomfortable, perhaps. The embodiment of ancient magic... What else can he guess? The question is incorrect. Is it possible, in principle, to hide something from him, or is this creature’s awareness limited only by his own curiosity?

– It was obvious to me. You are lucky, believe me. He shows me all this in colors. In pictures.

– But you laughed. – Then another thought struck me, strange, impossible... probably too impossible. – If you can laugh at this... if you can laugh at all! So, everything is not completely hopeless?

Dougal grew serious and narrowed his eyes. He was silent. He looked at me with some kind of investigative interest.

“I am not a supporter of baseless illusions, Miss Sullivan.” And I hate guessing and predicting. So I'm not going to get your hopes up. But I wouldn't bury both of us ahead of time either. Let's go,” he took my hand and, already stepping into the portal, added: “You don't wear crimson pants.” This seriously increases our chances.

## CHAPTER 6. Day six: Sunday

I woke up early and, oddly enough, in a great mood. Yesterday I returned from Dougal – that is, from Sabella – late and could say without lying that this was the best day spent here.

After meeting the kelpies, Dougal took us back not to the gazebo, but to the phlox bed. Said:

“I don’t think it makes sense to sit with guests and talk about nothing.” It’s not just phlox that grows in this garden. And besides the garden there is also a park.

– Do I still need to report on your experimental mixture? – I smiled. – Where do we start?

The park was huge and ancient. Most of it resembled a slightly cultivated forest – mossy ancient trees, dense ferns, in which barely noticeable paths were lost. A stream with a log thrown across it instead of a bridge. I stopped indecisively: the log did not seem reliable at all, and Dougal, taking my hand, simply stepped over to the other side. Portal.

After the lake I didn’t want to talk about anything. The session of half-forced frankness, Dougal’s reproaches, hysteria, an acute attack of guilt, and, for starters, an acquaintance with the kelpies exhausted me. I wanted silence. But Dougal’s company, like his silence, was not a burden.

We left the park again and went into the garden. The hand of a man with taste was felt here. The corner near the gazebo

was not the only one where climate charms were used. There was also a small piece of jungle near the waterfall, which served as a haven for an incredible number of orchids and butterflies. Fruit-bearing raspberries – each berry is the size of a large cherry! Dougal picked a few and nodded at me:

– Help yourself. Take advantage of the moment before Borvoor appears. He will grumble and talk worse than Kels. Only “dear miss” can calm him down. A mother has a special gift; she brings peace to everything around her.

– Who is Borvoor? – I picked a berry. Sweet and amazingly fragrant! I understand this... Borvura.

“You’ll see,” Dougal grinned and nodded at the branches strewn with clusters of raspberries.

We ate in a race, hiding among the tall bushes, like children sneaking into someone else's garden. It was... fun, I guess. In the style of carefree children's adventures. Exactly until the moment when a long red nose with a black button tip stuck out of the leaves right in front of me. The nose twitched, and the owner of this nose snorted and sighed. True, it was impossible to see him in the thickets, but that only made things worse. After the kelpies... who else is there to wait for? I probably wouldn't be surprised by a bear with a balalaika speaking Russian.

– Disgrace. Away! Get away from here, vile thieves! My raspberry! – I almost choked on the berry: it really spoke! Well, at least not in Russian, and thank you for that... – Sweet, juicy, honey, spicy. My raspberry! Fragrant, sugary, selected! Get out!

“Well,” Dougal looked away from his bush and lightly flicked the incomprehensible Borvur – it was him, of course – on the nose. – Your raspberries, your currants, your apples and plums. One day you will burst from greed, I already warned you.

“If you, stupid boy, had been here more often, you would have known that dear miss’s jam season is already over.” And Borvoor personally helped collect! Thirty pounds of peaches, selected, honeyed, huge, transparent, delicious! Fifty pounds of plums...

“Come on, Miss Sullivan, or we’ll have to listen to this until next spring.”

– Well, stop, boy! I haven't said anything yet!

– You are basically incapable of finishing your sentence. You have a natural talent for verbiage, Borvoor. But, I see, you no longer deafen the entire neighborhood with your cough. The syrup turned out well. Next time I'll put a numbing potion in there for you.

I picked the last berry, and we ran away, and for a long time there was a rush after us: thieves, disgrace, forty pounds... juicy, rosy, ripe... dear miss... boy... raspberries...

“I still didn’t understand who it was,” I admitted in a whisper for some reason.

“Amateur gardener,” Dougal chuckled. – Actually, he is one of the forest magical creatures. Leshchinnik. But he burns with a tender love for fruit trees and berries. He came here a long time ago, during his great-grandmother’s time, and lives like this.

– Wow... kelpies from distant ancestors, garden grumbler

from great-grandmother... – This is what I understand, inheritance. More interesting than pompous mansions and bank accounts.

Yes, a mansion, an estate, an estate – I don't know what to call it? – Sabella turned out to be much more amazing than Charlotte's cottage. More magical. After it, the small everyday miracles with which my morning had already begun as usual seemed something as simple and uninteresting as a news broadcast on TV. Brew coffee with one movement of your hand? By the way, my coffee turned out much worse than Sabella's, and yesterday she explained why: real masters regulate the temperature very subtly. Charlotte was not even an amateur, just an amateur. Hairstyle? I shook my head. You should have seen Sabella's reaction when Dougal told her:

“Imagine, Miss Blair considered the ability to do her hair more important than information about the restricted area of the Academy.” And Miss Sullivan decided to refute the laws of magical security unknown to her and opened a portal at the department. Why not, actually. A great way to kill yourself spectacularly and with a guarantee.

I threw up my hands guiltily in response to the look of horror. She repeated the same explanation she had already given to Dougal:

“I thought it was just not accepted.”

And he added:

– She escaped with moderate exhaustion. And then, strictly



speaking, I'm not sure that heartbreaking hysteria didn't have a hand in exhaustion. Judging by the fairly quick effect of my experimental mixture.

– Number two thousand two hundred and forty three. Fifth prototype. No pepper,” I clarified. Just to make Sabella smile.

When we returned from the garden, the gazebo was empty. Sabella was waiting for us in the house and, it seems, was not even surprised when she realized that Dougal knew about everything. This was probably the only way to explain our lengthy walk. But Elsa and Chester have already left. And I could stop pretending to be Charlotte.

We sat in the living room and drank tea with jam from those very peaches that Borvoor had muttered with such delight. Sabella's face showed relief. It probably wasn't easy for her either to remain silent and pretend that nothing special was happening. It's good that Dougal didn't demand an explanation from her. Maybe my thoughts were enough for him to draw conclusions about her too, or maybe he just didn't want to touch on a painful topic once again.

But after the news about my pathological magical illiteracy, Sabella decisively declared:

– Something needs to be done about this. If only I had known... and at least I could have imagined that everything was so neglected! Of course, a girl who has lived her entire life without magic at all will not master everything at once, and that's what I attributed to your mistakes that I noticed. But you

know absolutely nothing and can't do anything! You have been incredibly lucky all these days, nothing less.

Dougal chuckled, managing in that one sound to convey everything he thought about my incredible luck and equally incredible ability to get myself into idiotic situations and expose myself to ridicule. And the two of them began to fill my, as Dougal put it, “virgin emptiness” with at least some knowledge. Honestly, I had a hard time resisting a vulgar joke!

“Basics of Survival in the Magical World” began with what I had almost lost track of: protective domes against unauthorized movements. It turned out that the portal network is much more streamlined and gives less freedom than I imagined. Both people's personal space and public institutions are protected from uninvited guests very strictly. At the same time, they told me about other types of travel and opportunities to get “from point A to point B” – there were many of them. Not all the inhabitants of this world had magical powers, and only magicians could open portals, so there was public transport, taxis, trains, and planes. There was a whole industry of pocket private portals – they were low-powered, could only carry one person over a short distance, but anyone could use them. They were bought for schoolchildren, they used such portals to get to work and home, but the main thing is that everyone, magician or not, was obliged to have such a portal with them, configured for an emergency hospital. This was part of the health insurance system.

I haven't seen this in Charlotte's things.

“Most likely, she hid it before the ritual,” Sabella suggested. – Otherwise, his settings would work for dark magic.

“And she would be alive now, albeit up to her neck in trouble with the law,” Dougal added.

After which we logically moved on to magical medicine, laws, police... and then suddenly it turned out that it was already long after midnight, and my poor head was not able to let in a single piece of new information until everything I had seen and heard today had settled down in it.

“We’ll meet tomorrow, or rather today,” said Dougal. “I have a lecture to replace the one that had to be canceled because of the murderous Herr Wolger, and then we have the rest of the day to ourselves.”

I looked at my watch. The lecture will start at half past ten, now it’s five minutes to nine. Wonderful. You can have time to apply the knowledge you gained yesterday – purchase a portal to the hospital prescribed by law. At the same time we’ll eat somewhere in London. Or is Edinburgh better?

The thought of Edinburgh, in a completely understandable chain of associations, pulled with it another – to dress smarter. Yes, at least in the same “almost evening”, aka “not-at-all-evening” dress, in which I already went there once. Looked in the mirror, styled my hair... ready? Ready. I hope this time the portal will work at the right address, and not deep into the Scottish moors.

The first meaningful – that is, with full knowledge of all

possible dangers and consequences – journey through the portal network was successful. I walked around Edinburgh, found the hospital and received the portal without any problems. A simple white round with a red cross, the same as Sabella showed yesterday. They are standard, there is not even the name of the hospital, they are triggered by the nearest emergency department.

I went to a small restaurant with Italian cuisine. I didn't take pizza – I decided to diversify the menu. I ordered a vegetable salad and lasagna. The portions turned out to be huge, I took tiramisu and the strongest coffee for dessert simply out of principle – not to leave such a delicious thing!

But now you can go to the Academy. Sit in on Dougal's lecture as a volunteer listener. He won't kick him out. Suddenly I'll understand something.

I wanted to look at him. See another aspect of the terrifying Professor Norwood. It was interesting what kind of lecturer he was – certainly better than Herr Volger! Students don't worry about a lost lecture from a bad teacher.

I was going to get to the audience in advance – that is, if I didn't have to look for it – and take a place somewhere in the corner behind a column. Or, if there are no columns there, in some other secluded corner. But since I arrived early, I finally decided to pick up my things from the toilet on the way to Maskelyne's office. If they're still there, of course.

I don't know how common it is here, but no one had their eye on Charlotte's cloak and boots for two days. And I felt like a

fool, standing in the middle of the toilet and looking at my own things, which there was nothing even to hide. Surely Charlotte knew how to conjure some kind of bag! But I had no idea how to approach this task. What little I could do gave no clues.

“Okay, keep it simple,” I decided. She took her boots, threw her cloak over her arm to at least cover this disgrace a little, and went to the pulpit. I'll leave it there for now. Sunday, the risk of meeting unwanted spectators in the Academy corridor is minimal.

I got to the department without incident – except for the strange look of the student who came my way and the strange sounds that seemed to be on the very edge of audibility and for some reason were very disturbing. Howl, not howl, whistling, not whistling... maybe the wind? But just now the weather was wonderful.

It seemed stupid to worry about such nonsense, so I put it out of my mind. Moreover, Dougal was sitting at the table in the office – just like on my first day in the new world, with a newspaper. And, like on the first day, I said:

– Good morning, Professor Norwood.

Here he really was a professor, maybe a doctor, but not Dougal. But for some reason I felt sad because I couldn't call him by name. Not in this place, not now. Yesterday it was easier.

