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OKSANA MOROZOVA



DOMINANTA

ABOUT WHAT CANNOT BE HELD,
BUT CAN BE LIVED.



Oksana Morozova

Dominanta

«Издательские решения»

Morozova O.

Dominanta / O. Morozova — «Издательские решения»,

You may think you found this book. But what if it found you? Some books tell stories. Some change the way you read. And then there are those that have been reading you all along...

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Part I

Prologue

I found my body on the warm tiled floor of my own home. I was gone. How much time had passed, I couldn't remember: a few minutes, an hour — what did it matter... I tried to focus, to remember what had happened, and a sound of resistance escaped my throat at once.

Then I listened to the space around me. There wasn't a single soul within dozens of metres. An Indian night. Cicadas sang outside the window. The red glow of the floor lamp slowly spilled across the room, merging with the dense purple light of the wooden lamp above my desk. From the corner, the Om symbol and Ganesha watched with complete composure. Sandalwood still resonated on my skin, while Palo Santo and dhoop from Varanasi slowly intertwined in the warm air.

The universe was making a show of remaining calm.

I felt no desire to move. No desire to think. My thoughts had disappeared so deeply that searching for them felt almost like a violation. There were no goals. No plans. Not even the familiar urge to understand everything immediately.

Only sensations remained.
An almost indecent sense of enough.

As my strength slowly began to return, I opened my eyes and found a phone in my right hand. I rose slowly, feeling a sweet heaviness throughout my body, made my way to the bed, and closed my eyes again. My mind still refused to function. And, honestly, I had no desire to switch it back on.

What bliss.

But memories have a way of returning. Just before my eyes either closed or rolled back — I had been talking to him.

More precisely, he had been speaking. And I had been feeling?

With great reluctance, my mind slowly came back online. I pushed myself up on my elbows, picked up my phone, and tried to focus on the screen. The light felt unbearably bright. The letters seemed to scatter in different directions.

I managed to type a few short messages. That was all I had the strength for in that moment. I wanted to close my eyes and dive back into the current of blissful thoughtlessness. But before the screen could go dark, I saw that he was already typing a reply. Had he been waiting all this time?

— Now.

"Now," I read in his message. The words settled into meaning. I closed my eyes. Lay on my back. From somewhere deep within, a voice suddenly emerged. I knew that voice. So well that, for one brief moment, I could no longer understand whether I was remembering it... or hearing it.

My eyes widened. My body responded before my mind had time to understand what was happening. A wave moved through my spine. I tried to resist it. And only made it stronger. My body arched. My weight disappeared. My nails dug into the blanket. My body began to tremble. I couldn't relax my fingers. I listened to my breathing — it was steady and deep. I couldn't hold my attention. I heard a growl rising from my own throat.

Suddenly, I remembered...

This.

State.

Altered state.

The state when you...

XXI The World

Ten years earlier...

The space was wrapped in warm lamplight. Beautiful people moved through it in evening attire. The scent of leather. Soft sofas. The sound of expensive crystal mingled with the clink of ice in glasses.

My eyes wandered through the space of the bar. It was the Four Seasons Hotel in Moscow. Then suddenly, my gaze stopped on the back of a man I had never seen before. He was sitting alone at a table by the window. All I could see was the silhouette of his back in a grey suit.

A single thought pierced through me: “Talk to him.”

Excuse me? Talk to him? Where had that come from? I had no idea. But at that moment, I still hadn’t learned how to question my own thoughts. Quite the opposite — I trusted them.

Was this even legal? How was it done? Where did one begin? I had never approached a man first in my life. And what if he didn’t speak Russian? That was the most terrifying possibility of all. At that point in my life, my English was, to put it mildly, “so-so.”

I looked at the women accompanying me. Three women surrounded me, each beautiful in her own way, each different, and all older than me. My hope that women with more experience would somehow have the answers collapsed. The only thing “female experience” seemed capable of at that moment was chewing through the gum of hesitation.

I looked in his direction — he was gone.

