

For the love of my life, who blames me for all the bad things I do in her dreams.

Enter Dark

Sea of the drowned rats

Do you know the feeling when an idea is almost within reach in your mind, only to vanish when you try to grasp hold of it? Have you ever noticed a glimpse of a shadow in the corner of your eye that disappears when you turn to see it more clearly? Would you be ready to catch the idea? Would you be ready to see the shadow?

Day 1.

-Oleg, wake up! Wake up! The man patted Oleg on the shoulder.

-I'm awake, Oleg waved his arms, panting and stumbling to sit up. He struggled to pluck out the earbuds from his ears. Alexey Omelchuk's composition fell silent. Under the fluorescent light's pale glow, everything looked hard and colorless.

-Is everything okay? Did you see the numbers? The other man asked and took a cold black disc-like object from his hand.

-I'm fine, Oleg said confusedly, still gasping for breath. He noticed he was soaked in sweat.

-How long... How long did I sleep? Oleg asked, looking around, now seeing more clearly.

-30 minutes, the first man, whom Oleg now recognized as Palmer, replied and adjusted the large glasses on his nose.

-Give me the paper and pen! Oleg said quickly and fumbled around with his hands. The other man, Aljovitch, handed him a notebook and pen. Oleg quickly wrote a series of numbers on the paper. He remembered everything clearly, it had been just as Palmer had said.

-Did you see anything... else? Palmer asked, inquisitive and slightly stiff.

-Yes, our car's battery will die. I didn't see why, but we were in a hurry out of town, and it wouldn't start. We need to change it. But that was later.

-I'll take care of it right away, Aljovitch took the notebook and wrote it down.

-What about anything else? Did you see anything else? Palmer continued, leaning forward and stroking his hair

-Not really, you interrupted me, Oleg said, a bit irritated. He had seen, but there had been little sense or meaningful content. Nothing worth mentioning.

-You started sweating and turning. Aljovitch got worried, Palmer said with a slight grin. The tall American began packing his gear into a black bag. Coldness. Oleg remembered, in the dream, everything had been cold.

-Well, that's not normal, he was soaking wet with sweat. How long have *you* slept with it? Aljovitch interrupted Oleg's thoughts, directing his words at Palmer.

-Don't worry Aljo, everything is fine, Oleg said to his friend.

-Actually, I think we should celebrate. The test was successful, the dream went exactly the same way as Palmer said it would. At first, it was bright, and then I saw everything. I remember the events as clearly as if I had just done them myself, Oleg continued.

-Great to hear! Let's wait until the weekend, though. Just to make sure. I'll work with Alexander in the meantime, Palmer said and clapped his hands together. Palmer wasn't smiling anymore, as his gaze wandered to the windows.

-Let's get something to eat, I'm starving, Oleg concluded and got up from the couch to search for a spare shirt.

-Let's go to the Rat's Den, just a couple of blocks away. It's right by the sea. You'll love it. I

know the restaurant's owner. He's my cousin's husband, Aljovitch babbled to Palmer on their way out.

Day 5.

On Saturday, they gathered again at Oleg's place. A small CRT television flickered commercials into the otherwise dimly lit room. Oleg and Aljovitch sat on the couch. Palmer had settled leaning on the kitchen table. Oleg's Soviet-era apartment was small and modest. A couch, a dining set for four, a TV stand, concrete-colored plastic carpet covered by a rug which was slightly the wrong size. A few cabinets and closets lined the sides of the room. But soon Oleg might be able to move to something bigger and better.

Oleg held a lottery ticket firmly in his hand. 4, 9, 5, 18, 1, 20, and 19. On the other hand, he fiddled with his phone, from which a headphone cord went to his left ear.

-It's about to start, Aljovitch broke the seemingly eternal silence. Palmer glanced at Aljovitch. Oleg sensed Palmer's irritation. In his opinion, Aljo talked way too much. And especially saw too little. Oleg pressed play on his phone, and the silence was replaced again by Alexey Omelchuk's magical compositions. The music slowly lulled the entire room under its spell, just as it had lulled Oleg to sleep only five days earlier. The broadcast began. The host read the numbers one after another, and one by one, they matched his ticket. 4, 9, 5, 18, 1, 20, 26. All but the last number. Oleg glanced at his notebook, where the last hastily written number 26 underlined the week-long suspense.