The newspaper rustled and slowly fell onto the table. And this was already strikingly different from the first day. And then I watched as Dougal's right eyebrow creeped up just as slowly, and

his gaze became mocking. In a good mocking way, without the desire to offend.

“Miss... Blair, what a surprise.” Am I missing something, or are we planning walks through the swamps again? It’s unlikely that you were walking like this,” he cast a fleeting glance at the window, behind which the sun was shining brightly, not like autumn. – Or did you decide to insure yourself in case of sudden disasters?

– I forgot this... the day before yesterday. I decided to pick it up since I ended up going to the academy anyway. Teach you how to conjure bags? We need to pack it in something.

“You don’t have to do any magic, the suitable packages are in the lower left drawer of the table in the laboratory.”

– Wonderful. “I found the bags, put my boots in one, and a folded raincoat in the other. I left them both at my desk. I looked at my watch – it was almost half an hour before the lecture started. There was no longer any point in going to the classroom early and looking for a place where Dougal wouldn’t notice me right away. Asked:

– Coffee? “I wanted to offer a choice of tea or coffee, but I remembered in time that he doesn’t like tea.

– Did you come earlier for this?

I smiled.

– No. I wanted to take a seat somewhere in the back rows, closer to the door. But since I’m here anyway, and there’s no point in running to the classroom half an hour before the lecturer...

“It seemed to me that for an unprepared listener a lecture on alchemy would be no different from a lecture on tidal pebbles.”

– Why not compare?

“Commendable but senseless dedication.” Black without sugar.

Yesterday, when we were discussing Charlotte's ingenious methods of "training" Sabella showed some techniques for brewing coffee. Now I decided to repeat it. Dougal watched my manipulations, but did not interfere. The result... Hmm... It smelled good. I handed Dougal his cup and took mine. I tried it.

– OU. Not at all what... what it was.

Although Sabella's delicious coffee is still a long way off. Well... there is room to grow.

“That’s why I’ve never drunk Miss Blair’s coffee in my life.” So it’s not in vain. However, the smell was telling. – He also sipped my coffee with noticeable apprehension. I would also like to know what could be wrong with the smell. Why not ask?

– What needs to be done with coffee to create a “talking” smell? And by the way, what was he talking about? “Don’t drink me, you’ll become a goat”? – I remembered some Slavic fairy tale. It seems Russian. But they didn't seem to know her here, because Dougal almost choked and carefully put the cup down.

“I don’t have to worry about that anymore.” Late.

I didn’t immediately understand what he was talking about. And when I realized... Blood rushed to my face, I also hastily put the cup on the table:

– Listen, that’s not what I... didn’t mean at all! This is actually... from Slavic legends, I don’t seem to remember exactly. A friend told me. I studied to be a translator, from Russian.

“Wow,” said Dougal, looking at me thoughtfully. – Miss Blair couldn't do that. I thought this face was basically incapable of blushing, but this is not the first time I’ve seen something like this. Don't make excuses, you have nothing to do with it. I can be rewarded with not such comparisons. And none of them will be offensive, because they are true. Only funny.

“I don’t see anything funny,” I muttered. I wanted to hide behind my cup, preferably entirely. – And yet, what could be wrong with the smell of coffee? I am curious.

– Excessive bitterness from overexposure. Sourish tones are due to untimely addition of water. Astringency with slight notes of burnt is due to too strong an infusion of magic, and a sourish-tart tint is due to too weak.

– And this is all by smell?! – Yes, he should work as a perfumer, or a taster, or... who else needs a nose sensitive to the slightest shades? Although... he, to some extent, is all this combined. Potions and potions, balms and syrups, what else was there? Elixirs?

– Sometimes by color, sometimes by consistency, more often, if we are talking about students, appearance or a minimal idea of the state of the manufacturer’s convolutions is enough. In Miss Blair's case, almost all of these points came together in a bizarre



way. Drink, it will get cold.

We finished our coffee in silence. I thought it was a little awkward, but it seemed that only I felt the awkwardness.

When she stood up to wash the cups, Dougal shook his head.  
– Imagine them clean. Shiny, smooth, white inside and out.

I stared at the cups standing next to me. Is it that simple? Imagine – that's all? Not even a wave of the hand, like the ones Charlotte showed me, or even a wave of an eyebrow? although... I've already done magic like that. Not over the cups – over yourself and your clothes. When my hands were full of Chester's botanical rarities. And it worked out well!

It's even strange that I never tried to repeat it later. It's probably all about lack of habit.

– You can wave your hands over them if it's easier for you. But this is not necessary; for minor magical manipulations, ordinary visualization is sufficient.

“Y-yes,” I nodded uncertainly. I imagined the cups to be white. The coffee stains haven't gone away. She took a deep breath and, trying to hold the mental image of clean, white, shiny cups, raised her hand and released a stream of magic from her palm. The cups sparkled as if they had just come out of the dishwasher.

– Happened! – for some reason I exclaimed in a whisper.

“I'll give you credit,” Dougal chuckled. – The most difficult thing is to visualize the image. Imagine it down to the smallest detail and breathe life into it. Saturate with magical power.

– Are the clothes the same yesterday? Just introduced?

– Yes. But you already know that to maintain non-existent things, constant replenishment is desirable. Everywhere, except places overflowing with magic. It wasn't needed yesterday.

– Law of energy conservation? – I asked.

– Exactly.

– What about matter? I mean, making something out of nothing – is that really possible?

– Consider it an illusion. Material.

– Doesn't it consist of molecules and atoms?

– And it exists only in your imagination. And – or – in the imagination of others. At the same time, preserving some properties of a material, really existing prototype.

I shook my head:

– It's hard to believe. It's simply incomprehensible. I can't wrap my head around it!

– For us it is as clear and simple as breathing. And you will get used to it.

Well, yes, if you live with this from birth, of course, it will be clear and simple. And I... yes, I'll probably get used to it. With time.

Will I get used to it?

– You think? – I looked at his face, trying to understand, to guess: did he really mean what I heard, or is this classic “wishful thinking”?

– I think. Good,” said Dougal, without looking away. – To the

absence of crimson pants was added passable coffee.

I blushed again. She muttered:

– Men! The ideal woman is no pants and a good cook.

I noticed a familiar reference book on the table. The same one that was taken from Applestone. Not the worst way to get out of an awkward situation.

–Did he forget again? Let me guess,” she recalled her assumptions. -Did you get on him so much that he ran away in horror? With parting words to think about studying, and not dream about beaches and mojitos?

– And textured girls. But seriously, I had no time for parting words after your spectacular suicide attempt. And Mr. Applestone, impressed to the ends of his hair, has no time for alchemy. So, just in case, you knew about the renovation of the protective dome with a rickety barrier in the area of our department.

I stared at Dougal in complete... stun – just like Applestone, probably also to the ends of my hair – there’s no other way to put it.

– Is that what it looked like? Suicide attempt?!

– Exactly. True, it immediately became clear that it didn’t work out for you,” he chuckled, “but, you must admit, when such a disgrace is happening before your eyes for no apparent reason, it is quite difficult to remain impassive. I don't like problems without solutions and questions without answers. They violate the logic of space.

– ? I still couldn't understand why the hell brought you to my home. It's not like you forgot to bring in a bag, really!

– The bag played its role. From it, in fact, it was clear that you were not carried further than home and that you were still alive.

Now I chuckled.

– Don't tell me. A woman out of her mind can be carried away anywhere, with or without a purse. For example, that evening, and not only that evening, I almost drifted to Sydney.

“This is again one of the things Miss Blair didn't see fit to enlighten you about.” From an item belonging to a magician, you can learn a lot about the magician himself. So in this case, women's habits or extravagances do not matter. But Sydney... Yes, you just have to be glad that you didn't have enough time, courage, inclination to madness or anything else, otherwise the first suicide attempt would have been followed by a second. Probably successful.

– I assumed something similar. Well, that is, when I first learned about the portals, it dawned on me that Sydney was not half a day by plane, but one step. That there must probably be some kind of borders and border control, and visas, and something else that I don't know about. And to meddle like this on the fly is dangerous and stupid – it will smear somewhere else between Paris and Tokyo... But nothing like that even came to mind about the Academy.

Dougal shrugged his shoulders expressively.

“So, reason won after all.” Or what was left of him at that

moment. Maybe even a self-preservation instinct.

– Why didn't you ask directly? Well, when were you with me? About the dome and how stupid I was to portal straight from the pulpit?

“In the state in which I found you, it was absolutely pointless.” You couldn't even concentrate on the direct order to drink tea. We were in subtle matters known only to you. But using simple inferences, I received an answer to one of the questions – you did not intend to take your own life. On the contrary, you were haunted by exclusively positive things. Cherished dreams, for example. Which for some mysterious reasons cannot be fulfilled. But you want it passionately.

– And you concluded that I am not Charlotte. And all the other conclusions that were talked about yesterday: not a hoax, not cloning, not... what else was there? You know, I still couldn't understand whether I dreamed about your “Miss not-Blair” or not. Until that very flower bed with phlox, near which the moment of truth overtook us.

“I came to the conclusion that you are not Miss Blair much earlier.” But yes, then the fallacy of the idea with hoaxes of any kind was finally confirmed.

I shook my head.

“I shouldn't have been so afraid to open up to you.” Now understand. Sorry.

“It doesn't matter anymore,” he stood up. “Come on, it's time, if you haven't yet decided to attend a lecture in which you will

only understand prepositions.”

“It’s all my bad luck with men,” I muttered under my breath.

– Another point on which you are fixated and which, I confess, interests me. Let’s return to it at a more appropriate time and place. Certainly not at the Academy.

“And if we have time,” I did not voice this thought. As Dhugala had already learned, such an objection would only embolden him. I would organize a session of digging into my past at the first opportunity. And I wasn’t at all sure that I was ready to tell... him. It was easier with Sabella: after all, there are “purely feminine” themes. But I didn’t tell her everything, and she didn’t ask. Only about the last one...

But still, why didn’t Sabella tell him – about the curse, the remaining week, about everything? Was it a mistake to remain silent and hide the truth? After all, she understood, she could not help but understand how her son would react to such information... or to the fact that they were silent about it.

In front of Sabella, I didn’t dare ask, but now curiosity has won.

“It’s simple, she couldn’t,” Dougal shrugged his shoulder irritably as he ran. – You could. Miss Blair could, if she could find a way to somehow communicate with me. Nobody else. Curses do not tolerate outside interference. As a rule, the consequences of such interference are extremely sad for everyone. My mother did everything that a person not directly connected to the curse could—had the right—to do. She, fortunately, is smart enough

and knows when to stop and rely on fate. Besides, she was sure that I would find out the main thing without outside help, that you are not Miss Blair. ? After such a wondrous discovery, given my character, which she knows very well, the whole truth will only be a couple of steps away.

And again he ran headlong, as if hinting that there was no need to answer this.

The run from the department to the lecture hall was reminiscent of yesterday. Apparently, Dougal simply did not know how to move at normal human speed when something was bothering him or greatly occupying him. But today he at least sometimes slowed down, waiting for me. Mainly when I wanted to say something.

– By the way, while we're walking, listen to your feelings. In departments and classrooms the security is tighter, in the corridors it is less reliable, there is almost nothing to guard there. A dome of any kind and any intensity can be supported directly by magicians, but human resources are expensive, especially on an ongoing basis. Therefore, magic is usually supported by artifacts. The Academy has a fairly powerful material and magical base, Maskelyne cannot be denied this, and the place itself is one of those saturated with power, so everything is more than good here with the saturation of enchantments.