My eyes lowered. Something hot flashed through my chest. Why? Because I had lost my nerve. The thought came with a strange, cold clarity. I had allowed doubt to delay me. Next time, I wouldn’t ask anyone for reassurance. I would simply do it, I thought, lifting my chin with quiet pride.

I forgot about him. And I forgot about my impulse. Our little company returned to enjoying itself. Tiny secrets floated above the table between us. Beyond the windows, the red stars crowning the Kremlin looked in.

My eyes drifted towards one of them.

And there he was again. The stranger’s silhouette. Sitting in exactly the same place.

— Does anyone have Orbit?

Without the slightest hesitation, I dropped the request onto the table. Someone silently handed me a pack of mint gum. No one had time to think. No one had time to say a word. I stood up, squared my shoulders, crossed the room with steady steps, and took the chair opposite him.

That was all it took. Just a few steps in a pair of nine-centimetre heels.

— Hello. How is your evening going?

My smile was bright. My eyes were alive. What could possibly go wrong? I had walked over. I was speaking to him. He was looking at me.

— Sorry, I don't speak Russian...

Adjusting his jacket, he was clearly caught off guard by my appearance. He looked straight through me. In that first moment, he wasn't looking at me — he was looking *through* me. A few years later, I would master that ability myself. Along with many others.

In that moment, I felt a certain coolness and a gentle distance. “He doesn't speak Russian...” I admit, I hadn't been prepared for that, but there was no time to think about it. His voice decided everything.

That voice...

So deep that my eyes widened. I knew with absolute certainty: if I had to, I would speak any language with this man.

The pause didn't last long. I heard my own voice:

— Well... let's speak English.

“Well, let's speak English.” It wasn't even an answer to him. It was a command to myself.

I looked at him. I studied him. I looked deeply into him. What kind of person had to be standing before me for me to do something like this?

There was no trace of a bright and promising façade. It was something else. Understated style. Carefully considered details. You couldn't latch onto anything in his appearance, and yet you kept looking. You simply continued to look.

The first thing I saw in his eyes was scale and beauty.

And gradually, I understood why I had needed to speak with him. To see the way this person looked at the world — and to want to open that level within myself. Although there was something else too, something impossible for an inexperienced girl to grasp at first glance. Something hidden inside every truly deep person.

I caught perhaps ten percent of what he was saying in his impeccable British English. Yet instinctively, it was a perfect match. The connection between us was so strong that neither of us questioned whether we understood each other. Understanding simply existed by default. And we laughed more than we talked.

Of course, I had no idea what I was signing up for. And it was a good thing I didn't.

The choice had already been made.

It felt as though we could have talked forever. How much time had passed? Five minutes? Ten? Twenty? An eternity? I didn't know. Neither did he. The distance between us disappeared faster than the steps it had taken me to reach him. We smiled at each other, both of us glowing.

But more and more often, my eyes returned to the table where my friends were sitting. And finally, I felt it — the moment had come. It was time for me to go. Leaving at the right moment is just as important as taking the first step at the right moment.

— Could you please give me your phone number?

He's asking for my phone number, I realised. I paused and listened to myself. At that moment, I had no idea I was playing a game — or that I was playing it beautifully.

— Why not?

I answered his question with one of my own, a smile on my lips, and returned to the table where my companions were waiting. Inside, there was a quiet feeling: mission accomplished. They had been waiting for me. The moment I sat down, secrets of someone else's heart began being whispered into my ear.

The stranger, whose name I already knew, stood up and, adjusting his scarf, walked towards our table. He greeted everyone with effortless courtesy and immediately looked at me. The precision of every movement. The calmness of his gaze. *He came to say goodbye*, I realised.

— It was a pleasure meeting you, Oksana. I will call you soon. Have a wonderful evening.

The meaning of his words reached me.
And my left hand was already resting in his palm.

XIX The Sun

Back then, I still didn't know that some touches enter our lives long before we are capable of understanding their meaning. They remain somewhere inside us — a quiet promise of movement.

Later, movement became the only way I knew how to breathe.

