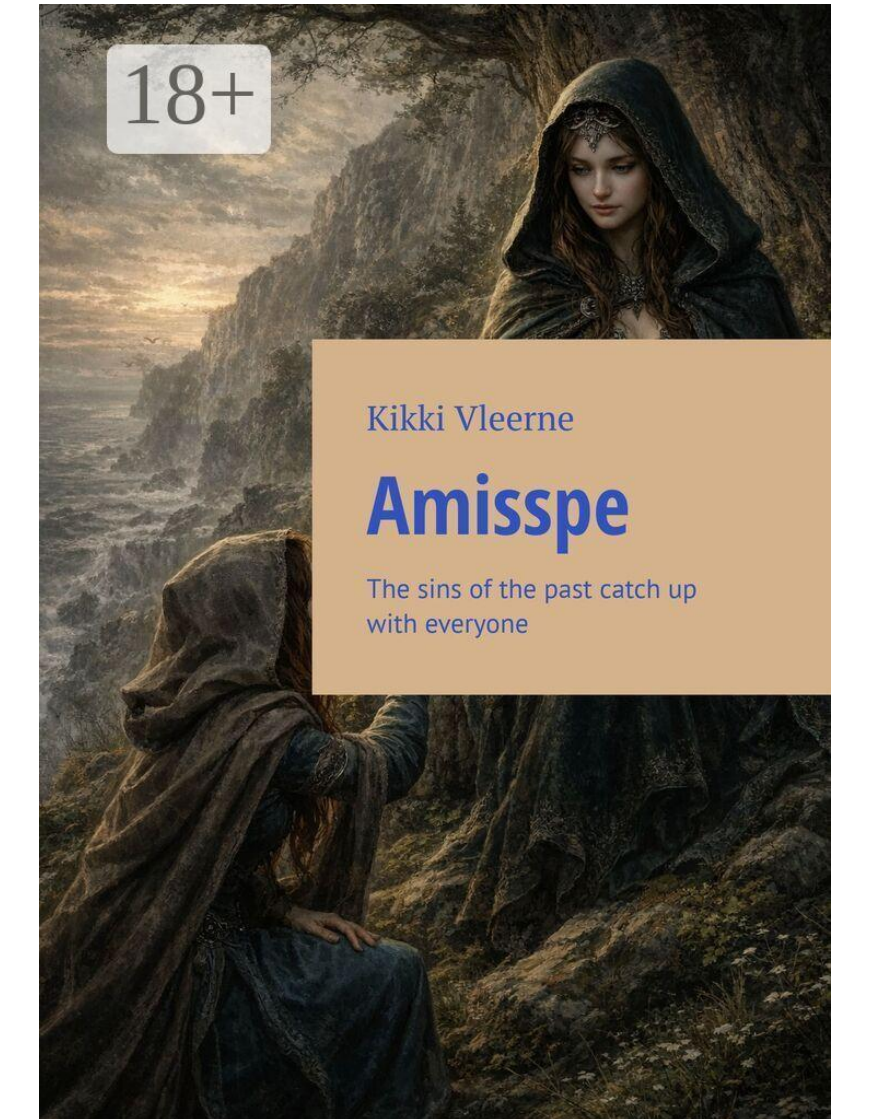




18+

Kikki Vleerne

Amispe

The sins of the past catch up
with everyone

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**Amisspe. The sins of the
past catch up with everyone**

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Аннотация

Onskava — an outcast on a lonely island. When an ancient evil abducts his mother, the despised boy descends into a forsaken underworld. The darkness tests him to his breaking point, but an unexpected ally gives him hope. Ahead lies a final battle — and a single choice.

Amisspe

The sins of the past catch up with everyone

Kikki Vleerne

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The distant island in these parts bore a curious name — Glëm. They said it had once been called something else, but the old name had vanished into obscurity along with those who remembered it. Now it was simply Glëm — a fragment of earth at the world's edge, where ships rarely troubled its shores.

Along its stony rim, where the high slopes of hills fell away into sheer cliffs above a subterranean sea of sand, there wound a narrow path. Worn by long years of use, it climbed between gray boulders and dipped into hollows choked with stiff heather. Along this path stumbled a fair-haired boy in a faded greenish shirt, a rope-tied pouch cinched at his waist. His name was Onskava — a name both rare and resonant, utterly unlike the plain appellations of the island folk.