Listen to your feelings? Everything seems to be the same as always.

– What should I feel? at least roughly?

– Only you yourself can answer this question. You have been given a body capable of sensing, assimilating and transforming magical energy. Your previous experience does not give anything even remotely similar, and the human brain is designed in such a way that it tries to find familiar analogues for everything new and incomprehensible. Which ones exactly? Listen to yourself and you will understand. You physically feel magical vibrations, sources with strong or weak magic, the difference between them. And, of course, danger of any kind. A protective dome is reliability, on the one hand – when, fueled by your own magic, it protects a house, for example. And danger on the other.

– But I didn't notice anything like that! Nothing special, not once in all these days.

– Most likely, you just weren't up to it. Too much new information, shock, tension, nerves...

He suddenly stopped and fell silent without finishing. He suddenly raised his hand, stopping me. He asked tensely:

– And now you don't feel anything?

I didn't feel anything! Absolutely. My Charlotte body felt exactly the same as always. But the outside world...

The same howling, either of the wind or not, that surprised me immediately after appearing at the academy. It became louder and clearer. In my opinion, it went into infrasound: the low, barely audible notes chilled me to the bones and covered me with unaccountable panic.

“I don't feel anything,” I responded irritably in response



to Dougal's questioning and expectant look. "I can't even concentrate on my feelings!" What kind of howl is this, can you tell me?! Are they keeping a pack of hellhounds in the Academy's basements?

"You feel it," he objected sharply. – Exactly this. Such sounds are sometimes caused by a directed effect on ritual stones. But now... The flow of force from the other side is too powerful.

– Ritual stones? – I asked again. – I don't remember any stones where I was transported. Just a lot of candles and some signs on the floor.

"Paul," Dougal explained briefly. – Onyx, jasper or jade, depending on the focus of the ritual. Sometimes it's obsidian. The feeling that now is everything at once. Is there something wrong. – He suddenly grabbed my hand. "We need to find out what's going on."

"Isn't there anyone who..." but Dougal had already taken off. – Stop! Why you? Where is the security?!

– Dome! Artifacts! This is security! Stay strong, stay focused. I was jerked and... A-A-A! Is this the same thing that will "smear"? It almost rolled out into a thin layer. An eerie and unexpected feeling of being squeezed between two presses. But we were already standing in a completely different corridor. And now I definitely felt this damn dome! My breathing was labored, my legs were giving way from weakness.

Now is definitely not the time for weakness!

Probably, reflexes turned on, that same body memory. A hot,

almost burning wave passed from the top of my head to my feet – and I was filled with vigor and strength. Dougal glanced sideways and chuckled:

– Great. Stay close, don't push forward.

I wouldn't have thought of it! Here the hum was strong and powerful, sounding like an alarming, terrifying symphony. Like an organ in a church, on which they play something completely inappropriate, some kind of hard rock. Only I have never been so scared from rock. “My hair stood on end with horror” immediately seemed like a less figurative expression. Where are we? There was no need to ask. I recognized the dungeons of the Academy. The same ones along which Charlotte led me that ill-fated night. And not only then. Somewhere here is the same laboratory in which for the only time in my life I observed practical alchemy... and a arrogant attempt to combine it with poetry.

Now Dhugal did not run. He walked slowly, warily, as if listening – although I didn't understand what else could be heard in this deafening ro?-symphony. Unless... as soon as I asked this question, I thought I heard voices, quiet, as if coming from afar. Emotionless, just like Charlotte. And scary – very scary. It chills your skin and makes you feel a toothache.

Dougal stopped, and at the same moment the door ahead opened and a student jumped out into the corridor. Course two or three, perhaps. What is she doing here?! She looked around wildly and squealed:

– Professor! There, there!..

– Portal! – Dougal yelled, breaking into a run again. – Call the headmistress! “We found ourselves next to a frightened girl. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her: “Now!”

– Ah... And there...

She paused, nodded sharply and disappeared. And Dougal stepped towards the door.

I looked over his shoulder. It seems that this was the very ritual room in which Charlotte did her deeds. Or exactly the same. The circles of candles and symbols on the floor looked very familiar, as did the floor itself, gray with whitish streaks. Around the same central circle where once... an eternity or five days ago? I woke up, there were students standing. Ten people... no, just seven. Tense backs, clasped hands. Recitative in Latin – discordantly, in trembling voices. Their horror washed over me like cold swamp water. Horror and... stubbornness? Determination?

One of them, red-haired, curly-haired, twitched, turned around impulsively, I saw a white face, a panicked look, and an instant flash of hope. “Save!” – To Dougal, with just his lips.

– Circle! – someone shouted.

Someone else screamed and jumped to the side. The ring of students broke up. Only the red-haired one was still standing in place, raising his hands in a protective gesture – the same one with which I put up the shield. The rest were swept away by panic, I barely had time to jump back, otherwise they would have been knocked down.

– Go away! Portals through the corridors! – Dougal yelled.

The fog swirled in the center of the circle, getting thicker every second. Or is it not fog? very dense for fog, materially. Faces and hands are guessed. Twisted fingers, mouths open in a scream. Ghosts?!

What to do?!

I think I said it out loud, maybe even shouted it. But the answer immediately became clear. Dougal rushed towards the redhead, and I followed. I know how to use this shield. I can! And the strength should be enough.

I raised my hands and sent a stream of magic into my palms. It seemed that she had hit a barrier. Alive, aggressive, predatory. Press. Like the moving walls in Star Wars – no matter how much you push, just a little more and it will flatten out soft-boiled.

I bit my lip. A red-haired man nearby was muttering something, and she listened:

– Hold, hold... hold...

I didn't see Dougal, but I felt her somewhere nearby. I recognized his magic, something sharp, prickly, tough, but giving a feeling of security. I felt it in that same laboratory, but then I didn't understand what exactly I was feeling.

And I just believed that everything would be fine, because Dougal, of course, would cope... The foggy ball of ghosts swelled, filled with a deathly blue-white light and... exploded? A roar and what seemed like a triumphant, victorious howl hit my ears. I was knocked over, carried through the air and slammed

into the wall. A sharp pain in the back of my head and back was the last thing I felt before falling into the darkness.

The darkness dissipated slowly. Strange silhouettes emerged from it, black outlines of either mountains or some strange pointed structures. The fog, for some reason also black, was creeping in, making it difficult to see better. But it seemed like I had been here before. I saw these mountains, and vague figures of either people or animals, rising on their hind legs. I saw it, but... erased it from my memory as something too incomprehensible, alien, unreal. It does not coincide with the usual picture of the world.

I tried to move, at least blink, but for some reason it didn't work. What is going on?!

And then I heard a voice, unfamiliar, as strange as everyone else here. It sounded like it was in my head. There was an unpleasant ringing in the ears and a nagging pain in the back of the head.

“Listen,” he said. – Listen and understand. You and he have two days left. But they won't exist if you can't change the probabilities. Tip the scales in your favor. Choose the right path. There are two of them. One step means inevitable death at the end of the seventh day. The other is time, which is never enough. Take the person you are connected to. He won't leave on his own. He knows that death will not overtake him while he is protected by the curse. But death is different. The true one will get to him later, and the other, non-death and non-life, will take him

now. The body will remain in the white room, under the care of those who know the power, but do not know the truth. And the spirit will get lost on unfamiliar paths. The dark thirst of the ancients will take away the last days in which the curse can still be deceived. And you both won't change anything.

– Who you are? – I asked. It's a stupid question, but for some reason it was the first one that jumped out at me.

– They asked about you. About you and him. One very stupid ghost and one very wise woman. Old Aislinne, called the Ghost Bear by mortals, speaks to you in the familiar world. The world of spirits and souls. Only in it can we meet, and only now, while your spirit is free from your body. But it's time for you to go back. Or you'll stay here forever.

Ghost Bear? The shaman, I remembered, is the same one Sabella was talking about. The one she dated for me. “A very wise woman”... and the stupid ghost then is obviously Charlotte?

“Thank you,” I muttered. – And these... ghosts, or who escaped there?

–They are not your concern. And not your man either. Protection is the business of the leader and the faithful, ancient place. Hurry up.

The chief's business? That is, Maskelyne should deal with this nightmare? Well, yes, Dougal told that student to call the headmistress. Dougal! ? what am I thinking?! Maskelyne, ghosts, defense of the Academy... They clearly told me that Dougal must be pulled out urgently!

I wanted to ask how to get back, but it turned out to be unnecessary. One memory of Dougal, his name, was enough. I was carried through a cloudy, suffocating darkness. The black fog, viscous and sticky, like resin, drew in and did not want to let go. I was rushing out of it towards the light, towards the body that had already become mine, lying somewhere out there, far or close – I don't know, in the real world. Near Dougal.

How disgusting and scary it is to feel like a midge frozen in amber!

“Come on,” I urged myself, “a little more!” Tighten up! Come back! Hurry, while everything can be fixed!”

The fog peeled away from me like chewing gum from a shoe. It rushed forward, faster and faster, spun, dragged through the narrow, and...

My bruised back ached, my head was cracking, the howling of ghosts was not even screwing into my ears – into my brain. I lay face down on the floor, awkwardly crushing the red-haired student with all my weight. He was passed out, but alive. Breathed. I raised my head and looked around. The ghosts no longer seemed vague, on the contrary, they looked almost material. Almost alive! And with every second, literally before our eyes, they filled with colors, life, and took on flesh. They no longer howled – they laughed triumphantly and evilly. There were many of them and it seemed to be getting more and more. Ugly figures in which there was too little humanity left, as if they had stepped out of Bosch's paintings – as some novelist would

say, or crawled out of Hollywood horror films – as journalists would prefer to put it. Twisted fingers, bared mouths, eyes burning with hellish fire...

One, tall and thin, in chains over a monastic robe, flew up to me and pulled my hair:

– Curly! I love curly ones. And who is this? – seeped through me, almost paralyzing me with a chilling contact. – Oooh, boy. Oscar loves boys, he's an old sodomite. Hey Scar!

“Get out,” I hissed, rising on my elbows. The ghost laughed: – ? you drive away! Curly, hot, daring. You will give old William a few unforgettable hours before your power and magic become mine. Oh, how good it is to be back in the world! Oscar, where are you? Let's get our loot.

Panic and rage – I don't know what was more in me. She rose to her knees and raised her hands. She channeled all the strength, all the magic that she felt within herself into the shield. The pervert William was thrown away, twisted and... as if squeezed out. It faded and became translucent and ghostly again. And, it seems, he was seriously furious.

“You impudent girl, do you dare take my new life away from me?!” You will pay!..

Where is Dougal?!

It turned out that it was not far. I didn't see a face, only raised arms, a tense body frozen in some kind of transcendental effort. I didn't understand what he was doing, but in the middle of the hall, right above the cursed circle, a giant vortex funnel was



curling, all of it, from the wide mouth to the thin part resting on the ritual stone, consisting of his magic. Before our eyes, this wild whirlwind was spinning faster and faster, drawing in the screeching howling little things, growing, swelling, filling with power, from which the air thickened and crackled. But several ghosts, who had apparently managed to feed themselves, resisted. It even seemed to me that they were drawing power from the funnel—for themselves. Oscar, looking lewdly at the redhead. William regaining his colors. A lady in a wedding dress, clutching a skull in her hands, like Hamlet on stage. An old woman with a hole instead of a mouth, with a stick – I clearly saw how magic pours into this stick from the whirlwind, the magic of Dougal, and the old woman laughs, opening her toothless mouth, and the gray tow of her hair turns red and curls into curls.