I woke up around four in the morning with a strange feeling of suffocation. I got dressed in a flash and rushed out for a run. Early morning. Moscow. The Garden Ring. I ran easily and freely. How I wished I could feel the same way inside. Another kilometre. The high-rise on Kotelnicheskaya Embankment appeared before my eyes, glittering in the distance.

The asphalt bounced beneath my running shoes. My favourite music played in my headphones. My favourite medicine for everything.

Running had always helped.
But today, it wasn't enough.
For the first time.

It was an ordinary Friday in the reality of a working person in Moscow. Except for one thing — by morning I had woken up in Moscow, and by evening I would fall asleep in Berlin.

I took a deep breath — and another Raffaello disappeared into my mouth. *And to think the Germans had once rejected my visa application*, I thought with a quiet laugh to myself.

I stopped to catch my breath at the outdoor McDonald's terrace. But staying in one place for too long was dangerous. You start feeling sorry for yourself, and that has never led anyone to success.

This wonderful feeling of something elusive and new continued to warm me from within. I smiled at my own thoughts. I walked with renewed energy, taking in a city that, at first glance, seemed severe and unwelcoming. But the moment the sun broke through the clouds — Berlin smiled.

Suddenly, I turned my head to the left.
A red brick wall.

What could be there?

Bullet holes.
Large calibre. Smaller ones. Larger again.

Without slowing my pace, I kept walking. A cascade of traces from the past moved before my eyes in a frightening pattern.

I felt my temperature rising. But I didn't allow myself to relax. I had no other choice. I bought a large box of chocolates and, without stopping, continued walking, continuing to discover the new city.

I tried not to think about what was waiting for me in Moscow. A wall of misunderstanding and silence, with a strange shine to it — perhaps envy. Perhaps resentment.

I knew. The moment I landed in Moscow — my life would change.

I was so tired of the beautiful picture with emptiness inside. Of the cold bed at night. What was the point of a relationship if love required a reason? A good night's sleep or conversations until dawn.

An idyll?
Maybe at ninety.

Sometimes I broke down. A cry of despair. And deafening silence in response.

I didn't understand what was happening. And no one could answer my questions. Neither people nor books.

Eventually, when the conversations moved into the territory of marriage, children, and buying an apartment, I began to shake. I could no longer maintain the illusion of harmony. And before I was even able to fully grasp reality, my feet were already carrying me through a city marked by scars. It seemed we understood each other better than people did.

Around thirty or forty kilometres on the first day. Heat. That was the one thing I couldn't ignore. I could feel the fever rising, but I kept walking. The sound of trams. East Berlin at dusk. The famous wall. The kiss between Soviet leaders. Street art. The peacock keychain. Coffee.

And there was a miracle too. I woke up the next morning completely healthy, full of energy, and glowing. I felt alive. For the first time in a long time, I didn't want to be anywhere else.

Defiance — on the edge of rebellion.
Freedom — on the edge of revolt.

Berlin cannot be called beautiful.

Berlin is alive.

My plane was climbing higher. Moscow was waiting ahead.
And inside me — new strength and the readiness to fight for myself.

Queen of Cups

But life rarely reveals right away who it is that you are destined to fight. Sometimes, before anything else, it brings someone back — the person beside whom you forget there was ever a war.

I was slowly making my way towards Red Square. It was the second half of November. My heart was pounding in my chest, and his letter was right before my eyes.

He was here. He had flown to see me.

How much time had passed since our first meeting? Almost a year. There had been letters. Promises. Invitations. There had been attempts to meet me earlier, but fate had arranged things differently.

This time, he was flying from East to West. Somewhere between two worlds, there was a place for me. The familiar bar. The polite waiter. The table in the centre of the room.

He was already waiting. I saw him immediately.
And why, somewhere deep inside me, did I feel sorry?
Was it already time to leave?

A tired young man after a long journey. And a gaze that showed no trace of exhaustion, holding me in every moment of our conversation.

I could have listened to him for hours. And I caught myself thinking something strange. I didn't want to get anything from this meeting. In the end, I was tired of watching him fight with himself. Someone needed to get some sleep.