-It works! We're rich! Aljovitch exclaimed as the last number came.

-Gentlemen, this is just the beginning, Palmer smiled and stood up. A visible joy of success sparkled behind his glasses. Oleg turned off the music and stared at his ticket. Aljovitch babbled about how he would treat them to lunch and then fix their car or maybe buy a new one straight away and started making a call. Palmer thanked him and announced that he had to go and report the results further.

-We'll continue the experiments tomorrow, Oleg. And Aljo, don't drink too much today! Alcohol interferes with the experiments, and we need you too, Palmer said, smiling and straightening his collar at the door.

-Yes! I'll take care of him. See you tomorrow! Oleg said, smiling at Palmer. Aljovitch was already finishing the call he had started with his cousin. They would meet him at the restaurant. Aljovitch tried to persuade Palmer to join them at the door, but after he politely refused several times, Aljovitch finally wished him a safe journey back to the city. Oleg's lips curled into a slight smile as he wandered to his wardrobe. Of the three hanging garments, he chose the best one, an old dark suit. The suit he had last worn when he graduated from university years ago. Oleg wiped dust from the shoulders. The scholarship had been just half a point away. Memories stung Oleg. Half a point had thrust him into fourth place. Knocked him off the path of success. Forced him to return from the capital to the old Soviet hometown. But now. Finally, he was back on the path of success. A path that would lead him to the world's spotlight and glory.

Just a moment ago, they had done something unbelievable. Something against the very laws of physics. How had they succeeded? How had it been so easy? Maybe he would get his answers tomorrow; he would see himself explaining it to himself. Unveiling the formulas and revealing the secrets of the universe. His career as a physicist would venture into new channels. Fame and fortune. Awards and research. Formulas that would belong to others, but which he would find tomorrow. Was he a thief? No. Knowledge belongs to everyone. He would be an innovator. Yes, that is who he was.

A snap of fingers brought him back to the room.

-Oleg must have had too many drinks already, Aljovitch chuckled, snapping his fingers once more in front of Oleg's face.

-Naah, I haven't had more than a few, Oleg laughed and leaned back on the restaurant sofa. Detaching his gaze from the sea he had been observing through the window. The never-ending waves crashing against the rocks in hypnotizing rhythm.

-Uncle, order some dessert for Oleg so he can keep the alcohol in his stomach! Aljovitch laughed.

-Yes, and as I said, I had a bad feeling about that last number! We should have chosen the 26 we had been pondering in our minds at first, after all it is my birthday, Aljo continued the story of how they had bought the second-highest winning lottery-ticket at the kiosk. Sitting at the table, besides them were Aljo's cousin Natalya and her husband who owned the restaurant, a local drinking hero, and Aljovitch's uncle Alexander. Alexander had just joined their company and was now listening to the story that had been told a dozen times already. Aljo talked more than necessary, but even as drunk as he was, he still knew how to keep quiet about how they had truly picked the numbers. Although Alexander probably knew that too. After all, he was the one who had introduced and presented Palmer to them. Aljo was the towns' news source and vice versa; he heard all the gossip but also passed it on. His storytelling was often winding but captivating, even the purchase of a lottery ticket turned into a wild tale that enchanted the audience into a trance-like state. For this reason, stories were often shared with him. People wished their stories would transform in his mouth, gain some richness in them, and become more intense tales for others to admire. This skill, however, didn't make much money. So, the second best prize of the lottery was a huge sum for him. To be precise, a huge sum of his own money.

-In conclusion I'm treating you all tonight, dear friends! You too, uncle, order something! And tell me, how is my father doing? Aljo ended his story session.

-He's doing well. A bit busy with those foreigners, you understand. But don't worry, he's coming to visit you next week, Alexander smiled broadly and signaled a beer for himself.

-Let's toast to Aljo and Oleg! May their luck continue and grow! Alexander clinked glasses.

-Let's also toast to you, uncle, who has returned home! Aljo continued next.

-And to all our dear friends who have never left at all! Oleg celebrated. Reasons to raise their glasses kept coming and coming, and the toasts continued late into the night. After Aljo fell from the chair trying to order more beer, it was time to leave. They said goodbye to their friends, as Oleg led the joyfully singing Aljovitch to the door.