“Defense is the business of the leader,” the voice of the Phantom Bear sounded in his thoughts. Really, where is Maskelyne?! After all, Dougal will earn himself exhaustion! He said... explained that it is dangerous to cast spells at the limit of one’s strength, but this is clearly the limit. "White Room" Hospital? "No-death and no-life." It happens? Yes, sure. Until they disconnect from our devices. And, probably, from magical recharge – here. Two days.

"Fork. Choose the right path. Take the person you are connected to."

– Dougal!!!

He didn't hear. Or I heard it, but didn't allow myself to be

distracted.

Portal. You can move several, he said.

Protection. Dome. Suicide.

Thoughts were racing, among them there was definitely something important, correct, and saving. But I couldn't catch her!

Yes, it's a portal. To the hospital!!!

“The only portal accessible to everyone, for which any protection is open,” Sabella explained.

We need to get to Dougal without losing the red-haired man – we shouldn't leave him to the ghost-pervert?! I grabbed the saffron milk saffron tightly by the hand, by the wrist – it's safer this way. She got to her feet. It was hard to stand; there was not only a magical whirlwind raging here, not only the one with which Dougal swept away otherworldly creatures. The ghosts laughed and stretched out their hands. The old woman grabbed me by the hair, Oscar flew up to the red-haired man and pulled me towards him. How can they even do this?! They... are already material?!

One step, another. The old woman pulled my hair as if she wanted to remove my scalp. The sharp pain made it dark before my eyes. Or not just from pain? My head was spinning, my legs were buckling. “Medical portals are activated by touch with a clearly expressed desire or order “to the hospital,” also supported by desire, conscious intention. Otherwise there would be too many accidental transfers.”

Reach Dougal. You don't even have to grab it, the main thing is to touch it. And exactly at the moment of contact – be transported. Three of us. This is important and must also be kept in mind.

– In hospital!

A jerk, darkness, a few moments of disorientation and excruciating nausea – I managed to panic, imagining that I had made a mistake in something, and we would be smeared right now into the protective dome – no curse would be needed. But then the light hit our eyes, and the three of us fell in a disordered heap onto the tiled floor.

For some reason I ended up lying on Dougal, and I was probably crushed on top by the poor red-haired fellow. At least I didn't drag anyone else with me, and it's unlikely that the doctor receiving the victims fell on us in joy.

What kind of nonsense is going through your head?!

–What the... hell... are you doing? – Dougal squeezed out and stared at me, perhaps with anger? Or not?

But I didn't have time to answer. Probably, our appearance in the form of a chaotic heap on the floor became for the staff something like an alarm signal and a general gathering – I could not describe in words the chaos and bustle that arose around. Any familiar clichés that are guaranteed to touch the soul of “our audience” paled and faded before this. We were taken to... examination rooms? adopted? I don't know what it's called here, and I don't know what they did with Dougal and the

redhead, but they immediately undressed me, examined me, felt me, treated my bruises, diagnosed me with a mild concussion and immediately cured him too. True, he advised me not to strain myself for a few days. After which they allowed me to get dressed – and someone managed to clean my clothes and even, it seems, disinfected them; they gave me some kind of potion – or potion? And finally they asked what happened. Why not right away, I would like to know?!

While I, carefully choosing censorship words, talked about what happened, Dougal appeared. I turned around at the sound of the door opening and met his gaze. Absolutely unreadable.

– Mr. Stanley? I was told that my assistant is with you. I hope she's okay?

“Now yes,” the doctor said with satisfaction. – But, since this is your assistant, take the trouble to provide her with two or three days of gentle exercise.

–What did she have?

Why does he say that I'm not here?! Was he really that angry that I pulled him out of these damned dungeons?

– The most serious thing is a concussion. Bruises, signs of recent magical exhaustion.

– Little things. Have you finished, or are there still some procedures left?

– Miss Blair has already received all the necessary treatment.

–Then can we go?

“Go,” Mr. Stanley graciously agreed, looked at his watch,

and exclaimed: “detour!” – and rushed off without even saying goodbye.

Dougal followed him with his gaze, nodded with satisfaction and finally looked at me.

“I would have said that you were prone to unreasonable panic if it weren’t for Mr. Whiteley.” He, unlike me, needed the help of doctors.

I got up.

– When you started needing her, it would be too late. Fatally late. You can't afford to spend two days unconscious in a hospital bed. Not now.

– Are these your assumptions, or am I missing something?

– Do not know. I will tell. But,” I sighed, “let’s not go here.”

I can't stand hospitals.

– Me too. Let's go. – Dougal quickly turned around and left. I hurried after. He probably knew where to go, where the area open to portals was, but I had no idea. And, thoroughly frightened by the latest events and discoveries, she did not want to explore the world around her blindly. Another “exemplary suicide attempt”? No thanks!

We went out into the hospital courtyard, small, paved with light brick and, it seemed, covered with climatic spells – it was warm and dry, there were benches, and asters and dahlias bloomed in a round flowerbed. Dougal took my hand and squeezed...

The next moment we found ourselves in a room unfamiliar to

me.

Spacious and quite bright. The walls are lined with dark wood bookcases. A small round table in the center, soft armchairs of a pleasant olive color and a huge window behind partially closed curtains of the same shade. I looked around, not hiding my curiosity. Are we at Dougal's? He just took me and brought me to his home?!

“Sit down,” Dougal nodded towards the chairs. – I don't offer coffee; it's not recommended after concussions. There will be tea. With mixture number two thousand eight hundred nine, if you're wondering about the name again.

I went to the window. Second floor. Below is a lawn strewn with fallen leaves. In the distance is a forest or park. No neighbors in sight. An almost uninhabited island, if not for the Academy towers on the hill in the distance emerging through the fog. Quiet. After the howling and laughter of the ghosts, the silence was especially pleasing.

– Your tea, Miss Sullivan.

– Thank you.

I sat down and took a cup. I inhaled the aroma. It smelled like strawberries.

– So?

I took a sip – delicious. Dougal glared at me impatiently. It took five minutes to retell the conversation with the Ghost Bear. But then I had to explain how I even knew about him, and how he knew about me, Dougal and the curse. And about

our acquaintance with Sabella. I even admitted that I had seen photographs of him as a child.

“Not too fair,” he noted, “I haven’t seen yours.”

– I look terribly funny at them. And ridiculous, to be honest. No, I would show it, but... you understand.

– Yeah. Insurmountable circumstances.

“I’m blond,” I admitted. – And she has a haircut. Very short, like a boy. I don’t have Charlotte’s mane, and what I do have, there’s no point in growing it out. But as a child they tried to make me into a good girl. Those ugly skinny ponytails. I hated them.

– What about pigtails? You know, two of them... also skinny, but with lush bows.

“It’s like tying a bow on a rat’s tail.” Nightmarish.

“Self-critical,” Dougal snorted and narrowed his eyes. – You talked about good things yesterday on the shore. ? What do you consider good about yourself? It makes no sense to start with me, because I can hardly name anything other than the ability to compare the obvious and, perhaps, some talent in certain scientific fields. Yes, you yourself managed to notice. In fact, I shouldn’t consider it a personal merit that most of the time I can communicate with people without calling them idiots to their face.

– In that laboratory... well, until it exploded... I was tempted to ask you for a master class on dealing with students. I can’t do it like that... beautifully. Although, it would seem, the profession obliges. That is, others think so. In fact, a good journalist should

be better at listening than talking.

– And, I believe, in the correct order, make words from letters, and sentences from words.

– Should this be considered something special?

– Somewhat. I wouldn't mind seeing something similar in the work of certain individuals. And not always students.

I chuckled and shrugged.

– Judging by the worst exceptions, then, probably, Mr. Applestone will seem like a genius from poetry – without irony.

– Mr. Applestone – without a doubt. Everything with him is not as bad as it might seem. Of course, I won't tell him about this even under torture, but you can't argue with the facts. Shake the childish stupidity out of your head, put him behind books and lock him in some basement without temptations looming before your eyes, and something tolerable might come out. But for some "established authorities" nothing can save them. You were lucky the day before yesterday. You were just listening to Herr Volger. And I, to my great regret, read it. And even reviewed it.

"I sympathize," was all I could say. She finished her tea in silence. Dougal was waiting for something. Is it really a desperate self-promotion session? What's good about me, really? What could he have seen even if I hadn't been stupid and opened up right away?

That's the question.

"All my good things are left at home," I admitted bitterly. – Who needs a journalist here who doesn't even have basic



knowledge about the world, even minimal cultural baggage that is understandable to readers? Of course, my two and a half foreign languages remain, but, again, these are the languages of our world.

– But you are not only a journalist. To begin with, you are Freya Sullivan, a woman who began with something and continued with something. With your views, life, and even these dreams of yours. I don't think that you wrote your articles from infancy and around the clock until the notorious astral transfer and that's all.

I wrapped my arms around myself: I felt like I was freezing, just like yesterday at the lake. No, I wasn't cold at all. It's just very awkward. I've never been able to talk about myself. A good journalist is invisible. He looks, listens and remains silent. Otherwise, all the sensations will run away!

Well, really, what can I say about myself?

– I also walked around London, fed the neighbor's cat, read a lot, watched films, and sometimes tried to start an affair. As a rule, unsuccessfully. Nothing interesting if you look from the outside. And those who looked closely... The last one, for example, said that I was unbearable. And he fled to the other half of the globe, but here it's far away, we don't have portals.

“Apparently, your intolerability gave him an excellent acceleration.” I'm even curious what it is.

“Perhaps in the request not to throw your socks all over my apartment.” Or in the habit of saying “wait, I'm working” when

he feels the urge to roll around in bed, and my article is on fire. Or maybe the last straw was a poster with some half-naked model, which I tore off the wall in my bedroom and invited him to hang this pornography not in my place. Don't know. He didn't explain, and I didn't ask.

“Indeed, it’s unbearable,” nodded Dougal with a very serious, even, perhaps, slightly dramatic look. – “Ours”, “mine”, “his”, “mine”. I have a slightly different idea of the harmonious coexistence of two organisms that, for some inexplicable reason, wished to be together.

“We haven’t reached the “ours” stage,” I agreed. – Strange. I just now thought that this was for the best. That nothing good would have come of it would have ended sooner or later.

– Logical conclusion. In principle, nothing decent can grow on such roots.

“Free and independent,” I remembered. “All that was left was to get fifteen cats to match.” But the problem was radically solved by damn astral transference.

Dougal put down his cup and leaned back in his chair. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked out the window with a thoughtful look.

– Well, it’s a good time for intermediate conclusions. You and I are ordinary, not very pleasant people to talk to. Which rather scare away others than attract them. Sometimes I even enjoy it. It's about me. In addition, neither you nor I can imagine ourselves without our favorite activity or hobby, for which we

are ready to do almost anything. And no human relationship can replace this. I have only one exception, and it's conditional. My mother never tried to change me or come between me and what I hold dear. Apparently you like something about me. I also like something about you. Is this enough of a curse? Not sure. But your Ghost Bear gave us time, which probably means something. I can't imagine how best to spend it. We'll have to improvise.

I listened and... fell into shock? I think, yes. All this "mine" is a consequence, not a cause. The real reason is that Mike, and Jeremy, and Ted... yes, absolutely all of my guys. They just got in my way. They irritated me with their pestering when I felt like working. They didn't understand why I was ready to leave a date somewhere, in the middle of the night or halfway through an interesting movie. None of them were truly passionate about anything themselves – maybe that was the problem? And not one of them could, or even tried, to come to terms with my passion. At least reconcile, not to mention support!