Late evening was settling over the island. The sun had already sunk beneath the rim of the sea, leaving behind only a dull copper streak on the horizon. The western wind gathered strength, bearing the smell of salt, wet stone, and distant storms. Onskava was making his way home from the village — the island's sole human settlement, huddled in a hollow between two hills, half a day's walk from his dwelling. The journey there and back devoured nearly the entire day, and his legs throbbed from the miles.

At last the boy halted beside a wayside boulder, flat and broad as a seat fashioned by nature herself. Settling onto it, he exhaled with relief and untied the cloth bundle he'd carried tucked against his chest. Inside lay a small barley cake studded with boiled perch — still warm, fragrant with hearthsmoke. This was his payment for the day's labor. Biting into it slowly and listening to the evening stillness, Onskava found himself remembering what had happened in the village that day.

* * *

That morning he had set out for the village, carrying tucked against his chest a vial of healing remedy — a tincture of bitter roots and herbs his mother had prepared. She was known throughout these parts as a healer, sought out when ailments defied ordinary treatment. Arriving in the village, Onskava stopped before the house he'd come to find. At first glance it was no different from the rest: low-built, with a wooden roof grown

over with moss, a sagging door of rough-hewn planks. But the moment the boy crossed the threshold, he knew — something here was wrong.

«Good day to you, Master Valkhorn,» Onskava said with a deep bow, scarcely having stepped inside.

In the half-darkness of the house, reeking of smoke, sickness, and something bitter, stood a tall man with a graying beard and a gaze heavy as stone. Once he had been a warrior — his scars told that story, etched across face and hands, along with the rough bearing, the habit of keeping his back straight even here, in his own home, where there were no enemies.

«Well, boy,» came the reply, dismissive and cold, without so much as a glance upward. «What brings you to our dwelling?»

He crossed his hardened arms over his chest, limbs covered in ancient scars and old wounds — remnants of battles long since faded into silence. His jaw was clenched, and Onskava could see anger trembling at the corners of his mouth, barely restrained.

«I've brought you medicine,» the boy began hurriedly, slipping the canvas bag from his shoulders. His fingers trembled — not from fear, but from urgency. He drew out two vials sealed with wax and held them out to Valkhorn. «These will help cure her of the contagion.»

Onskava nodded toward the adjoining room, from which came the sound of labored, uneven breathing. There, on a narrow bed covered with coarse wool, lay a girl of Onskava's own age — pale, hollow-eyed, her sweat-dampened hair plastered to her

forehead.

«Let her drink one mouthful morning and evening,» Onskava continued, striving to speak calmly and confidently, as his mother had taught him. «And — »

«I have no need of your bottles,» Valkhorn cut him off sharply.

His voice came out muffled, nearly soundless, yet such pain threaded through it that Onskava froze where he stood.

«But my mother wants to help you in your grief!» the boy blurted, unable to contain himself. «She knows how to treat this sickness! If you don't give HER the remedy, she'll — »

He broke off. Valkhorn was watching him with a long, heavy gaze — the gaze of a man who had already lost too much.

«We have no need of your damned bottles!» Valkhorn erupted suddenly, his voice — formerly muted and strangled — now flooding with fury. «Your accursed mother's charity! You bring me these poisons and think I'll accept them? That I'll allow this... this brew to be poured down my daughter's throat?!»

He stepped forward, looming over the boy with all his hulking frame. In the gloom of the cottage his face seemed twisted, almost bestial.

«But I only want to — » Onskava began, trying to master the tremor in his voice.

— «I know exactly what you want!» — Valhorn cut him off, shouting at the top of his lungs — so loudly that a mouse rustled

anxiously in the corner of the room and a faint groan drifted in from the next room. «You don't want to cure her with that filth; you want to finish her off! Kill her with this sickness — a sickness YOU are responsible for, by the way! You and that witch-mother of yours!»

Valkhorn breathed heavily, as though after a long run. His fists were clenched so tight the knuckles had gone white. His face flushed crimson. Onskava saw in his eyes not mere anger — there was true hatred there, nurtured by grief and helplessness.