As they stepped onto the street, a gust of ocean wind blew over Oleg, washing away the bright and warm feeling of the restaurant. The sun had long since set, and not even the moon cast a shadow on the street. The chilly wind had brought fog from the sea which now wrapped the old Soviet town in uniform murkiness. The whole town had already fallen asleep as they began their walk to Aljo's apartment. The walk was not long but already after a few

steps Oleg felt the damp air heavy on his skin. Only the crunch of the gravel road echoed around the crumbling concrete walls of the town. The dim street lights seemed to be absorbing into the dark fog along the roadside. Oleg had an odd feeling. As if something was watching them. Observing their slow progress. The closer they got to Aljovitch's apartment, the more oppressive the atmosphere felt. Somehow even quieter. Even Aljo had stopped talking, now only breathing heavily as he dragged his feet forward. Oleg glanced around. The tree leaves were locked in place in the still air. Nothing could be seen anywhere. Oleg crunched his brows and continued. Was he just imagining everything? He shouldn't have drunk so much. The duo arrived at Aljovitch's door, and Aljovitch began to dig for his keys in his pocket. Like a wave, the rustle of falling hay came from behind them. Oleg turned to look back. Everything was as if frozen in place. Motionless. Not a hint of wind. Oleg squinted at the edge of the forest. After the first trees, the darkness became impenetrable. The silence was deafening, only Aljovitch's heavy breathing beside him kept him from imagining that time had stopped. Oleg turned back and pushed the key in Aljo's hand into the lock and turned it. The door opened, and Aljovitch collapsed inside. Oleg turned to look back one more time. A faint breeze had returned to the street. Oleg stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He was too drunk. Aljovitch's couch would have to do for sleeping tonight.

Day 6.

In the morning, Oleg woke up with a ringing headache. It was a little past ten, but their work would not start until noon. Aljovitch was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. Last night now seemed distant to Oleg, but the unnerving feeling returned to his mind as he recalled the trip back from the restaurant. Aljovitch did not remember anything about the journey and was as cheerful as ever. They returned to Oleg's apartment after noon. Palmer arrived there shortly after them.

-Okay, let's see if we can get some real results today! Not just playing with small change anymore, Palmer rubbed his hands together and began to unpack his briefcase.

-Great, so do you already have a target and a plan? Oleg asked, stretching his stiff neck from side to side.

-Indeed. Have you chosen the track you want to sleep into? The idea is to aim about five or six years ahead. We will aim longer by the end of the week with small steps, Palmer explained, spreading a pile of notebooks, a camera, and a computer on the table.

-Right, can I go first? Aljovitch asked.

-Please, go ahead, Palmer said and made room for Aljovitch.

-Now Aljovitch, try to see yourself with your father. He tells you about the army's actions. Try to focus on both the details and getting a broader picture of the world. Can you do that, Aljovitch? Palmer explained, tapping the camera on, and then handing the black disc-like item to Aljovitch.

-I'll read the instructions for the recording first. 'You must immediately report: if you see something that does not belong to this world, see death or accidents, the dream is oppressive, or there is something wrong in a way you do not want to experience in real life. In these situations, we must immediately interrupt the experiments for everyone's safety,' Palmer read the list from his notebook and then gave a thumbs up to Aljovitch.

-I think I can manage. At the same time, I can check the day's lottery, Aljovitch chuckled and lay down, squeezing the disc in his hand.

Palmer scowled at him and jotted something down in his notebook. Aljovitch winked at Oleg and then placed earbuds in his ears. A few minutes later, Aljovitch was fast asleep.

-Then we wait, Palmer said. Oleg noticed how Palmer tapped his pencil on his notebook and kept glancing out the window. Oleg had noticed him doing the same during last experiment when Aljo was at sleep.

-Are you expecting someone? Oleg asked.

Palmer was slightly startled, stopped his movement, and then cleared his throat.

-No. I just noticed that it has cooled down since last week outside.

-Does it affect the experiments?

-Not really. I just don't like the cold. You see, my knees start to ache easily.

-It always aches on the coast, but the sea also keeps the worst frost at bay. I kinda like it here.

-I hate the sea. If we succeed, you will most likely have to move to Europe or maybe the United States.

-Mmm... I don't know if I like that. On the other hand, I'll probably soon see where I end up.