Of course, in the end the work was more important. Should we be surprised? What's more surprising is that with at least some of the guys things even went beyond the first date! And did I really need to hear this from a person who barely knows me to understand?

"Rationalism as it is," I muttered. -You have a completely different approach to... to our problem. Fundamentally different, perhaps. Very strange for me. But do you know what's strangest? Now I'm looking at you, and it seems to me that it might work.

“The rational approach usually works better than the emotional one,” Dougal responded. – This is true for any problem.

– What’s at the Academy? Did you find out? And... what was that all about, do you often do this?! – I shuddered with disgust, remembering William with his “Curly” and the “old sodomite” Oscar.

– Never. I have never encountered anything like this before. But I suspect that these are all consequences of Miss Blair's ritual. Isn't the ritual room the same one by any chance?

– I'm not sure, but it's very similar.

– That's what I thought. On Sundays it is usually attended by students from behind. Under the supervision of someone from the senior year. They prepare for tests, practice ritual magic. I'm not an expert in ritualism, but I think I won't be wrong if I assume that they opened a portal to the world of spirits while practicing the summoning spell, but the balance of power turned out to be too unequal. And the defense is shattered, or even completely broken by your appearance and the intervention of forces that it is better for a normal person not to even know about. You saw the result with your own eyes. Restless spirits, lost souls, ghosts and a lot of small evil spirits. All that had to be done was to throw them back, close the portal and seal the breach. And I think I would even have enough strength for it. With subsequent exhaustion, of course, but I did not expect the outcome that you described.

“Ghost Bear said that protection is the responsibility of the

chief and some... old man?" I don't remember exactly... the place.

– And he was right. I thought I told you that the land on which the Academy stands is filled with power. Madam is the headmistress there now. Perhaps in the company of experienced ritualists. The magic of the Academy is fixated on it, security and protective artifacts are tuned to it. There appear to be no casualties other than Mr. Whiteley. Except maybe a couple of impressionable students with nervous breakdowns. We managed to leave.

“Tomorrow is the last day,” I blurted out. – Let's go for a walk? It's not critically important for you to hold it at the Academy, is it?

– I am one of the victims, like you. And I have a moral injury incompatible with work. I have already informed the director about this. In a written form.

I couldn't help but laugh. She said from the heart:

– Thank you.

– It won't hurt you either. But that's later. You can add exhaustion, concussion and mild to moderate physical damage to the moral one. Doctors will confirm.

– Necessarily. By the way. Is there a concept of “injury at work” in your world? Do you mean that she is entitled to some kind of compensation from the employer?

– Not for magicians.

“Discrimination,” I snorted.

“We are able to take care of ourselves much better than those who do not own magic.” It's more like a kind of justice.

– What about magical exhaustion?

– Every magician first of all has reason, and only then magic. But a reasonable person is different in that he is able to make a conscious choice – to bring himself to exhaustion of any kind or not.

“It's logical,” I agreed. – Although... circumstances are different, right?

“They happen,” Dougal nodded, “but, as a rule, they do not depend on the place of work.” For example, today no one demanded any action from me other than the lecture. Madam headmistress is not responsible for the fact that I ended up in the dungeons of my own free will.

“As well as for a ritual carried out by an ambitious fool without her knowledge,” I nodded. – And for all its consequences. Okay, let's not spoil our mood with Madame Headmistress. We suddenly had a day and a half free. I have no ideas. Do you probably have things to do that are better not to be put off? So the program is yours.

– I need a couple of hours to finish one extremely interesting experiment. You can stay here. Since you like to read, you'll find something less boring for yourself,” he added, grinning: “There are no treatises on alchemy here.” But if I'm late, go down to the first floor and call me. Exciting experiments tend to eat up time unnoticed.

He left and I took care of the bookcases. There were three of them, and it took me about half an hour to be convinced that although there were no treatises on alchemy here, there was not a single art book either. Directories, encyclopedias, monographs on botany, zoology, pharmaceuticals, magic and others. One closet was almost entirely filled with memoirs and biographies. Without leaving this room, one could get a completely fundamental understanding of the world, although somewhat one-sided.

“Still, he looks like Sherlock Holmes,” I muttered. I remember that the brilliant detective of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle also did not recognize fiction.

Well, the local Encyclopedia Britannica isn't so bad.

The first thing I found was an article about Panacea Academy. The institution turned out to have a three-century history, an impressive list of famous graduates, teachers and directors, with a solid baggage of inventions and discoveries. Maskelyne's ambitions became clearer – compared to her predecessors, she looked... pale, to be more precise. A good, perhaps an excellent administrator, but for such a prestigious post this is not enough. And there is nothing more to boast about. She realized that she would not achieve heights on her own, and decided to remain in history as the director who raised the prestige and importance of the Academy to unprecedented heights. Yes, most likely it is.

Dougal was not included in the list of famous teachers – the encyclopedia was published three years ago. But it

was mentioned in articles about magical pharmaceuticals, multi-component elixirs and the International Board of Patent Examination. In the latter – as one of the leading experts in magical chemistry, pharmacology and cosmetology.

I wanted to look for Chester as well, but I came across the article “Magic: General Provisions.” And disappeared.

Although the article was, for my taste, too academic – well, this is an encyclopedia, not “Preschoolers about magic.” And even though all these “magic flow exponents” and “differential-step enchantment” sounded no clearer to me than Russian or Chinese. Let be. But here there was also about ancient magic as such and its incarnations, like kelpies or brownies, and about traditional magic – the Druids, Celts, Romans, Saxons, Picts... About the magic of children, elemental, scientific. About all branches of magical science. I read about alchemy, and about climate charms, and about the portal network, and about visualization – as a special case of the magic of illusions, and about the magic of illusions itself. ? why someone is born a magician and someone is not, and why excessive passion for magic is dangerous.

Yes, I had to read all this on my first day here!

The letters began to blur, I closed my eyes for a minute. I also thought: maybe Mr. Stanley meant something like that? But reading isn't a burden, is it?!

She sat down sideways, tucked her legs under her, lowered her head onto the soft edge of the back of the chair – and passed out.



I didn't wake up right away, at first I felt something like a slight tickling, then there was some barely audible melodic chime, and then someone took me by the shoulder and shook me lightly.

– Miss Sullivan. Freya. Wake up, everything will cool down.

– Will it cool down? Dougal? – I yawned and rubbed my eyes.

The body ached. Did I manage to fall asleep curled up in a chair?

And... – Freya? “I peered into his face, and he looked at me. No,

I don't understand. You won't understand anything from his face

until you want to! But... -Did you really call me by name? Didn't

I dream? – She lowered her legs from the chair and stretched. –

Your mixtures... after them it seems that I slept for a week ahead.

It`s Magic?

– No, only the right ingredients in the right proportions. I

wouldn't wake you up, but it's already evening. And I suspect that

you, like me, haven't eaten anything since the morning. Not the

best way to restore wasted magic. Exhaustion cannot be cured

by fasting.

But he's right, he's hungry like crazy. I glanced outside the

window and was dumbfounded. Evening?! It seems – no, without

any “it seems”! – Dougal monstrously understated. It was pitch

dark outside the window. How long did I sleep? Damn... our

penultimate half day...

Although Dougal was still busy. If he and I are similar in our

attitude towards the work we love, and obviously we are, then

distracting him is the worst way to create a normal impression

of ourselves. Yes, I wouldn't, although he seemed to ask me to

call him. No, I wouldn't.

– I don't know what you like. Besides pizza and cupcakes, of course. So I chose according to my taste. The day before yesterday you didn't mind, but... the day before yesterday you weren't capable of it. So it's time to start. Something like “don't put your beef on my side of the table,” for example?

I laughed. What's strange is that I know that Dougal is capable of laughing. I remember yesterday. But now you can't even tell from him whether he's joking or not. Neither by face, nor by intonation. Not a muscle moved. Rusk as is. So why is it funny to me, and it doesn't even occur to me that he was thinking of tricking me? Or even worse – insult or poke in a sore spot?

– How was your experiment?

– Successful. And it even took less time than I expected.

Meanwhile, dishes appeared on the table one by one. Ready, served. From the restaurant again? But nothing particularly tricky. Good old English cuisine: roast beef, mashed potatoes, green peas, stewed carrots. Baked beef in spicy tomato sauce. I wolfed down the food as if I hadn't eaten in at least a week. Dougal was not far behind. I suddenly noticed that he was very pale. Magical exhaustion plus experiment? Yes, a day from hand to mouth against this background is not the best solution.

When the empty plates disappeared, dessert appeared on the table. Cupcakes. Chocolate, lemon, berry. Basket with eclairs. And aromatic strong coffee.

I took the first sip with pleasure.

– Returning to the experiment. May I congratulate you?

– It's early. Full-scale tests are ahead.

– Then – good luck in the tests.

– If I say that you will become a direct participant, won't you be afraid? And no details. Everything – later.

– Am I scared? Yes, you know a lot about how to interest a journalist. And when is “later”?

– Tomorrow. I think later in the evening, though... we'll see. Everything will depend on several factors that I cannot predict.

“I know what I'm going to die from—curiosity!”

– I like this attitude better. I can feed your curiosity with a walk around London, would you like? And you will tell us whether our London is very different from yours.

– Not bad idea. Right now?

– Why not? You've had enough sleep, I don't want to spend this night sleeping. Just change your dress. This attracts trouble – and we've probably had enough adventures for this week.

## CHAPTER 7. Day seven: Monday

Walking around London until the morning with the person with whom you would like to spend your whole life is probably not the worst start to the day, which with a very high probability could be the last for both of you. It would even be ideal if it weren't for the curse hanging over us. It was impossible to forget about him. "The whole life" is very little, if we don't succeed... "If Dougal doesn't fall in love with you, call a spade a spade!"

We did not go to generally accepted sights or iconic places. But they found a house in which I lived in my own world. Here it was the same, only opposite – not McDonald's, but a bakery with a pastry shop and a small 24-hour coffee shop. We drank a glass of coffee, looking at the not-my windows. Dark ones – whoever lived there did not have my habit of working at night.

Then I told Dougal about the witch from whom I went on my fatal astral transition, and together we found the area where it happened.

"Strong magical background," Dougal assessed. – If it's the same in your world, this could give an additional boost.

"There is no magic in our world," I reminded.

"There are no magicians in your world," Dougal corrected gravely. – But it's not a fact that it never happened. You know about magic, even from legends. Neither knowledge nor legends arise out of nowhere. "After a pause, he added: "This could be

an extremely interesting topic for research.” If only there was a chance to explore.

– But you haven’t learned how to open portals between worlds yet? – I joked sadly.

– Our science, both magical and not, does not know at all about the phenomenon of parallel worlds. You could make a breakthrough,” he said seriously.

– But I won’t.

– Why?

– They won’t believe it. I don’t like and don’t know how to prove the obvious. It’s obvious to me,” she clarified, after thinking, “after all, there is no real evidence. They’ll simply think I’m crazy.

– Hardly. The presence of a world of souls and spirits is no secret to anyone. All ritualism is based on feeding power from it. Again, rituals of calling, which sometimes pull from the other side strange and unexplainable entities known to science. From all this to parallel worlds, in fact, it’s closer than from London to Panacea Academy. And you definitely weren’t the only one who saw ghosts. But it won’t be easy, that’s for sure. New knowledge is never readily accepted.