«I...» The boy tried to speak, but the words caught in his throat.

«You have the devil's eyes!» Valkhorn snarled, leaning lower still and staring directly into Onskava's face.

Onskava stepped back, clutching the vials to his chest. His heart hammered so violently it seemed ready to burst free. But he did not lower his gaze. Did not run. Instead he swallowed and spoke — quietly, but firmly:

«She is dear to me. And I want to heal her.»

The words rang out in the silence like the toll of a bell. Valkhorn froze. Something flickered in his eyes — surprise? disbelief? — but it died at once, yielding to his former rage.

«You bewitched my daughter!» Valkhorn seized Onskava by the collar and jerked him close. His face was mere inches from the boy's, and Onskava could feel his hot, heavy breath, steeped in bitterness and spirits. «Led her into the forest! Into that forest where ghosts wander and marshes rot! You infected her with

this... this vile sickness now devouring her from within!»

His fingers dug into the fabric until the knuckles blanched. Onskava tried to pull away, but the grip was iron.

«She was healthy!» Valkhorn continued, his voice shaking with rage and pain. «Perfectly healthy, do you understand?! Rosy-cheeked, cheerful, running about the yard, singing songs! And then she came home covered in filth, burning with fever, raving through the nights! All because of you!»

His voice broke. Moisture gleamed in the corners of his eyes — quick, nearly imperceptible, but Onskava saw it. And understood.

This was not mere anger. This was the despair of a man terrified of losing the last thing he had left.

«As headman of this village,» Valkhorn's voice rang out hard and cold, like the strike of hammer on anvil, «I forbid you henceforth to set foot in our settlement. Cross beyond the last fence by even a single step — and I'll slaughter you like a pig!»

Onskava did not wait to hear more. Spinning around, he bolted from the house, nearly catching his foot on the threshold. His heart pounded so fiercely it seemed ready to burst. His legs carried him of their own accord — past sagging fences, past the smithy, past houses from whose windows curious and hostile faces were already peering.

«That's him!» someone shouted behind him. «That boy who infected the headman's daughter!»

«Witch's spawn!»

Onskava glanced back as he ran — and went cold. From around the corner of a house several men and youths came charging. One snatched a stone from the ground. Another grabbed a stick.

«Drive him out! Away from the village!»

The first stone whistled past the boy's ear and clattered off a fence. The second struck him in the back — not hard, but painful. Onskava gasped with fear and ran forward with all his might.

The road wound between houses, descended to a bridge over a stream, climbed back up again. The ground underfoot was slick from recent rain. Somewhere ahead rang the jingle of a bell and a rough shout:

«Out of the way, boy!»

Onskava threw up his head — and froze in terror. Bearing down on him at full speed came a cart drawn by a large bay horse. The driver — a red-faced man in a filthy vest — yanked at the reins, but the mare, frightened by the crowd's shouting, galloped at breakneck pace. The cart was piled high with cabbages, barely held in place by ropes.

The boy tried to dodge aside, but his legs gave way. He barely managed to scramble across when he stumbled against the horse's foreleg — she shied with a frightened whinny — and he crashed flat onto the ground.

The mud, sodden and cold, squelched beneath him. In that same instant cabbages came raining down from above with loud thuds — the rope on the cart had snapped, and the entire load

cascaded onto the road. One head struck Onskava's shoulder, another rolled toward his head. The boy gasped for breath, struggling to crawl out from under the green heap, his hands slipping on the wet leaves.

«Witch-spawn!» someone from the mob shouted, and a fresh stone splashed into the mud beside his hand.

With difficulty he staggered to his feet, filthy all over, shoulder stinging and knee skinned, and looked back. A crowd of villagers — ten at least, perhaps more — was charging toward him. One brandished a pitchfork. Another a rake. Their faces were written with fury, fear, hatred. Without hesitation the boy bolted — away from the village, toward the hills, where the wild lands began.

His legs barely held him. His breath scorched his throat. The bag with its vials knocked painfully against his side. But he ran and ran, never looking back, until the village disappeared behind a bend in the road. Only when he had gained sufficient distance did Onskava allow himself to stop and turn around.

The pursuit had ended. The villagers, it seemed, had decided they'd driven him far enough and returned to their homes. Only the wind carried their distant voices, mingled with the barking of dogs.