20 minutes passed and Aljovitch woke up panting and looking shocked. However, the shock and pained face almost immediately turned into fist-shaking and cursing. Aljovitch hadn't seen anything. Or at least according to his words, he had just walked down the street and stopped at a grocery store. There was no news, and nobody had talked about anything other than pie-making recipes. The disappointment on Palmer's face was mild but visible.

Aljovitch's miserable mood soon eased. "He should just forget the lottery and focus fully on the research itself," Palmer scolded more heavily this time. They will try again tomorrow. Only one attempt per day was Palmer's limit.

Oleg lay down on the couch. His hand held the thin, cool, black disc. The surface of the disc was full of some pattern too small for eyes to see, but you could feel it with your fingertips. Oleg called it a disc because he didn't know what it really was. It felt like it could bend if folded, but he hadn't dared to try. Just holding it sent cold shivers down his limbs. He put the headphones in his ears and pressed Alexey Omelchuk's composition again, sinking into its world, towards the white light.

The white mist receded before him. He was in a laboratory. No. Observatory? There were pictures on the wall, formulas that he already knew. References, writings and strange projections. People moved from place to place. The space was completely silent except for a woman's voice that greeted him as she passed by. Oleg nodded and walked towards the center. Something rustled behind him. Oleg turned around but saw nothing but more formulas spanning across whiteboards. The woman had disappeared. The rustling was also gone. Silence numbed his senses and disoriented his perception. Formulas. He must look at them to see if any are new. 'Why am I in the observatory? Black holes? Antimatter? What am I discovering?' Alexey Omelchuk's tunes began to fill the silent space in the distance. Oleg ran towards a person standing in front of a large workstation. His wheezing breath steamed up into the air.

"Oleg, where have you been? Shouldn't you answer your phone?" the man asked, turning to him as Alexey Omelchuk's composition played louder and louder out of his chest.

"There's no time. Tell me everything," Oleg snapped at the man, thirsting for knowledge. Oleg licked his lips greedily. Iron. The man had begun to explain a new formula, part of which was written on his paper. Something flashed in the corner of his eye. Oleg turned but saw nothing. Shadows had begun to form inside the observatory. They fell from the devices onto the walls and floor, snaking towards him.

Oleg turned back to the man: "Sorry, start from the beginning."

"So, this formula of yours that you discovered... Are you alright, you look a bit pale," the man asked.

"Please continue," Oleg commanded rudely. Something moved in the corner of his eye on the wall, Oleg instinctively turned.

He had moved into his home. Someone or something was in the apartment as well. He couldn't see it, but he knew, he *remembered*, that something else was there with him. He walked into the living room. The light from a soon-to-break fluorescent tube flickered irritatingly. Everything else looked as it was back at his house now. Same couch, same tv, same table. A science magazine lay on the table. Oleg recognized himself on the cover. "The man who solved one of the biggest problems in physics. Page 5." As Oleg rushed towards the magazine as frosty mist began to fill the room.

-Oleg, what did you see? A distant male voice asked.

-Am I here? Oleg asked and wiped the hair from his face. He was soaked in sweat again. For a split second, Oleg thought he saw black fog in the room. He shook his head rapidly and the outlines and objects in the room began to take their proper places.

-Pen and paper. Oleg said and immediately received them in his hand. Palmer took the disc from his grip in exchange. Oleg recounted the events, or the most important ones. There was no need to mention his delusions. Oleg didn't want Palmer to think he was going crazy in the future and stop the experiments. His entire career depended on this project.

-Are you sure that's all? Palmer asked, waiting, as if sensing that Oleg hadn't mentioned everything.

-That's all... But this bothers me. I couldn't get a grip on the dream in the same way as back then with the lottery numbers. And the time dreaming was shorter. It broke off before I was ready. Oleg spoke irritably.

-It's normal the further we aim. I also strongly suspect... That perhaps your hangover affects the situation, Palmer said, somewhat prickly with a big smirk on his face.

-You mentioned an observatory; maybe if we go there, you could get a better hold of the vision. Was it somewhere nearby or abroad? Did you recognize the place? Palmer pondered, tapping his cheek with a pen.

-I believe the observatory was the one we have here up on the mountain. The writings were in Cyrillic, so it was unlikely to be abroad, but I didn't see the surroundings, Oleg scratched his head and got up to change his clothes.