“Then... we need to think about it.” Assess whether this is needed here? I know nothing about your world, and you know nothing about mine. Maybe when I start telling you things that are commonplace for us, you will be the first to say that it is better to stay as far away from such madness as possible.

– Like from the grumbling of Borvoor and the tidal pebbles? It is quite possible that I will say. But no one will ever know if you don't try.

“Let's return to discussing the terrible realities of my world and parallelism later,” I suggested. – This is not a question that should be solved hastily... and based only on scientific considerations. Maybe I'm stupid, but I believe in morality. And that some discoveries would be better off not happening.

– I understand what you mean. But I am always more interested in the question of who can decide this and by what right.

– At a minimum, the author of the discovery has some rights. After all, it will be he who will be cursed if the discovery turns out to be monstrous.

– Or praise. The result is usually unpredictable. And no one knows how they will use your work.

“Or praise,” I agreed. – Or both. You're a scientist, you couldn't help but think about it.

“I couldn't,” Dougal agreed. – And I came to the conclusion that every discovery and every opportunity has its time. If the discovery is made, then its time has come. If an opportunity presents itself, then it's worth taking advantage of. Nothing around us happens without a reason. Everything that happens is caused by something. Even accidents are not accidental. It was no coincidence that even Miss Blair went to perform her idiotic ritual. It's just time.

–Are you a fatalist?

– No. I believe that everything in our lives is determined by our choices. And your “incredible probabilities” that ghosts and shamans told you about confirm my theory.

– May be. I'll think about it.

We went out to the Thames and stopped at the granite parapet of the embankment. Seagulls flew over the gray water with sharp cries. Pigeons were crowing behind me; they were fat, well-fed and lazy, they shied away from under their feet, but did not take off.

“It’s a wonderful night,” I said. – Thank you... Dougal.

“Enjoy yourself, Freya,” he chuckled. – It’s only morning.

– Don’t pretend that you don’t understand. Doesn't suit you. By the way, my friends call me Sally. You can too. If you want, of course.

– I won’t even try. Freya suits you and this world much better.

– You think? – I froze. I really liked it when he called me Freya. When I woke you up... and now. From him the least favorite name sounded different. It’s not that it’s more beautiful, but rather more correct. There was magic in it. As in this world, and in me now. – Maybe you're right. Fine. Let there be Freya. Only for you. And for Sabella, of course. She also said something similar.

We stepped into Sabella's living room at exactly eight in the morning. For what? Dougal didn't explain. He didn't even say when he opened the portal where we would end up. To be honest,

I was surprised. That is, it is clear that Dougal could not help but be with his mother that day, but I did not think that he would drag me with him. And, for that matter, I very much doubted that Sabella would be pleased.

But she smiled sincerely, and her “Good morning, Sally, very glad to see you” sounded from the heart, and not from formal politeness.

“Everything is as you asked,” she told Dougal and placed something in his palm. – Double-sided for a day. This time difference...

– Thank you mom. I hope you didn't have to hang around there all night.

– Oh, no, very nice people work there.

“Your crocodiles are all cute, even evil ones,” he pressed her to him and touched her cheek with his lips.

I felt embarrassed: it was not for prying eyes. So... personal. Parting. For a day or forever. I wrapped my arms around myself and turned away. But then Sabella pulled away from Dougal and came towards me. Hug.

– Don't cry, Sally. Everything will be fine, I believe.

I don't know how I didn't burst into tears from this “don't cry.” ?hummed in response.

– Thank you, Sabella. You are so... wonderful.

“It's time,” Dougal said in a strange voice. “You'll still have time to cry in the arms of... a woman.”

And then he took my hand.



– The time for testing and new experiments has come. Ready?  
“He turned his back and put his palms on his shoulders. He said quietly: “Close your eyes, it’s... probably too bright.”

I obeyed silently. A short meeting with Sabella turned into such an emotional shake-up that there was no strength left to be interested in anything else, to ask about anything. And... I told Dougal that the program is at his discretion.

I felt the usual tug, for some reason a whistling in my ears – this definitely had never happened before. And also the moment of movement itself, for some reason it seemed too long to me.

– Well, that's what I thought. And, of course, the unbearable heat.

– Can we open it now? Or is this also... a test?

– No, these are experiments. Open it up.

I opened my eyes. She blinked. Did you want to wipe them like children do, or... or maybe cry? No. Fuck the tears.

The openwork arc of the Arbor Bridge was reflected in the blue bay. Large and small boats cut through the water surface sparkling with sunlight, yachts were white, tourists were noisy around. The roof of the Opera, like sails inflated by the wind, shone under the bright sun.

My stupid, idiotic dream. Sydney.

Dougal's hands were still on his shoulders. I leaned my back against him and threw my head back. He looked at the bay, at the bridge, at the white sails of the yachts.

– Sabella said that, right? – I whispered.

“She only confirmed suspicions.” Mind reading is not one of my talents. But I remembered your dream. And you mentioned Sydney several times. At first glance it looks good. I've been here twice. I saw nothing but the reception area and the lecture hall.

“Then we'll watch it together.” Only... It seems like it makes sense to practice magic. Too hot. I'll try to make myself a summer dress. I hope I don't end up naked in the middle of the embankment.

– The likelihood of a successful outcome is minimal, but I'll back it up. Imagine something simple with a secure top. Straps are details, they can let you down.

I imagined my wool dress brightening, the wool giving way to fine cotton, the long sleeves disappearing, leaving my arms exposed. No need for straps. Simple straight cut sleeveless. It couldn't be simpler. Light, flowing, let the wind pick it up and play with the hem. The fabric flapping around her legs. I lowered my eyes. White flowing fabric, too thin, translucent, but it's not scary, even so. The main thing is that I succeeded. Happened!

In a wave of courage, I turned the shoes into sandals and out of nothing created a wide-brimmed hat, white, with a scarlet ribbon tied in a lush bow.

“You're making progress,” Dougal assessed. – Now don't forget to slowly feed it all with magic, otherwise it will dissipate at the most inopportune moment.

He himself changed from a black suit to light beige trousers and a thin white shirt with short sleeves and an open collar.

The spectacle, I must say, was amazing. Because I couldn't even imagine him in anything similar. In response to my stunned look, he only raised an eyebrow.

– What?

– Gorgeous! – I answered with feeling. – How come the students haven't torn you up for souvenirs?

“I'm angry and intimidating, I love to humiliate people, I cook poisons of any complexity with my eyes closed, and getting a pass from me the first time is like hitting the jackpot.” This happens once in a lifetime only to the luckiest. What kind of students are you talking about?

I burst out laughing. Indeed, it was worth remembering him in that laboratory. And the cow eyes of the girls pressing questions on the golden-haired and smiling Herr Wolger. And even Charlotte's complaints.

– Are they all idiots?

– There are pleasant exceptions. But these exceptions are busy with the intensive acquisition of knowledge, and not with delusional dreams about teachers.

A group of tourists passed by, and I grabbed Dougal's arm, suddenly afraid that the crowd would separate us. It was noisy and perhaps too crowded. Circular Quay, one of Sydney's main attractions.

At the pier, boats rocked on the waves, large and small, and very tiny, just for two.

– Shall we go for a ride? – I asked.

– Let's.

We made an agreement with the owner of a tiny white boat, a young guy with a big smile. Dougal counted out the payment, jumped into the boat from the pier, and offered me his hand.

I remembered my dream. There was the same boat there, and I was sorry that Dougal was not nearby. Now he was. Another wish come true and probably some “incredible probability.” “Perhaps,” I thought cautiously, as if I was afraid of frightening off the hope that had suddenly spread its wings, “the ending of the dream in reality will be different? Without the blue tones that smack of hopelessness and disappointment?”

The boat rushed across the bay, leaving a white foamy trail. The hot, salty wind hit my face and tried to rip my hat off my head. I held it with one hand and grabbed Dougal's elbow with the other. He held me by the waist, tightly, as if he was afraid that he would be carried away by the wind. And he asked about all sorts of nonsense that now for some reason seemed important.

– Oatmeal or bacon?

– Bacon, of course! – I was indignant.

– Harmful and fraught with obesity.

– Somehow I'll survive! Surely there are ways, and if not, you will invent a suitable potion for the occasion.

– Keep Chester company.

– And Mrs. Ferguson's pies!

– What about heels? The belly will outweigh. You already have a migrating center of gravity.

– I'll buy some sneakers. I'll run to work in the morning instead of the portal.

– And fall into all the puddles you come across? It's rainy in Britain, you know.

– I will work on myself. Regular training works wonders. I know, I checked!

We were dropped off on a beach with white coral sand. There were almost no people here, and I already created a swimsuit for myself without fear.

–Are you a good swimmer? – asked Dougal.

– I won't outrun the shark, but I'll try to you.

And we started racing. Dougal swam the classic crawl, with powerful jerks, and it was indeed difficult to keep up with him. And when did you learn?! Armchair scientist!

When he allowed himself to be caught up, I was breathing heavily, like a driven horse, and the beach was visible in the distance as a narrow white stripe. I had forgotten that in Charlotte's body I could simply go to the bottom. And it's good that I forgot, otherwise Dougal would probably have had to catch me. Legs too long. Hands that have probably never lifted anything heavier in their life than a pencil... or a mirror... And also these... tits. And patlas. I wonder if Charlotte even knew how to swim? a very timely question, yes. Time to take a break!

– You are needed for the national team! – I exhaled, floundering in the water that suddenly seemed dangerous. – To the Olympic Games. Do you have the ?Olympic Games?

– Were in bearded antiquity. In Greece. But if Kels does condescend to you, you will not swim quite so well. Lots of unforgettable thrills in icy water. And an ancient creature neighing, literally and figuratively, instead of fans.

I lay on my back, the ocean held me gently, rocking on the gentle waves. The sun was setting towards the horizon, casting a sparkling, blinding path onto the water. My hair became completely wet, my head was pulled down, under the water, and I had to strain my neck. She turned over and slowly swam towards the shore. Tomorrow all the muscles, unaccustomed to such loads, will ache like hell. And to hell with them, let them hurt. I will also teach this doll body to be human.

I climbed ashore and collapsed on the hot sand. Dougal lay down next to him with his hands behind his head.

The surf was noisy, and we were lying on the sand and talking. About magic, the academy, our Olympic Games... Even about why I was so drawn to Sydney. Now, after our conversation with the “interim results”, the reason seemed stupid. I said so, for some reason feeling guilty. But Dougal looked in such a way that it became clear that he knew this even without my revelations. Well, yes, probably also from Sabella. And I couldn't even blame her for blurting out my personal secrets. She told me a lot of personal things about Dougal too. And about her story with Maskelyne, although it was not easy for her. And if she conveyed something about me to Dougal, it would probably be something that would help him see me the same way I saw him. She knows

her son. And, as Ghost Bear rightly noted, a very wise woman.

And Dougal said:

– It's not so important why the dream was born. What is more important is whether it will come true or not.

He was right, of course. I looked at the sun that had almost set into the ocean and asked:

– Action films or melodramas?

“I don't look,” he shrugged. – I don't read novels either. A pointless waste of time.

“Mr. Holmes,” I snorted. – Interesting, would you like science fiction? Do you have one?

– If it cannot be brought to life at least in laboratory conditions, it is unlikely. As for you...” he turned around. – Perhaps melodramas, perhaps sometimes comedies. Right?

– Melodramas – yes. Depends on the mood. Comedies – only if they are not stupid. All science fiction, without reference to laboratory conditions, and non-scientific fantasy too,” I smiled and spread my hands. – More detectives, but very selectively. Sherlock Holmes is my favorite. Is he in your world?