The boy breathed heavily, hands braced on his knees. His heart hammered so loudly it seemed the whole island must hear it. Tears burned his eyes, but he did not weep. Not now.

* * *

Straightening, the boy looked around.

Before him, crowning the heights of a tall hill, spread a great dark forest. It was shrouded in a thick blanket of gray mist that crept slowly between the trunks like a living thing. This was an ancient forest — the very one through which the road to his home ran. The forest was staggering in its grandeur. Giant trees whose crowns vanished into the sky remembered still the age of the ancient Aesir — so at least the legends in his mother's books claimed. Their roots delved deep into the earth, and their trunks were so massive that three grown men could not have encircled them with joined hands.

But for all its beauty, the forest inspired dread. Its somber aura, heavy and oppressive, repelled travelers. It was said that once, in immemorial times, a great battle had been fought here — between men and something else. And still the earth remembered the blood spilled upon it.

At the very heart of the forest, in a deep hollow, stood an old abandoned well. No one knew who had dug it or why. No one dared look into its dark depths. They said that sometimes voices could be heard from it. They said that anyone who gazed into the waters lost their mind from what they saw. Much was said — but none had tested it.

Onskava knew this forest. He had walked here with his mother gathering herbs, learned to distinguish the tracks of the few animals that haunted this region — most of which had fled some

time ago — and listened to the whisper of wind in the branches. The forest did not frighten him.

But now, standing at its edge, bruised and exhausted, burdened with guilt and shame, the boy suddenly felt that something had changed. The forest was silent. Too silent. As though it were waiting for him.

Onskava approached the forest's edge and paused, peering into the gray veil of mist that swirled between the ancient trunks. His hand reached for his belt, where hung a small oil lantern — lately become an essential tool for such journeys. Striking flint and steel, the boy lit the wick. A faint yellow glow flickered to life, barely piercing the surrounding gloom, but at least some hope appeared.

Crossing the invisible boundary, Onskava entered the forest, and the forest closed behind him like a living creature swallowing its prey. The mist was so dense that nothing could be seen more than a few paces ahead. The boy walked almost blind, guided only by the faint outlines of trees and the barely discernible roots beneath his feet. Every step held uncertainty — a pit, a gnarled root, a stone, or perhaps something worse.

But worst of all were the sounds.

The gray mist, churning and stirring, seemed to whisper something. The wind carried strange echoes — not merely the rustle of leaves but something else, ancient and anguished. Onskava heard them ever more distinctly: screams. Groans. The clash of arms. As though somewhere close by, behind the veil of

centuries, that very battle still raged — the one that had turned this forest into a dwelling place of restless souls.

The clang of swords. A roar of fury. The death-rattle of the dying. These were the voices of warriors who had fallen here in times beyond memory — men whose fear, whose agony, whose rage had found no peace even in death. They remained here forever, woven into the very earth, and their suffering echoed through the mist.

«Help me...» drifted from somewhere on the right, thin and drawn-out.

Onskava flinched and halted, clutching the lantern's handle until his fingers ached.

«Mercy...» another voice whispered, terribly close, as though someone stood right behind him, breathing down his neck.

The boy spun around — but there was only emptiness and the churning mist.

And the voices would not be silenced. They swelled, multiplied, layered atop one another — pleas, curses, dying screams.

«Run!» a piercing cry suddenly tore through the silence, so close and clear that Onskava stumbled back involuntarily. «Run while you still can! Save yourself!»

«You are suffering...» the boy whispered, barely able to move his tongue. His throat was parched, his heart beat somewhere up in his throat.

The echo snatched his words, repeated them, distorted them,

scattered them through the forest. And now it seemed that behind every tree, behind every bush, an enemy lurked, ready to spring at any moment.

Onskava quickened his pace, pushing through the mist at nearly a run, trying not to think about what he heard. This is not real. Only an echo. Only shadows of the past.

Suddenly, up ahead, something rustled in the undergrowth. The boy froze, thrusting the lantern forward. The light trembled in his hand. The rustling came again — quiet, cautious, as though someone crept between the branches, choosing the moment to strike. And then from the mist, slowly, as if surfacing from the depths of a dark pool, two large green circles emerged. They glowed with a dim, sickly light and gazed straight at Onskava. Unblinking. Unmoving. Simply gazing.