-Well, I'll go book it for us tomorrow, Palmer said, gathering his belongings.

-Don't drink tonight! And choose a song that firmly anchors you to a moment in the future. Especially you, Aljovitch, pick something you hear only in your father's company, Palmer preached and then disappeared through the door.

-Well, today wasn't as successful a day as last time. Are we still going to the restaurant

tonight? Aljovitch asked.

-Not today, Aljo, I need to prepare for tomorrow. Oleg shook his head as his stomach growled.

Oleg pondered his dream all day. Now, as evening approached, he wondered if he had been too harsh to Aljo. Should he go to the restaurant to see him as the poor friend hasn't seen anything useful yet. Or would that be detrimental for tomorrow? Pacing in circles inside his apartment. Oleg had gone through every corner of the dream in his mind. He was now sure that analyzing the dream wouldn't get him any further today. The thought frustrated him. He knew the answer was so close. The formula had been so close in the dream that he could've almost tasted it on his tongue. Oleg wandered into the bathroom lost in thought and opened the mirror cabinet. As the mirror turned, it reflected a black figure behind him. Oleg spun around, gasping for air. There was nothing behind him. Empty. Just a shower curtain and a toilet. Oleg approached the shower curtain and yanked it aside. Nothing. He returned to the mirror cabinet and turned its door. Waiting. Slowly studying the reflection. Ready to spin around. Nothing. Everything looked the same, sounded the same, tasted the same. Yet something seemed off. Oleg returned to the living room. Distorted shadows were cast through the windows onto the floor. Outside, a fine mist had begun to gather among the buildings and trees. Like a subtle filter that blurred the distance. The outside world looked like a photograph glued to the window. It had the same sensation as the night coming back from the restaurant. Frost had crawled over the yard. Not a single person outside. Not even a breeze. As Oleg listened closely, there was no sound at all. His house was eerily quiet. Maybe it's better to call Aljo.

-Hey, are you still at the restaurant? Oleg asked.

-Yes, I was just about to call you; you have to see this. The sea is all frozen. I'll come pick you up, Aljo said on the phone.

Oleg arrived at the restaurant in Aljovitch's car. They went straight to the beach, where Aljovitch's cousin Natalya and her husband were standing in the breeze. Their faces puzzled with uncertainty and caution.

-Look, it has frozen from the shore. Maybe ten to fifteen meters just today, Aljo said and pointed to the thick and translucent ice tightly attached to the shoreline. Oleg's gaze followed it along into the dark waves of the sea. Though right after the edge of the ice the endless rough waves disappeared into darkness. Wind swept the fine dust like snow, moving it in its own waves along the surface of the ice. Oleg glanced to the side.

-Why is it frozen only in this part of the town? Look, the ice ends there and there. Oleg said and pointed about a kilometer in both directions along the shore.

-I don't know. Aljovitch replied and stiffened completely.

-Do you hear it? Aljovitch asked and turned jerkily towards Oleg.

Oleg nodded. He felt it more than heard it. A low vibration swept along the ice field towards them. Cold sweat rose on his scalp. The low bass vibrations gave him goosebumps as it resonated against his clothes. His entire body tingled under the sound. Then it disappeared. Leaving them in windless silence.

-We should get away from here, Natalya said and turned towards the town.

-Did you hear it too? Oleg asked. The young couple nodded and quickly moved back into the dim lights of the town.

-We should probably go too. As the old saying goes: *Uncanny waters foretell troubles*, Aljovitch said and lay his hand on Oleg's shoulder.

-Is it okay if I sleep on your couch tonight? Oleg asked quietly without letting the sea out of his sight. Aljo agreed and went to start the car. Oleg stared for a moment into the abyss, beyond the rolling waves of the sea. Into the darkness that the town lights couldn't reach. However it did not reveal its secret to him but fell silent. For now.

Day 7.

As evening came, Oleg headed towards the observatory with Aljovitch. Aljo was driving an old Lada given to them by Aljovitch's uncle. "I'm surprised you haven't scrapped that thing yet," Alexander had remarked upon seeing it two days earlier. However, they had not had the luxury of upgrading their car before the lottery win. The journey across the field was not long, but the steep road up the mountain would have been laborious to walk. The weather was clear, and the stars shone beautifully in the night sky. Oleg thought it was a pity for the observatory's workers to miss the night. But their work would make it up for the astronomers. They would later thank him.