– Sir Arthur? There was one.

– I would like to compare. Suddenly he wrote something new... that is, different. What a gift that would be! – ? after all, it's probably different, the world is with magic, this cannot but influence the investigations. Maybe I'll read it some more. All collected works. – Now you? Owl or lark? Or an invigorating potion – and the whole day is yours?

– Depends on the case. If it's interesting, I can be both. But I have not yet invented a permanent invigorating elixir. None of them are ideal and require adequate sleep between doses. I'm working on it though. It makes me angry that there is always not enough time.

“Exactly,” I agreed. I suddenly didn't want to ask anything else. I scooped up the sand and opened my palm. – Like that.

– As a child, I had a different dream. Not about the island. I dreamed that one day I would find a way to stop time. In a month, a week or a day. But I couldn't decide what this day should be like, because each of them is interesting in some way. How to choose? I never thought that one day the answer would find me on its own and there would be nothing to choose from.

Breathless. I turned away. Said:

– And no day can be made endless. Science is powerless, and so is magic. It's a pity. Let's go somewhere. It seems to me that the beach has exhausted itself. It will become too sad here now.

From the beach we were transported through a portal to the embankment – when the sun had almost set.

“We urgently need dinner, or breakfast, it depends,” said Dougal. “Otherwise we'll definitely die prematurely.”

The tiny cafe was full of people under frivolous striped umbrellas. But this did not interfere with anything. I sipped a poisonous green cocktail through a straw, ate thick pink shrimp in a white, sweet and sour sauce and seriously thought that this was the best day of my life. Even despite sad thoughts and



melancholy ready to set in at any moment.

A light wind came from the ocean, tickled my bare hands, ruffled the ribbons on my hat, but it was warm and pleasant. No comparison with the piercing, prickly winds of England. And yet, for some incomprehensible, unthinkable reason, I remembered the park where we walked yesterday. And garden. And Borbourg with its plums, peaches, pounds. In spring, real spring, not cut into pieces by the magic of Chester, it must be stunningly beautiful there. It blooms, smells, and falls in pink and white rain at your feet. I would really like to see all this.

– What else besides Sydney? – asked Dougal. – Snows of Kilimanjaro? Grand Canyon? Dawn over Fuji?

– Northern lights. But I won't refuse the sunrise over Fuji either.

– What about the patriotic moors of Scotland? Didn't you like it?

– They already were. You can cross them off the list. Is it possible to get another purple one and exchange it for Mrs. Ferguson's pies?

– Not bad idea. We need to think it over.

Then there was night and fireworks over the ocean. Scarlet, green, golden balls swelled and fell into the sea, leaving luminous paths. I still don't understand whether it's magic or fireworks like ours. It wasn't that important. The thought was much stronger that the moment was absolutely suitable for kissing, but Dougal showed no "such" intentions. This was both pleasant

and disturbing at the same time. In the end, I let go of the situation, forbidding myself to think about whether we would have a tomorrow. If not, if Dougal and his rational approach were lost to the curse – well, at least he managed to give me a magical last day. It's worth a lot.

And yet I wanted, so incredibly I wanted to believe in the future! The fact that we have it... more than a few hours before the end of my seventh day after the ritual. I didn't even know the exact time! "Midnight or a little later"... Although... maybe this is for the better?

And I asked, turning to Dougal and not even thinking that anyone else could hear us:

– Boy or girl?

The silence was so long that I couldn't stand it and tried to look into his face. It turned out that he was extremely focused. Frown brows, half-closed eyes.

– Dougal? – she called carefully. What is he even doing?

– Wait. I calculate the statistical probability of twins.

– Different sexes? – I clarified, dumbfounded and at the same time skeptical.

– Exactly.

– Extremely low. But you can always try again.

– Attempts threaten with triplets, this is too much.

Where did he even get this from? Or is he joking?

– Are you kidding? – I clarified. – Sounds... a little crazy.

"Elixirs," he explained briefly. – Cause addiction and increase

likelihood.

– What about without them? naturally?

“Then we’ll have to calculate the probability of seniority.”

– Whose seniority? – It seems that I didn’t understand anything at all.

– A boy, of course.

– Fifty-fifty, as far as I remember the school physiology course.

– In our world, you can change the ratio. But the result depends on too many factors.

–Who do you want? – I couldn’t stand it.

“I can’t choose,” it sounded irritated, but behind the irritation one could sense confusion. ?Well, never thought about it? At least... hypothetically! – And you?

“I want two,” I answered seriously. – Growing up alone... it’s sad, and then it’s also lonely. And it doesn’t matter who... that’s how it turns out. I won’t love my daughter less if I wanted a son. Or vice versa. So – why choose? It’s men who always want someone specific. Or an heir, or a little princess.

– As you can see, not always. There are more severe cases.

“I see,” I smiled. – And honestly, I like that you can't choose.

“The eldest must be a boy,” Dougal said with conviction. – A younger sister is a reason to grow up with a sense of responsibility.

“Being an older sister is also useful.” It seems so to me.

We reached the openwork lattice and turned into the open

gates of the park. It was now quiet and deserted, the spreading crowns rustled in the light wind, and the yellowish light of lanterns flooded the paths strewn with fine white sand. The roar of the surf came here as a faint echo, and some night birds screamed in the bushes.

We sat on a bench under a lantern. I leaned against Dougal's shoulder, and for some reason it felt easy and natural. And just as naturally, he put his hand on my shoulders, hugging me. Asked:

– Isn't it time to change your dress to something warmer?

– No. I feel... good.

“Then let's change something else.”

A small bottle fell into my palm, the glass was warm, and I was suddenly scared. But she immediately clenched her fingers tightly. She asked in a whisper:

– What's there?

– The result of yesterday's experiment. Will you take the risk?

– I'll take a risk. But I'm interested! Still no questions? – I clarified.

– Without. Just have a drink and imagine yourself...you. Your real self, the way you remember and know yourself, the way you are used to seeing in the mirror.

Myself? Sally... Freya? Not... not that damn Barbie?!

I drank it in one gulp and closed my eyes tightly. It was easy to imagine. Much easier than imagining clean cups or this dress. It was enough to remember. An ordinary morning. How I walk barefoot into the bathroom, look in the mirror, smooth

my tousled hair with my fingers, but it only gets more shaggy... I wash my face and go to the kitchen to make coffee. I catch the reflection of my figure in the dark glass of the cupboard and wave my hand: "Good morning, Sally!"

Only now, belatedly, melancholy came over me. Previously, probably, there was simply no time for it. I wiped my tears. She turned to Dougal. I wanted to ask – why is all this?

But he looked at me... so strange. Attentively, intently and... tenderly? It was as if he was trying to remember every smallest detail and at the same time appreciate everything... in its entirety. From bare feet to a T-shirt with... ? God! An old, comfortable, beloved, already stretched out and slipping off the shoulder, T-shirt with Darth Vader! Sally, you're in your repertoire. But... It's true. Such as there is. I ran my fingers through my hair. Like in a dream. As always in the morning. Disheveled, uneven strands stick out in all directions. She sighed. God, what a blessing it is to feel... normal? Without that weight in your bra! Easy! Correct. Not a glossy doll with pouty lips.

Dougal moved closer, carefully, as if afraid that any of his movements would suddenly evaporate or melt, touched my cheek, and gently raised my chin. He looked without stopping, squinted, then said:

– Gray. Right?

I nodded silently. Suddenly my lips trembled. Dougal's face blurred before my eyes, and I still asked, sobbing:

– For what?

He pulled me towards him, I buried myself in his shoulder, my palm ran over my back, soothingly, affectionately.

“Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t fall in love with a woman I’d never seen.” You are not Miss Blair. You don’t match her looks. You can’t imagine the unbearable dissonance. What an annoying need to adjust and guess. Guess which assumptions are correct and which are not. That body is a distraction. Now you are real. Surprisingly correct.

– But I... can’t stay like this?

– And there’s no need. The puzzle is complete. The question has an answer, and it completely suits me.

I hugged him and asked him for some reason about something that had already become extremely clear:

– Is it true? And we... did we succeed? And all will be well?

“We won’t know until we survive the dawn and several hours after.” I’m sorry, I’m not used to... measuring my feelings with ephemeral definitions that cannot be touched and broken down into components.

“It’s nothing,” I said with conviction. – Is it true. I... I feel it. And you don’t have to measure it at all.

– Let’s see.

He froze, still hugging me. The night dragged on slowly. I didn’t want to talk, I didn’t want to do anything at all. And I didn’t want to ask Dougal how long his elixir would last. I was simply pouring magic into the illusion of the real me. Sounds strange. Sad. I didn’t want Freya Sullivan? remained just an illusion. But...

at least let it be like this. Better an illusion than nothing at all.

Whatever this dawn brought us, I wanted to meet it with myself. Not Charlotte. Dougal and I both deserve it.

–What will you be afraid of later? – he suddenly asked. –  
When all this is over.

I didn't have to think long.

– Charlotte's parents. That is, meetings with them. They are not my parents, I am not their daughter. All this... is dishonest! But something will have to be decided about this. I can't... like that.

– It wouldn't be fair if you lie. ?neither should know.

– Yes. But how will I tell them? How can you say this? I can't imagine.

– The truth is never better or worse. She just is. Nothing will change from the wording.

– Will you help me?

– Certainly.

I silently rested my forehead on his shoulder.

When the sky above the trees brightened, we, without saying a word, got up and went to the sea. The sand of the path, hot in the evening, now pleasantly cooled my bare feet. I just conjured up shorts and a sports T-shirt instead of a home shirt. The ones I ran in in the morning.

The park went right to the shore. The waves gently rolled onto the deserted beach. The ocean was smooth, pure blue, and above it was an equally clear sky. Only at the very horizon a narrow

strip of clouds gleamed scarlet.

I shuddered when a voice sounded in my ear, which I had already forgotten to think about.

– Goodbye.

She squinted her eyes slightly. The ghost, barely visible, almost completely transparent now, the ghost of Charlotte hung nearby. And melted. And for the first time in all the time we knew each other, he seemed... happy?

“I don’t know, I can’t see your future from here, it’s just beginning from this dawn, but I can already leave.” It’s all over. I’m sorry I couldn’t be with you. But my intervention could have turned out to be the wrong thing. The man who knows the ways promised to show the right path. It’s no longer hard, it’s easy, you can get out. There are still things left for me to do. But you can finish them. The man who sees the invisible promised to help, to tell those who were dear to me about everything that happened. And about you. Through dreams. Tell Professor Norwood that Director Maskelyne knows that I am no longer here. I had to say goodbye to her too. Now she won’t hold him back.

I managed to get out of the habit of her abstruse manner of expressing myself. By the time I realized it, the ghost had completely melted away. Only a barely noticeable piece of fog swayed in the air – and disappeared under the first rays of the sun.

– Something happened, right? – asked Dougal. “Magic background.” Not that it’s broken... Strange. It seems to me that



I have already felt something similar. I don't remember when or where. "He fell silent, as if trying to find the right words to describe his own feelings.

– Charlotte. She said she could leave. Which is easy now. That our future is just beginning. And... she disappeared. Not like she disappeared before. It just evaporated.

"Easy," Dougal repeated thoughtfully. – Exactly! Light, barely noticeable excitement. It looks like ripples on the water. It is now clear. I felt it at the academy. Close to you.

– She told me to tell you. Maskelyne knows she's gone. It means something? Something important?

– My contract. One of the points, she insisted on it. Miss Blair is my assistant. Violating anyone means freedom to me.