«Come to me,» spoke a low, rasping voice emanating from beyond those glowing circles. Within it lurked mockery, hunger, something predatory and ancient.

Onskava stepped back, feeling gooseflesh crawl up his spine. «Who are you?» he choked out, his voice thin, childlike, trembling with fear.

«I have come for you,» the voice replied, carrying such certainty, such terrible calm, as though the outcome were already sealed.

The boy began to retreat slowly, hoping the path behind him was clear, that he could turn and flee in time. But the green circles swelled, drawing nearer, emerging from the bushes. Alongside

them, something skeletal thrust itself from the dark foliage — a long, curved protrusion resembling a snout. Along its edges hung tattered shreds of burgundy flesh, as if the skin had long since rotted away, leaving only bone, sinew, and decaying meat. The muzzle continued to writhe forth from the mist. Two fiery red sparks ignited where eyes should be — bright as coals in a smithy's forge. Below them, a maw gaped open, filled with long, crooked fangs, between which oozed a thick, green saliva that dripped onto the ground, hissing like acid.

This was no wild beast. This was something — a spawn of nightmare, unlike any fragment of that ancient war that had failed to find rest and now seemed to wander the woods in search of living souls. In all his previous journeys through this forest, the boy had never encountered such a creature.

Onskava spun around and ran. Branches lashed at his face. Roots snagged at his feet. The lantern swung wildly in his grip, casting leaping shadows upon the trees, transforming the forest into a labyrinth of nightmares. The boy raced through the fog, heedless of the path, hearing behind him heavy breathing, the thunder of paws, the crunch of splintering wood.

The creature was faster. Far faster. It saw him even through the dense veil of mist, even amidst the tangled branches. As if it sensed him not with eyes, but with something else — the fear radiating from the boy in waves. Onskava darted between trees, trying to confuse his trail, but the beast did not fall behind. Its breath grew ever closer — hot, foul, steeped in rot and death.

Suddenly, before the boy loomed a massive gnarled root, cloaked in black moss, slick and wet from eternal dampness. He tried to leap over it, but his foot slipped on the moist slope.

«Aaah!» Onskava cried, losing his balance.

He tumbled down the incline, striking stones and roots, and crashed with a roar into a small hollow directly beneath the gnarled mass. The lantern flew from his hand, rolling aside; its light flickered and died, plunging the boy into absolute darkness. Onskava lay frozen, gasping from pain and terror. Above him hung the great root — immense, ancient, gnawed by time. Beneath it had formed a small cavity, barely large enough to hide within.

The boy wedged himself inside, pressing his back against the cold, wet earth, and froze, daring not to breathe.

But above came a sound — heavy, rhythmic, the tread of paws. The creature had reached the root. Onskava heard its breathing — ragged, wheezing, as though air struggled through rotten lungs. He heard claws scraping against the soil. He heard something wet dripping onto the moss — saliva. The demonic hound circled the root slowly, sniffing, clawing at the ground. It was hunting. It knew its prey was near. Onskava clamped a hand over his mouth, striving to hold his breath. His heart hammered so violently it seemed audible from outside. The beast halted directly above the hiding place.



Onskava, unable to bear it any longer, tried to inch deeper into the hollow — and stepped on a dry branch. The crack rang through the forest like a thunderclap.

The hound pricked up its ears and hissed — low, guttural: «Where are you, little serpent-child?»

Onskava curled into a ball from sheer terror, clutching his knees to his chest. Tears scorched his eyes, but he did not cry — only whispered, again and again, like a prayer:

«Mother, come! Mama, save me! Please... please...»

The creature brought its enormous bony snout to the entrance of the hollow, and Onskava saw the red glow of its eyes, staring straight at him.

And in that moment the forest was pierced by a loud, furious woman's scream. The hound whipped around, snarled — and an instant later a deafening blast erupted. A tree somewhere nearby cracked and crashed to the ground. There came a canine howl, full of rage and pain, and again that same terrifying woman's cry — but now in it was not fury, but anguish.