Reluctantly, he agreed. Then he looked at me carefully. He named the hotel. His favourite one. In one of Stalin's skyscrapers. I didn't let the pause linger.

— No, I won't go with you.

I answered the unspoken question with a smile. He held my gaze for a moment.

And nodded with understanding.

As I was getting ready to leave, I picked up his scarf. The soft fabric unexpectedly lingered in my hand. Without thinking, I brought it to my face and took a breath.

— Mmm... — Escaped from me. Such a delicate and pleasant scent.

He froze, his coat still in his hands, as if he hadn't expected it. His fingers lightly touched the back of my neck. From behind.

Two points of contact.
I didn't have time to think.
What was that?

We stepped out of the hotel, and the cool air of late autumn immediately embraced us. He looked down at me. Calmly. Attentively.

And suddenly, I couldn't lift my gaze.
He gently took my face in his hands.

And kissed me.

The second touch.

XV The Devil

After that, a space remained between us. It never disappeared, no matter how many years went by. Sometimes it fell silent. Sometimes it returned as a familiar tightness somewhere deep inside.

On one of those days, I was sitting in my office. I think it was the eighteenth floor. To my right, a floor-to-ceiling window overlooked the summer skyline of Moscow. Looking back now, that pre-pandemic corporate world seems almost endearing. Especially those days when the entire company — including every executive and its flamboyant founder — still fit on a single floor. I'd long since grown used to the chaos of the Yellow Bank. In its own way, I had even come to love it.

But inside, everything tightened again. The feeling was unmistakable. *So... was it time?*

Slowly, I opened a flight-booking website. Before every next click, I paused and listened to myself. Back then, it was the most reliable way I knew to have a conversation with myself. In my case, that conversation usually began with one search: **The whole world**. I clicked **Search**. A quiet sense of anticipation settled into the air. I was curious to see what the search would bring me this time.

The page refreshed, and the results appeared. I looked at the first destination. His country. His city. Departure — tomorrow. Without a moment's hesitation, I got the ticket. Then, without offering any unnecessary explanations, I told my colleagues I was taking Friday off.

A message about my plans appeared in our chat. To put it mildly, he was stunned. Within minutes, I had a list of places I should visit and a hotel reservation waiting for me. I was also told there would be no meeting.

Hmm... I couldn't say that news affected me in any particular way. Something else mattered. I wanted to leave Moscow. To discover a new country and see a new city. Whether he was there or not made no difference. I wasn't flying to him. I was flying towards myself. Sometimes, the shortest way to that place runs through another country. Reality has a habit of presenting its deepest meanings as riddles, with just a hint of symbolism.

The FIFA World Cup was underway. Russia was the host nation. While the rest of the world was making its way towards my country, I was flying to Europe.

And who could have imagined it? Certainly not me. Somehow, a chance to see me appeared after all. I still remember the music playing in his car. Lunch at a restaurant on the water. He talked a great deal, and I listened. Little by little, I realised we weren't having the same conversation. He blamed it on my "poor English," but in truth, I understood everything — and perhaps even more than he did.

He spoke about us on yachts in the Mediterranean. About islands. I listened, watched him, and couldn't understand. Why would I want any of that? It all sounded beautiful. Most women would probably have been swept away by plans like those.

But not me.

I felt, with complete certainty, that none of it belonged to my near future. I turned my gaze away, looked out across the turquoise sea, and felt nothing.

I was bored.

They drove me back to my hotel and walked me to the entrance. Then, quite unexpectedly, he began asking me to let him into my room. This time, it was my turn to be shocked.

— No!

I cut him off once. Then again. I felt that *no* with my whole being. It came before thought. Before words. Before any argument could exist. Many years later, I would learn that he had been married at the time. Many years later, he would apologise.

But in that moment, he pulled me into his arms and kissed me. My pulse shot up. My smartwatch vibrated. Heart rate—132. *Working out, Oksana?*

I caught my breath. Slipped out of his embrace. Went upstairs to my room. Slid into bed and lay there for a long time with my eyes closed.