Upon arrival, Palmer's black SUV was already waiting for them. Somehow, Palmer had managed to reserve the observatory for them and had the workers relocated in a single day. Palmer believed that the evening would stimulate them better, as sleep would be as calm and unforced as possible, unlike during the daytime experiments. The interior of the observatory was the same that Oleg had seen in his dream yesterday. Now Oleg was certain about it. Although at the moment it was shabby and rather discouraging, he would soon change that. This would be where his destiny was to create something great. Perhaps even change the world.

Aljovitch would go first again, and he lay down on the couch they had dragged from the lobby to the observatory hall.

-All right, Aljovitch, this is important. Try to concentrate. Clear your mind. If nothing starts to appear today, we'll have to consider whether we need to suspend the experiments for you. Your uncle is in the same situation. Palmer spoke firmly and began to read through the warning list. Aljovitch took on a focused expression and soon fell asleep.

While waiting, Oleg wandered around the observatory. A draft sent shivers down his spine, and he adjusted his collar.

-Is there a window open somewhere? Oleg asked Palmer, pulling his sleeves over his hands.

-No, I checked the place when I arrived. Why do you ask? Palmer inquired, emphasizing the end.

-It feels like there's a draft coming from somewhere. Maybe I'm just imagining it, Oleg shrugged his shoulders and glanced around. The air conditioning unit creaked in another room. Even though they had turned on all the lights, it still seemed like the shadows had begun to grow on the observatory's walls.

Aljovitch hadn't been asleep for more than fifteen minutes when he suddenly woke up and practically jumped to his feet. His breath was quick and shallow, eyes glancing around

furiously in the room.

-What's going on? Aljo, are you alright? What did you see? Oleg asked, handing over a notebook and pen. Palmer moved nervously next to him and grabbed the black disc from his hand. Like a snap of the fingers, Aljovitch returned to this world.

-I... I saw the sea. A black, churning sea and... Aljovitch said slowly, taking the notebook in his hand. Tzzzzt tzzzt tzzzt. Aljovitch's phone rang. Aljovitch glanced at Palmer and Oleg. They didn't have time to say anything before he pulled the phone from his pocket.

-Hello?

-Aljo, where are you? Terrible things have happened! Alexander! He..., Natalya stammered into the phone before bursting into tears.

-What!? What about my uncle? Aljo demanded, worried.

-He fell into the sea. Or rather, he ran, I don't know. Oh Aljo, this is awful!

-Is he okay? What exactly happened? Explain on the way, I'm coming there now!

Aljovitch began to put on his coat, fading out Natalya's words. Palmer's face contorted in a grimace. He just opened his mouth, but couldn't say anything.

-Palmer, can you take Oleg home? I'm sorry, but I must go. Something terrible has happened. My cousin said my uncle fell into the sea. I must go help them.

-Wait a moment, can you... can you... I mean, Palmer stammered and began frantically flipping through his notes and various books from his briefcase.

-Just go, he'll give me a ride, we'll follow shortly, Oleg answered on Palmer's behalf to Aljovitch, who was already dashing out the door, ignoring Palmer's requests.

The door slamming brought Palmer back to the present. He cursed and began stuffing items into his briefcase.

-Aren't we going to see what I see? Oleg asked, surprised.

-We have to go check on Alexander. We can come back with Aljovitch later. Or continue tomorrow, Palmer said quickly as he stuffed his belongings into his briefcase.

-Are you sure? But we're here now. We can't do anything there. Aljo already went to help, Oleg said, trying to sound convincing.

-I need to know what happened. I need to... I need to know what Aljovitch saw, Palmer puffed, pulling on his jacket with trembling hands. The American was completely off-balance, and his chance to see his destiny depended on him.

-Fine, fine. Let's go then.

Oleg sat in the passenger seat and watched the town as they descended the winding mountain road. The frozen part of the sea glowed dimly, in the sparse town lights. Just looking at the ice seemed to bring its chill inside the car. Oleg stretched to turn up the thermostat when he felt it. A low, steady wave swept over them and remained trembling in the air. Oleg glanced at Palmer, who scrunched up his face. As they arrived at the foot of the mountain, the wave could be heard very clearly.