– And... what now? All?

– All. – He looked at the sun. A huge golden sun that slowly rose over the ocean. – Do you like happy endings, Miss Freya Sullivan?

– Adore!

– Then tell me – what is there at the end according to the laws of the genre?

"Happily ever after," I smiled wider and wider. – Boy and girl. Sometimes there are all sorts of tests, but this is nonsense.

– It later. And at the beginning?

"At first..." I think I blushed. Truly, uncontrollably, brightly, as the naive girl Sally, who still believed in real miracles and true love, once blushed. – Kiss?

– I hate the laws of genres. – He turned around, and I froze, trying to understand: it seems that now I see the main, most impossible, incredible and unreal miracle of this magical world. Dougal smiled. Wide, reckless, completely boyish. Just as Dr. Norwood, a professor at the Panacea Academy, certainly couldn't smile.

Did he step forward first, or did I hang on his neck first? What difference does it really make when I heard something as incredible as his smile:

– But I like this one.

## **EPILOGUE. One year later**

It's amazing how everything around you changes when you don't have a fatal curse hanging over you. When your whole life is ahead – your life, your own, and not borrowed from a hysterical ghost. And you can learn magic, do what you love, discover a magical new world...

The year has flown by faster than that terrible week. Exciting, interesting, filled with new impressions and relationships.

A year... yesterday we celebrated Sabella's birthday, and today I am again walking through her beautiful park, heading to the lake – the abode of the malicious “creature of ancient magic.” Ever since Kels accepted me as a member of the family and deigned to communicate without a “translator,” I loved visiting him. The ancient kelpie has an interesting view of the world. Inhuman, paradoxical and, perhaps, very sensible. Dougal even joked once that it was time to be jealous.

Today I have a strange topic of conversation. But more people understand kelpie magic, if only because he himself is concentrated magic, and feels it as clearly as people feel heat or cold. He felt then, at our first meeting, both the curse and the fact that Dougal and I had every chance to overcome it...

I couldn't help but smile, remembering my return from Sydney. How Sabella and I laughed and cried in our arms, and then it was as if something was dragging me to the lake. And

the neighing kelpie conveyed that one must be careful when speaking out loud promises backed by magic. And now he waits impatiently and really longs for me to start begging. If I start immediately, so be it, by the summer he will agree to take me for a ride.

And how Dougal had fun retelling his flowery images!

Kels is caring in his own way, although he will never stoop to show it. He knows that icy autumn water is not good for people, even if they are magicians. But then I was not a larva of a magician, but an embryo. No matter what Charlotte says about this...

I am still just learning. But I can maintain my true appearance without much difficulty and even without Dougal's potion. After all, this potion is not a manifestation of the essence, as I thought then. It just stimulates the memory and helps to concentrate extremely much to create the desired illusion. Nothing that cannot be learned with desire and a good incentive. But I had an incentive, and not even one.

Not only the desire to see herself as real and the dislike of Charlotte's body. As soon as I understood and believed that I would linger in this brave new world, the question arose – who would I be here? Charlotte Blair? It was unfair, it was wrong, my whole being was against it. And her parents are unlikely to be happy about this turn.

Freya Sullivan? ? who is she? Where did it come from? Why without documents, without that “paper trail” that leaves the life

of any person: born, studied, applied to some institutions, spent money and topped up a bank account, bought tickets or ordered portals...

And what can you do with the fact that along with Charlotte's body I inherited her magic? That very "magical aura signature" that verifies even an application to a bank or payment for an order by card, even magical oaths, contracts or vows.

What if this stranger-my-Charlotte's magic doesn't allow me to resign from the Academy?! Then Dougal will remain attached to her?! After all, his only chance to leave there by terminating the contract early is if the headmistress violates one of the clauses. We have the item "Miss Blair is Dr. Norwood's assistant." If you can't "break" him, there's no point in expecting new mistakes from Maskelyne.

Dougal then only shook his head after listening to my chaotic reasoning. Said:

– Leave it to me. I know what to put pressure on and what to threaten with. She doesn't need any fuss about the death of the professor's assistant within the Academy. If she tries to keep us, she will get everything she fears and even more. I will ensure close public interest and a massive outflow of students.

I will probably never forget this wonderful scene with Dougal the Menace and me as Freya Sullivan in Maskelyne's office. But, perhaps, we must give the headmistress her due. She knew how to lose with dignity. Moreover, the publicity of the reasons and conditions of Dougal's contract, either now or later, also

categorically did not suit her. But Dougal promised to remain silent if she immediately canceled both contracts, both with him and with me. Maskelyne agreed. And as a “gesture of goodwill,” or rather, so that the truth about Charlotte’s death would remain true only for a narrow circle of people and would not in any way affect the good name of Regan Maskelyne, she herself offered to talk to Mr. Blair.

– He is a sensible person. The loss of his daughter, of course, will be a terrible blow for him, but I think we will find a solution that will suit everyone. He probably won’t want anything to do with the woman who has taken over the body of his “dear Charlotte.” And you, as I see, have already found a solution. Temporary, I guess?

“I hope it becomes permanent,” I assured. – I have no desire to walk in someone else’s guise and use someone else’s name.

Mr Blair insisted on talking to me – he wanted to make sure for himself that his daughter was no more. A painful meeting. How would I have survived it without Dougal's support? We swore an oath of secrecy – Mr Blair, Maskelyne, myself and Dougal. I received new documents, I don’t know how Mr. Blair got them, and Charlotte received a different fate, about which I know nothing.

– She is alive. The rest doesn’t concern you,” he said, and I, of course, did not object.

That evening, Dougal and I spontaneously, without saying a word, reached out to each other, as if we both needed a good

dose of human warmth and affection. As a cure for the chilling cold that reigned in my soul after meeting Charlotte's father and the headmistress. But the "medicine" very quickly turned into pleasure, and that night was the first of many – we felt good together, very good. It was then that the fear that now, freed from the curse, we would look at each other differently disappeared. And the last doubts disappeared.

And two weeks later there was a wedding. Quiet, chamber ceremony: Dougal said that the noise around his name would be enough for him for several years to come, and I knew almost no one here at all. Chester is the best man, Elsa is the bridesmaid, and the only spectator is Sabella. The ring on my finger felt... strange. Finally, but not as "it's all over", but as "now it all begins." Happiness with a taste of anticipation...

No, everything did not become easy, simple and wonderful, as if by magic. But Dougal and I wouldn't want to end up in a cloudless fairy tale. Is it possible to enjoy the sun if it shines around the clock?

"Dougal and I"... Yes, with him it was easy and natural to move from "mine" and "yours" to "we" and "ours". Not in everything, of course – it's still "your work and mine", but this does not interfere with anything. Quite the contrary.

Mrs Freya Norwood has not yet made a name for herself as a journalist. It doesn't happen that quickly. I get to know the world, gain impressions, and at the same time explore interesting topics. Honestly, it's much more difficult than it was at home, because

here I'm interested in everything. Even alchemy conferences, which I went to several times with Dougal. And even though I still only understand prepositions and individual words in reports, conversations on the sidelines are something! You won't hear anything there, from debates about the advisability of creating the philosopher's stone (here, by the way, it is considered not a legend of alchemy, but a paradoxical scientific curiosity) to a caustic discussion of the unforgettable "tidal pebbles."

And Dougal Norwood is a world-famous scientist, one of the leading experts of the Patent Commission, the inventor of one and a half dozen fundamentally new potions and one and a half hundred successful modifications of well-known recipes. Honorary member of five Academies, which does not include the Panacea Academy. Maskelyne bites his elbows in frustration, but cannot do anything. She has no access to Sabella's house, much less to our London apartment. And when they happen to meet in public, Dougal only bows to her mockingly and politely and suppresses any attempts to start a conversation.

Here is the lake – a magically blue surface under a cloudy sky, a sunny glare, although the sun is not visible behind the clouds. Kels is curious and has already sensed my presence. We still have to wait out his usual water show with special effects, but I know how to speed up the conversation. It is enough to recall the incident that I want to talk about.

I was looking for something unusual as a gift for Sabella. As light, sonorous and magical as she herself. I don't know how I



ended up in an art gallery—a painting would have been the last option I thought of. If only because I don't understand painting at all.

There I saw... him.

The same portrait.

She froze, clenching her fists painfully, convincing herself that it seemed to me, I imagined it. This is not a dream... not that creepy dream with the “portrait in blue.” But when I managed to breathe and take a step, I saw it myself – and the portrait was not the same. Not so...otherworldly. Without the frightening landscape of the astral world, without ghostliness in the image. Just the face of a girl, very similar to Charlotte and slightly like Sally, in the bluish moonlight, on the ocean shore. Disturbing, yes – but nothing more.

“Jacob Hughes. “The echo of someone else's fate,” I read and closed my eyes. Jacob. Jake. The same artist and drunken Australian night that I dreamed about. Just a dream. Does this even happen? At least in the magical world, at least not?”

Kels's mocking neigh jerked him out of his memories. Kels communicated with Dougal in colorful, visible images, but more often he sent me phrases, spoken in Dougal's voice and with his most poisonous intonations. I suspect this is one of the kelpies' ways of brightening up eternity by having fun with people.

“You have already been answered. Some bipeds are given the ability to see and know more than others. If they also understood what exactly they see and know, I wouldn't have to explain the

obvious.”

And it’s true... when I showed the purchased portrait to Dougal and Sabella and told about that dream, Dougal just shrugged and replied:

– Inspiration. The thing is extremely unscientific because it is inexplicable. But it happens to some.

“It happens to everyone,” Sabella smiled. – Especially often with creative people. Ideas, pictures, words just come. And no one knows where. Doesn't that happen to you, Freya?

“Probably,” I admitted. – Sometimes.

Kels suddenly appeared very close, snorted in the face, splashing him with cold spray. The purple eyes sparkled with fire.

“You were one step away from the Brink. A pitiful, lost, loving creature who wanted to live, but did not believe in life. “He did show me an image, probably the same one that so amused Dougal a year ago: a young, sickly pale mermaid sobbing bitterly, irritably scraping faded scales from her tail and sobbing again. – Eternity watched over you, the curse pushed you in the back. If it weren’t for the connection that had managed to form... – the picture changed, now I saw Dougal and myself, sheets of paper with a field for a “naval battle”, myself on the floor of the buffet and later, in the evening, in Dougal’s arms. – You could have left at any moment. You people are funny. One touch of your consciousness was enough for me to understand. And for some reason you waited until the last minute. You love to suffer too much. “He snorted again, and a cold wave washed over my feet.

“Sit down, I’ll take you for a ride.”

– To the middle of the lake? – I dried myself off and cast a warming charm. – Thank you, Kels, I definitely don’t like suffering in icy water. Let’s wait for summer. But still, what does Jake have to do with it? How did he know? How can you meet a real person in a dream?

“How can you inhabit someone else’s body?”

“There are many things in the world, friend Horatio,” I chuckled.

“Kels, this is my wife.” Find yours and talk half to death as much as you like.

– Dougal! – I threw myself on his neck, he grabbed me by the waist, lifted me, pressing me tighter. It’s good that I came back earlier today!

Against the background of my laughter, Kels’s intonations suddenly seemed not sarcastic, but grumpily sad:

“Wives don’t fly to me from other worlds. But this one is boring.”

–You’re too old to have fun. And envy is a bad feeling.

“Get out. Both. And don’t even think about returning without foals. Stupid people, you always waste time on things that are not really important.”

Well, of course, Kels always has the last word. Although he usually turns out to be right.

**End**