I had preserved the future.

That evening, I went down to the bar next door to watch the football. Russia was playing Croatia. A penalty shootout. The teams were level, one kick after another. Every Croatian goal was met with a roar of approval from the local crowd. And then — Russia scored.

— Yeeees! — I cried out with all my heart.

My voice cut through the silence. Heads turned towards me. The only Russian in the bar. I was sitting in the middle of the room, my chin held high, my back perfectly straight. My eyes were burning. I didn't care that I was alone.

Russia lost that match.

— The gift, — the owner said, placing something on the table in front of me.

A curious keyring lay there. I looked more closely.

A metal circle, engraved with... a spiral.

III The Empress

— Happy Birthday to me...

I sang softly under my breath, listening to the steady hum of the engines. The clock struck midnight. The cabin was wrapped in complete darkness. In the seat beside me, a woman was quietly snoring, having clearly had more wine than she should have. I hadn't planned to welcome my birthday somewhere between earth and sky, but that's how it happened.

One more impossible act of will — to walk away from the corporate greenhouse with iron bars around it. And now this. I had escaped Moscow for nine days.

Why? Why hadn't I stayed inside my comfortable concrete box with central heating? Because I couldn't bear being there alone.

I had a choice: fly to Amsterdam, or to somewhere completely unknown — Goa.

I weighed my options. I'd already been to the Netherlands that year. Guaranteed pleasure at zero degrees, or a leap into the unknown beneath thirty-five-degree sunshine? A Schengen visa wasn't forever, and India...

Never before had I flown to Asia alone. By then, I already had many European cities behind me. But India belonged somewhere beyond the boundaries of what felt reasonable. The part of the map where people like me simply didn't go — least of all on their own.

The sun won.

On the second day, it began...

A sudden, overwhelming hunger hit me. I slammed on the brakes of my scooter. To my right was an Indian café. Lights glowed warmly. A live band was playing. The place was full of people.

I made up my mind. *Here. I'll eat here.* I was tired of looking for somewhere that matched my expectations. It seemed such a place simply didn't exist here. I glanced at the parking area, made a sharp turn, and pulled into an empty space.

— Do you need help?

Please, not this, I thought, turning around. A tall, bald young man was standing beside my scooter.

— I'm fine, thank you.

I tossed the words over my shoulder as I climbed off the rented machine that had been carrying me around for the past few days. But the young man had no intention of stepping back. Instead, he took hold of the rear of the scooter with both hands and, ignoring my protests, shifted it with one firm movement until the back wheel was perfectly aligned with the row of motorcycles.

— Thank you.

I said it almost absent-mindedly, without breaking my stride. I walked past him and headed inside. A typical Indian café. Checked tablecloths that looked almost dirty. A young woman singing on a makeshift stage. I took an empty table and opened the menu.

Arcan Bar, I read. The name of the place.

The hunger was almost feral. I hadn't eaten all day and had spent hours on the road. I needed food — urgently. First, though, I had to find something edible among hundreds of things I couldn't even identify.

Suddenly, I felt someone watching me. The same tall, bald young man was standing beside my table again.

— Are you waiting for someone? No? Then would you mind if I kept you company?

He asked politely, gesturing towards the empty chair across from me. But beneath that politeness there was a trace of irony. And something else — something elusive, with the sweetness of honey.

— Not yet.

I answered with that same hint of sweetness and watched his reaction.

He was already pulling out the chair when the meaning of my answer reached him. He paused for a brief moment.

— Ha-ha-ha.

My seafood sizzler arrived. I ate, and slowly I felt my goodwill towards the world returning. Meanwhile, people kept stopping by our table to greet my neighbour. He clearly had no shortage of company. So why had he chosen to sit at mine?

He took out a green packet, along with a few other things, and began rolling what looked like a cigarette. Seeing me watching with open curiosity, he explained:

— It's tobacco.

He pointed to the green packet.

— And this is rolling tobacco. I hope you don't mind?