Onskava scrambled out of his hiding place with a cry. Before him, a few paces away, on the ground lay the black hound — enormous, bony, unconscious, a smoking wound on its flank. And beside it, kneeling and pressing her left hand to her belly, stood a woman. Fair hair, long and unbound. A long cloak the color of seaweed, torn and smeared with blood. Her face pale, lips pressed tight against the pain.

«Mama! Mama!» Onskava screamed in a joyful, frantic wail and flung himself toward her.

The woman, seeing her son, tried to rise, hiding her pain, and a faint, sorrowful smile appeared on her face.

«My boy... You're alive! Oh, how glad I am...» Her voice trembled. «The blue flask in my bag. Quickly!»

Onskava darted to the canvas bag lying nearby, rummaged through it with shaking hands, and snatched out a small blue flask sealed with wax. His mother grabbed it, tore out the stopper, and drained the contents in one swallow. Almost at once the trembling in her hands subsided. The blood seeping from the wound in her belly thickened and stopped flowing. His mother, though with difficulty, managed to rise to her feet.

«My sunshine!» she whispered, and Onskava threw himself into her arms, burying his face in her cloak, not holding back the tears of joy and relief.

«That hound wounded you,» he sobbed.

«It doesn't hurt anymore,» his mother soothed him, though her voice was faint. She stroked her son's head, and then, holding him at arm's length, looked into his eyes with unusual gravity. «Now listen to me, please. Carefully.»

«Yes, Mama.»

«As you know, there is an old well in this forest.»

«Yes, I know.»

«Well then,» his mother swallowed, and fear flickered in her eyes, «at the bottom of that well something evil lurks. Ancient. Hungry. It is striving to break free into our world... and it is already close. That is why this hound appeared. It is merely a harbinger.»

«What do we do now?» Onskava asked, his voice trembling with fear, clutching his mother's hand.

«We leave, my boy! We go home — as fast as we can!» His mother tried to take a step, but staggered.

«I'll help you walk,» the boy said quickly, offering his shoulder.

«No need... I'm quite all right...» Gripping a long stick that lay nearby, his mother tried to walk on her own.

But before she had taken more than a few steps, her legs buckled and she fell.

«Mama!» Onskava caught her by the shoulders, keeping her from striking the ground. «Please, lean on me!»

His mother at last nodded, and they set off — slowly, very slowly — toward the forest's edge. Onskava supported her, feeling her body tremble, feeling how every step cost her dearly.

Behind them, in the darkness, something stirred. But the boy did not look back. He simply walked. Forward. Toward the light. Toward home.

A loud voice — thunderous, ancient, brimming with malice — rolled through the forest like a tolling bell. The trees shuddered, their branches creaking as though answering the call. A wind rose suddenly, cold and bitter, sweeping waves of dread through the thickets. It was a harbinger. A harbinger of something terrible.

Onskava and his mother, who had not yet reached the forest's edge, froze at the sound. It swept through the wood as though alive, and in it there was more than snarling or howling — there was invocation. A summons, addressed to someone.

«Mama, what was that?» the boy asked, frightened, clutching her hand.

His mother stood motionless, gazing into the depths of the forest. Her face had gone white. Her lips trembled. She knew. She understood what that call meant.

«Listen to me, my boy,» she said at last, sinking to her knees before Onskava and looking straight into his eyes. «Go home now. At once. And light the Anabu fire before the door.»

«I don't know this fire,» the boy answered, bewildered. «How do I light it?»

«Listen carefully,» his mother spoke rapidly, gripping his shoulders. «Mix branches of lifewood with blue vervain flowers and whale tallow. All of it is at home, in the large chest by the hearth. Mix them together and light it before the door. The fire must burn until dawn. Once you've done that, bar the house with every bolt and drink the „Soul's Slumber.“ The flask stands on the upper shelf. And until the sun rises — do you hear me? — until the sun rises, do not step outside! It is dangerous!»

«But — » Onskava felt his throat constrict with fear. «Where are you going?!»

His mother averted her gaze, and tears glistened in her eyes.

«I must go to that summons, Onskava,» she said with bitterness, and her voice shook. «I must. I cannot refuse. But when the sun rises, I will return to you. I promise.»