-What is this...? Oleg couldn't finish his question. Out of the window, Oleg saw a large black figure forming in the darkness on the field. Or rather, a hole in the field, formed by the figure. It absorbed all the light around it. Like a dark hole in the middle of the field. Immediately, the air filled with the squeaking of a rusty hinge. Palmer gripped the steering wheel and pressed the gas. The slow, scraping sound of the squeak drowned out the sound of the engine, while the vibration wrapped other sounds inaudibly. The car's headlights and dashboard began to flicker. Oleg could do nothing but sit petrified, staring towards the edge of the forest. Towards

the darkness that swallowed a piece of the field and forest where they had just passed. The figure disappeared behind the car's structures. The engine coughed a few times but then came back to life. The squeaking had stopped, and the low vibration disappeared.

-Did you see that? What? What the hell was that? What's going on here? Palmer! Oleg regained his voice and almost yelled his questions into the air. Palmer breathed very quickly and shallowly. He gripped the wheel with his hands completely white and his eyes locked on the road.

-Hello! Is everything okay? Oleg asked and patted him vigorously on the shoulder.

-Don't yell! Palmer snapped back to this world and began digging his phone from his pocket. With a trembling hand, Palmer typed a contact into his phone and raised the phone to his ear. Sweat droplets ran down his now glowing red face. Someone answered the phone.

-Abort the operation! It's right here! Dammit, Aljovitch and Alexander have been watching propane nightmares the whole time and haven't said anything. ... Yeah... Alexander is already gone, drowned in the sea for what I heard... I don't know... He never saw anything, so probably the whole time... I'm leaving right now. Send someone to get the artifact from Oleg. And get my stuff from the hotel... I heard its voice, I'm definitely not staying a second longer... Screw you, I don't care! I'll leave it with Oleg, he'll give it to you when *you* come to pick it up yourself if the *probabilities* are supposedly so low, Palmer screamed into the phone, his eyes constantly glancing around. Upon reaching Oleg's door, Palmer stopped abruptly.

-Can you tell me what's going on? Oleg asked when Palmer thrust the artifact box into his lap and leaned over him to open Oleg's door.

-Get out of the car and I'll tell you, Palmer said manically.

Oleg wasn't convinced and only half got out of the ride.

-Are we just stopping this experiment here? Oleg snorted, furrowing his brows.

-Hell yes. Someone will come pick up the box from you soon, don't use it. Don't look at it. Don't approach it. Run away immediately if you hear it. It should leave when the box leaves, Palmer listed and constantly glanced around.

-But what about my future? Oleg wailed.

-I'd worry more about today than tomorrow if I were you, Palmer said and shoved Oleg completely out of the car while pressing the gas. As Oleg was still stumbling to his feet, the black urban SUV disappeared into the darkness with the passenger door still swinging open.

Oleg stood bewildered on the street with the box in his hand. What had just happened? The evening had gone completely off the rails, and nothing made sense. Rustling. Oleg stiffened. Something had moved behind him. Don't look. Oleg started running towards the restaurant. He took out his phone and called.

-Hello, it's Oleg. Where are you? What's the situation?

-H...llo lm... attt thhhe rsss... Ar yo-u guys read-y? Aljovitch's choppy disconnected voice came through the phone.

-The connection is bad. I can't hear you properly. Wait for me, I'm coming there, Oleg shouted into the phone.

-I caaan'tttt u-u-nderssstandd.

-I'm almost at the restaurant! Oleg ended the call. He couldn't help it and glanced back. Nothing. Far ahead, there was a distant bang.

Aljovitch had just reached his car when Oleg arrived at the restaurant's parking lot. Heavily panting, Oleg stopped to lean on his knees, the box still tucked under his arm.

-Did you hear that bang? Aljovitch asked.

-I did, what was it?

-It came from the coastal road. Can you hear it, the car alarm? Someone's been in an accident!

Aljovitch quickly jumped behind the wheel of his car. Oleg was still trying to catch his breath and only faintly heard the car alarm's babbling sound. He climbed into the passenger seat, and Aljovitch accelerated towards the faint beeping.