I nodded. He flicked his lighter and lit the cigarette.

— I'm almost out.

He nodded towards the packet again. There was unmistakable concern in his voice.

— It's hard to find here. And none of my friends from Russia are flying to Goa anytime soon.

Without a word, I picked up my phone and messaged a friend in Moscow. She replied almost immediately. Her boyfriend was flying to Goa in a couple of days. I sent her the name of the tobacco.

— I can't promise anything. But there's a good chance you'll have a couple of packs of your Golden Virginia in a few days.

He stopped smoking mid-draw and looked at me intently. I hid a smile and quietly watched his reaction.

— If you ever feel like having coffee, let me know. I know a place that makes a good one.

Without ceremony, we slipped into calling each other *you* in the familiar form.

— It's quieter there. We'll actually be able to talk.

And yes, I wanted a good cup of coffee more than anything.

A few more turns. Crowds of tourists just like me. This village was called Arambol, farther north than the place where my tour operator had booked my stay.

And there we were, the two of us, sitting at a large round red table. The conversation continued.

— Yesterday was your birthday? — he asked again. — Do you happen to know what time you were born?

Something changed in him. He became noticeably more alert, studying me with renewed attention. He took out his phone and started entering something into it, while I, with the carefree openness of a traveller, kept sharing little details about myself.

— You're a mathematician?

He repeated the word and fell silent. That piece of information clearly wasn't what he'd been hoping to hear.

— Now I'm not even sure whether I should tell you what I do...

I looked away from the chaos of the Indian street and turned back to the bald man dressed in black. Strange. Very few men shave their heads completely when they don't have to. He had gone still. Everything about him suggested he was genuinely uneasy.

— What is it? Don't worry. I'm open to new things.

I meant it.

He seemed to relax. Then, with unexpected caution, he said:

— I'm a Jyotish astrologer.

Is that some kind of astrophysicist? I wondered, remembering a rather unusual date with a PhD from Silicon Valley. He was watching my reaction closely. I simply shrugged.

— I have no idea what that is.

He looked at me. Then back at his phone. Suddenly, he straightened in his chair. His eyes widened.

— Wow...

A week later, I caught myself thinking that I was beginning to like India. Somehow, the dust had disappeared. My eyes no longer noticed the dirt. The roughness of the place had quietly become something complete, something natural in its simplicity. What had once seemed like pure disorder was beginning to reveal its own hidden logic — as though life here followed laws that existed all along, and I simply hadn't learned to see them yet.

I remembered the things I'd once said about this country without ever having set foot in it. Perhaps fools are forgiven their mistakes when they recognise them with an open heart. As for the snob... a large cockroach may run through his house once or twice. And if understanding still refuses to arrive, the procession of unexpected visitors will simply continue.

It was a gift. India itself — and everything that had been waiting there for me.

After returning to Moscow, I could feel that something irreversible had happened. But I gave myself time to look around.

Had everything that happened to me in Goa been a dream? No. It was my life in Moscow that now felt like one. Dull. Cold. A box tied with a red ribbon sat on the bedside table.

A payoff.

I finished the book I had bought at the airport before my flight. It was full of wise words about loving yourself, loving God, loving other people, and the art of holding all of those things together.

I took out the candle I had brought back from India, poured into an unusual clay vessel. Its flame was large and full of life. I switched off the lights in the apartment and, for the first time in my life, sat down to meditate. When I opened my eyes, the very first thing I did was reach for a notebook and a black gel pen.

Everything had already been decided.

Was I afraid? Refusing to give that thought any room in my mind, I crushed the feeling beneath the imagined heel of a sharp, mirror-polished stiletto.

That evening, I began a conversation with the man who was beside me at the time. Or perhaps we were only pretending that he was. He heard my decision — I was leaving him.

And he smiled sooner than he should have.

The next day, I walked into the apartment. And there he was, leaning over the bed. My notebook was in his hands. The very one marked with black ink. The one no one was ever meant to see. *Hmm...* I watched the scene in silence. Then, all at once, he looked up at me and almost shouted:

— You're going to India?!