«Don't leave me!» Tears streamed down the boy's face. He flung himself at his mother, pressed against her, knowing with every fiber of his being that this was perhaps their last meeting. «Please, don't go!»

His mother held him tighter — so tight he could feel her heart beating. Tears ran down her face too, falling onto her son's hair.

«My beloved sunshine,» she whispered, kissing the crown of his head. «I will always be with you. I will always love you. Even if mortal peril forges you into the gloom of hopelessness and despair, know this — my love will shield you and show you the

true path. Always.»

Onskava felt his mother's love and tenderness leave, in the wake of their sorrowful parting, a priceless gift in the form of a sad yet burning kiss.

«Run,» she said. «Run and don't look back.»

And Onskava ran.

The house greeted him with darkness and silence. The boy burst inside, slammed the door, and leaned his back against it, breathing hard. Tears still streamed down his cheeks, but he wiped them with his sleeve and forced himself to move. He dashed to the large oak chest by the hearth, threw open the lid, and began rummaging through its contents. Bundles of herbs, vials of oils, pouches of powders — everything was here, everything with which his mother busied herself preparing remedies for the villagers.

Here were the branches of lifewood — dry, knotted, smelling of honey and bitterness. Here a bunch of blue vervain, whose flowers retained their sky-blue hue even when dried. Here a clay pot of whale tallow, thick and pale.

Onskava mixed everything in an old copper bowl — carefully, unhurried. Then he carried the bowl outside and set it directly before the threshold. He struck flint and steel and the flame leapt to life — but not an ordinary one, red or yellow. It was turquoise, cool and bright, like a piece of sky captured in fire. It burned steadily, without flickering, and from it emanated a strange scent

— fresh, clean, driving back the darkness.

The boy returned inside and barred the door with every bolt — the wooden beam, the iron chain, the hook. He drew the heavy curtains across the windows. Then he climbed to the upper shelf and found a small black flask with an inscription scratched into the glass: Soul's Slumber. His mother had always forbidden him from touching this draught. She said it was dangerous. Said it was to be drunk only in the direst need. But this was precisely such a need. Onskava spread a woolen bed on the floor — the very one his mother slept in. He lay down, pulled the blanket over himself, and opened the flask. The draught's scent was strange — sweetish, intoxicating, evoking the feeling of one who had not slept for days and was on the verge of oblivion. The boy raised the flask to his lips and drank.

The taste was unexpected — sweet, almost like honey with herbs. Onskava raised his brows in surprise, but before he could form a single thought his eyelids grew heavy and the world swam. He closed his eyes and plunged into a dark abyss.

* * *

Unbroken darkness, thick and oppressive, surrounded him on every side. Yet beside Onskava, at his feet, lay a torch — burning with a steady flame, casting a faint light. The boy picked it up and looked around. He was standing in some kind of corridor. The walls were uneven, as though hewn from stone. Somewhere far off, water was dripping — measured, monotonous.

«What is this place?» Onskava whispered, and his voice echoed back from the walls.

He moved forward, holding the torch before him. His footsteps rang hollow in the silence. Suddenly, something crunched beneath his foot. The boy stopped and lowered his gaze. What he had stepped on looked most of all like a stick — only hard, pale, and stained with red and grime.

His heart lurched.

It was a bone.

Cold sweat broke out on his forehead. Onskava recoiled and quickened his pace, almost breaking into a run, trying to get as far from that place as he could.

But then, from somewhere in the distance, music drifted toward him. Frightening — and yet unbearably sorrowful. As though someone were playing a Nordic lyre, and every note was steeped in grief.

«What is happening?» the boy whispered, but no one answered.

He walked on, and the music swelled, growing louder, heavier, pressing on his chest. Suddenly he stepped in something liquid. At first he thought it was water. But when he brought the torch closer, he saw the color. Red.

Onskava gasped in horror, but forced himself to keep moving. Fifteen paces. Twenty. And then he saw her.

A woman in a tattered dress, a blue scarf at her neck, stood ahead, her head bowed. She was thin, almost emaciated. Her hair

tangled. Her arms hung lifelessly at her sides.

A tremor seized the boy. But he could not stop. It was as though something pulled him forward. He drew closer. Extended his hand. Lifted her head. And froze.