-Someone at the restaurant saw a dark figure running on the ice into the sea... Snif... Of course, my cousin had immediately run to the spot. She found my uncle's phone and mitten at the edge of the ice. She had tried to call out and search for him, but the waves were too rough. She couldn't see anything. Aljovitch explained as he sped down the road, tears streaming down his cheeks. They arrived at the coastal road and saw a black SUV that had first jumped over a ditch and then crashed into a tree. Palmer's car.

Oleg jumped out of the car and ran to the SUV. It was empty. The contents of Palmer's briefcase were scattered around the car. There was blood on the deployed airbag and throughout the cabin.

-Look, he ran into the forest. Aljovitch pointed to the dark red splashes on the ground, which led into the woods.

-Palmer! We're here! It's us! Come here! Oleg shouted and began to follow the torn path through the bushes.

-He can't be far, this forest is just a couple of trees. He won't get far before... Oleg and Aljovitch came through the bushes to the shore. Just ahead of them were barely discernible tracks leading onto the ice and into the impenetrable darkness.

Oleg took a step forward when he felt a shockwave coming from the sea. The same pulsating wave that he had felt and heard twice before. Now, with an immediate coldness following its intensifying pulses. It was close.

-Back to the car! Get away from here right now! Oleg yelled and started to rush back. The bushes scratched their faces as Aljovitch followed him. Oleg no longer had any idea where the sound was coming from, it felt like it was all around them. The car was their only option. They lunged out of the bush for the car, whose windows had frosted over with ice. Aljovitch jumped into the driver's seat and tried to start the car. The engine turned over once stiffly, and the battery died. Oleg immediately grabbed the box and started running towards the town. His steps rattled against the road over the low vibrations. Only his steps. Oleg glanced back. Aljovitch had gone to the trunk to dig out the starter crank. Darkness condensed in the shadows of the forest, hiding the trees behind it. The screech of breaking ice tore through the air from the darkness.

-Forget the car and run! Oleg yelled without stopping. He saw Aljovitch rising to look at him, and his movements froze. The crank dropped from Aljovitch's hand, and his mouth opened to respond, but his voice was drowned out by the creaking and vibrations. Aljovitch turned to face the darkness. Oleg didn't look any further. He didn't glance back again but ran. Ran until the low vibration and ear-piercing screech had once again silenced.

Oleg dragged himself towards his home. His legs ached. The restaurant was closed. Everyone had already gone to sleep by the time he arrived. Oleg would have liked to leave the box at the door with a note or throw it into the sea. If it was chasing the box, he didn't want to hold it. But he just couldn't throw it away. The future in the box was too valuable to

be discarded. And what would be done to him when it came to be collected, and he wouldn't have it? Something seemed to move between the buildings. Would they make him sleep again? An empty can rolled around in an alley somewhere. Oleg's thoughts became more and more disarrayed and erratic. Every noise sounded like the low creaking noise, or the first wave of low vibrations. All was amplified by the surrounding in silence, every corner and shadow felt as if it could turn into impenetrable darkness at any moment. Each window reflection he passed transformed in the corner of his eye into a shadowy figure right behind him. Oleg was now just a few steps away from his home. His steps seemed to slow down, and he felt the cold intensifying in his bones.

'It's just fatigue. You haven't slept.' Oleg reassured himself. He forced his body to move slowly inching forwards to his entrance. Reaching for the doorknob Oleg felt a low vibration sweeping faintly over the street.

'You're just imagining it. You're just tired.' Oleg repeated to himself, trying to fit the key into the lock fighting his trembling hands. The scraping noise of the key against the lock screeched in his head as the vibrations grew stronger in the background. Oleg's breathing quickened, and something flickered in the corner of his eye. Finally, the key slid into the lock. Oleg rushed into his dark home. He peeked through the gap behind him as he slammed the door shut. Emptiness on the street. There had been nothing there. Oleg stared at the door and listened. Was something approaching it? The low vibration had stopped. He fumbled for the light switch and clicked it. The buzzing of the fluorescent light starting up echoed in the now completely silent room. The darkness did not retreat.

'The room had been empty when I came in.'

'I checked that everything was as usual when I came in.'

Oleg didn't turn around. Click Click. The fluorescent light buzzed in the background. Darkness began to deepen at the edges of his vision. It scratched its way out of the slightly open closet, crawled up from the open shoe cabinet. Oleg's breath froze in his lungs. The air did not move in or out. His heart pounded once. Twice.

'When I came in. The apartment was darkness.'