Nothing remained of yesterday's cheerfulness. His face had fallen. He seemed to have withered somehow, his whole posture collapsing inward. *Strange*, I thought. *Does that really change anything?* But his reaction spoke for itself.

— Yes, — I answered calmly.

I wanted neither victory nor war.

I The Magician

What lay ahead was something no school lesson in survival could ever have prepared us for. I smiled to myself as memories of those years returned.

A global pandemic. A “hazy honeymoon” in Moscow. An escape to St Petersburg. A return to the capital. The summit of the Black Pyramid at sunrise on the first of January. Remote work that kept me from losing my mind along with the rest of the world. Lockdown in South America. And a quiet mountain village above Yalta. Waking up every day to the sight of Ai-Petri.

I took a deep breath, winced, and thought of my relationship with the Jewish man. As it turned out, there was much more to him than I had once imagined. Never toy with instinct.

How did I find out? I had a dream. The kind of dream after which reality becomes the illusion. For several days, you look at familiar things as though you’re seeing them for the very first time.

Then come the direct questions. And then the illusion shatters, while reality turns into the nightmare.

I blinked, pulling myself away from the memories. And smiled a curious smile — one that held more understanding than anything else. I was sitting on a rooftop in one of the most fascinating cities on Earth.

Istanbul.

The sound of the evening *adhan* echoed from one mosque to another. The voices rebounded from walls of stone and brick. Invisible currents rose into the air. People sank to their knees. Foreheads touched the earth. The city resonated like a musical box from an Eastern fairy tale.

I’d been lucky with my Airbnb. Within a few hours, I had gone from being a guest to being a friend. They showed me the Istanbul tourists never see. I found myself at an auction where a sketch by Aivazovsky was about to be sold. I spent the night inside a historic building in the heart of the city. I danced beneath a soaring vaulted dome with friends I’d only just met.

And now, before me, stretched the magnificent panorama of an ancient city in its most beautiful light — the golden hour.

Or Constantinople?

My hair danced in the wind. My eyes were fixed on the distance. Slightly narrowed. I love studying details from far away.

Wind or... changes?

A strange inner stillness had been surrounding me since the day before. It felt familiar, though I hadn’t yet understood why. My gaze drifted between the horizon and somewhere deep within myself.

The pain of what I had realised was so overwhelming that the day before I had walked across half of Istanbul without lifting my eyes once. Trying to remember what I had passed along the way was pointless. I hadn't seen a thing.

When I had finally reached the end of my strength, a taxi appeared somewhere in the streets of the old city. Then the front door closed behind me. I shut myself in my room, and for the first time in my life, I screamed without a sound, without a single sob. I remember my cheeks were wet. I don't remember the tears.

The walls were closing in. The ceiling had disappeared. My fingers were trembling. I rolled from my back onto my stomach. Bit into the blanket. Smothered every sound in the pillow.

Pain. A whisper. A soundless: *I was wrong*.
Who was I saying it to? Who was listening?
And yet, someone was unmistakably there.

I could feel it.

The golden disc of the sun gently touched the skyline. The wooden door to the rooftop creaked open, and two heads appeared above the stairs. My host and his friend joined me. Both were about my age.

They had noticed the change in me. I'd grown quiet. Thoughtful. They behaved like true gentlemen, never asking the questions that didn't need asking. And wherever I went, I could feel their quiet support.

— Oksana, thank you. Because of you, we remembered this rooftop again.

One of them handed me a mug of hot tea. They had come up at exactly the right moment. The most beautiful part of the evening was about to begin.

I smiled. How could anyone forget a treasure like this?

The pain hadn't gone anywhere. There was simply tea beside me now, kind people, and the enchanting music of Istanbul.

0 The Fool

A few more flights. A few more cities. And at last, I found myself in India. What unfolded there became such a defining chapter of my life that it grew into a book of its own — perhaps even more than one.

At that time, there was a master beside me. A man whose role was to teach me. Or rather, to help me remember what I was meant to remember.