The face was bitten, mutilated. But the eyes — pale blue, familiar — gazed at him with an expression of terror and pain. It was his mother.

«No!» Onskava screamed and leapt back, dropping the torch.

The woman slowly, with effort, raised her head on her own. Blood flowed from her mouth. She looked at her son with those blue eyes, brimming with suffering.

«Why... did you... do this?» she rasped, choking on blood.

«Mama... I didn't want to! I didn't want to do it!» Onskava sobbed, backing away.

His mother rose. With a bony creak she turned her head — too far, unnaturally. And then sound came crashing over the boy. A thundering of hooves. Loud, resonant, echoing through the corridors. Snarling — menacing, horrifying, inhuman.

Onskava screamed.

* * *

Outside, the night storm raged with unprecedented fury. Thunder crashed so violently the walls of the house shook as though struck by an invisible hammer. Lightning — blindingly white, ferocious — tore the sky to pieces, illuminating the forest

with a spectral, deathly light. It seemed as though somewhere up above a great battle was unfolding — a clash between forces beyond mortal understanding.

The boy bolted upright in bed, his heart pounding wildly. He rushed to the window and pressed his face to the glass, peering into the raging darkness. And then he saw them. Flashes. Pale blue, brilliant, like fragments of sky. They flickered in the depths of the forest — once, twice, again — as though someone there, among the trees, was wielding magic. Onskava froze, his palm against the cold glass. He knew that light. It was his mother's magic. Without thinking, the boy grabbed the lantern, flung open the door, and ran outside.

The turquoise flame of the Anabu fire still burned before the threshold, but Onskava paid it no heed. He ran — through rain, through wind, through mud — toward where the blue light flickered. Into the forest.

Entering the thicket, the boy felt the atmosphere change. Here it was quieter. The rain barely penetrated the dense canopy, but the mist had grown even thicker, almost tangible. Onskava raised the lantern and moved forward, following the flashes. His unease intensified with every step. The light of blue azure — the light of his mother's magic — flared more frequently, more brightly. But now it carried not strength, but desperation. As though someone fought with their last reserves of power.

«Mama,» Onskava whispered, quickening his pace. «Please, be all right...»

Suddenly, ahead through the trees, something else flickered — not blue, but violet. Dark, ominous, pulsing like the living heart of darkness. The boy burst into a clearing. Before him, at its very center, stood the old abandoned well — the very one about which so many myths and legends circulated — and from its depths surged a flame of violet light — thick, cold, steeped in malice.

And beside the well, on the ground, lay his mother.

«Mama! Mama, no!» Onskava cried out and rushed to her.

He fell to his knees beside her, seized her by the shoulders, shook her, trying to make her open her eyes.

«Mama, please! Wake up! Please!»

Her eyelids fluttered. Slowly, she opened her eyes — pale blue and clouded with pain. Her face was smeared with blood and dirt. Her cloak was torn. Her breathing was ragged and hoarse.

«Son...» she whispered, her voice barely audible. «You are in danger... Why did you leave home? ... Evil is here... Run!»

«Why?!» Onskava cried, pressing her hand against his cheek. «I came to save you, Mother! What happened here? Who hurt you?»

With great effort, his mother lifted her head, gazing at him with unspeakable sorrow.

«You... you have been summoned, Onskava,» she rasped. «The Great Evil... the one that sleeps at the bottom of the well... it has summoned you. It was no dream. It was a trap. It wants to drag you down to its Underground Castle. It will kill you!»

She seized his hand, gripped it with unexpected strength.

«Run! Now! I will protect you! I'll hold him back! Run while you can!»

«No!» the boy screamed. «I won't leave you! I won't!»

But then from the depths of the forest, from the abyss of foliage and mist, came a sound.

Footfalls. Heavy, measured, like the tread of a giant. And a snarl. Resonant, thunderous, brimming with fury.

Onskava slowly turned around. And froze.

From the darkness, between the trees, emerged a figure. Towering — nearly half again the height of a man. Clad in an enormous black cloak. Beneath the cloak showed a skeletal body — bones covered in gray, dead skin, sinews that pulled taut with every movement. The face was gaunt, pallid, almost translucent. Cheekbones sharp as though carved from stone. A mouth — a narrow slit from which issued a rasping breath.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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