Candlelight. Half-darkness. A fine mist hanging in the room. For days, for hours, I trained myself to master the **sensations**. Then he began showing me practices that are difficult to write about. The moment you do, the story either turns into a mystical thriller or a dark fairy tale. Tantra without the marketing. India beyond the tourist trail. Dangerous.

Will you step inside?

I did. Not only did I step inside — I plunged in headfirst and surrendered to it completely. India gave me far more than I had ever asked for. And even that *more* cannot compare with what I was initiated into.

The Key of All Doors.

But as so often happens, everything has its other side. Each of us has a shadow. And the deeper a person is, the more fascinating — and more dangerous — that darkness becomes. One day, in the middle of a conversation, the master suddenly said:

— You're sub.

Excuse me?

How else could someone with a BDSM past have reacted? And how else could I have understood his words when all I knew came from a few films and whatever images I'd happened to see online?

No one knew.

At first, I didn't even understand what I'd heard. Then I did. And my face changed instantly. I stood up. Without a word. My body was already moving towards the door. It was as though an invisible boundary had appeared around me. And he could not cross that line.

No one could.

My mind was trying to catch up with what had just happened. How could someone invade another person's space with such complete disregard? How could anyone say something like that? I felt offended. And I was angry.

How dare he...

I wanted to leave. I felt insulted and, for some reason, frightened at the same time. He stood up as well.

And then, quite calmly, he said:

— Feels like I have to apologise.

I didn't answer. And I left. At the time, all I wanted was to prove that he was wrong. I was convinced he was talking complete nonsense.

Years later, that conversation began to look different.

The façade of spiritual practice?

Simple physiology?

Or something elusive, somewhere in between.

Find that middle...

Part II

Prologue

Night. Red light. A vast, unfurnished room. A silk shawl, deep purple, softly brushes against my skin. My naked body spins slowly around its own axis. Music fills my headphones.

Loneliness?

Ha... ha... ha...

Closed eyes — as soon as you stop trying to look, you begin to see.

I allowed myself to dance. A dizzying, elemental dance that could never be performed for anyone else. The kind that becomes possible only after the last observer disappears.

I treasure these moments...

No one is watching.

But that's never true.

Someone is always watching...

And now, there was no witness left in the room except the flames of the candles and the sound of my own breathing.

I spun faster and faster. As though I were remembering something long forgotten. No. Not remembering. Returning to it without questions, without thoughts, without desire.

The body remembers what the mind buried long ago under layers of good decisions, common sense, and discipline. It remembers first. It remembers without words. And sometimes a single movement is enough to shatter years of carefully guarded silence.

One turn. Then another. The silk glided over my shoulders.

For a moment, it felt as though the years had vanished. As though there had never been any distance between the woman I was now and the one I had once been. She had never gone anywhere.

She had simply been waiting.

How long had it been since I had fired without a weapon.

Mistaking courtesy for surrender is an expensive mistake.

The music kept playing. The candles burned with quiet delight, and the red light rested on my skin like something almost alive. I ran my fingers across my phone, about to turn the volume down, when I felt that familiar shift again — as though an invisible layer of reality had silently turned.

Someone's hand was already resting on the next page.

Just then, a message appeared.

— When are you flying to Goa?

You never get used to something like that, even when it is your own life.

— On the full moon.

Before I returned to the dance, I caught his reply.

— A wise choice.

IV The Emperor

For the first time in all the years I had known India, I finally began to understand the energy of that place.

Not to go where you shouldn't — even if you're invited, even if they insist. Not to look where your eyes have no business wandering — even if curiosity pulls you in. Not to linger where you are meant to keep walking — even if you share a past with what lies behind you.

I was working on my second book and getting ready to leave before the monsoon season. Everything had been settled well in advance. The tickets. The timing. The plans. Then, without warning, the itinerary we had agreed on months earlier began to fall apart before my eyes.

First came the outbreak of war in the Middle East. Then several days of suspended decisions. And suddenly, everything was there, distilled into just a few lines.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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