

PLAN OF THE CITY OF OBLYA



CHAPTER ONE

I checked under my bed, but the monster was gone. It had been gone since morning, when the pink fingers of dawn flushed it back to its favorite hiding place in Rose's garden, spiny tail banded around the trunk of the juniper tree. It would lie there, belly-flat and hissing, until I or one of my sisters went to feed it our leftover chicken bones or give it a rub behind the ears. Of all the creatures that lived in our house, it was the most easily sated.

By evening, the garden was lucent with the speckle of fireflies, rustling with the susurrant of wind through the willow branches, but otherwise quiet and still. From my bedroom I could see the whole brindled sweep of it, the stout, swollen hedges and the ivy that trawled over the rust-checked gate. If anyone in Oblya walked down the road past our house, they might feel green tendrils curl around their ankles, or hear the whisper of ferns through the fence. The pedestrians whispered back: rumors about Zmiy Vashchenko and his three strange daughters.

When I was younger, their mean words made me cry. At twenty-three, I learned to close my ears to them, or even to relish them with a resigned, perverse bitterness, closing my fist around the old hurt. After all, the meaner their words, the better their business. The rumors deposited clients at our doorstep like a cat leaving its mangled prey at the feet of its master. The more jagged and gruesome the rumor's shape, the more our clients gawked at my sisters, as if their beauty were a velvet carpet laid

over a hole in the floor, something that might fall out from under them.

My sisters were beautiful without ruse or artifice, which was my curse, really, not my father's. My father's curse was never to be satisfied with anything, so to him my sisters were beautiful, but not beautiful enough. He had been cursed by Titka Whiskers, the last true witch in Oblya. My father had done all he could to run her out of business, to make himself the last true wizard in the city, so she'd repaid him the only way a witch knew how. Of course, then he *was* the last true wizard in the city, and he wasn't satisfied with that either.

The clock gonged nine. I had heaped old throw pillows and a sack of scrolled autumn leaves under my quilt, molding them to a shape that approximated my sleeping body. Rose had cut a sheaf of dried wheat stalks for my hair, the color slightly too pale, and with none of my real hair's untended frizz. But if, *when*, our father rose from his bed and stumbled half-dreaming past my room, I hoped he would not look closely enough to know the difference. The curse, too, meant he could sleep for hours and hours and still wake with the faint itch of exhaustion under his skin.

Outside, the sky darkened in increments, like an obsidian blade lowering over Oblya's pale throat. The sound of footsteps, quick and light, on the wooden threshold. I turned around. My sister, Undine, stood in the doorway.

"Dear Marlinchen, no one will believe we're anything but witches if you don't put a comb through your hair."

A flush crawled over my cheeks. I left my bed and sat down at my boudoir, scrutinizing my face in the mirror. My sallow cheeks now bore two splotches of red. My hair was a mess of coils that fell as heavy as a quilt over my shoulders.

"I don't know what to do," I said. "It's too long."

All of our hair was too long, and far too long for the current fashion, those slim curls like rolled tobacco that the other

women in Oblya sported. Our father would not let us cut even an inch. The clients, he said, liked that there was something charmingly rustic about us, our untrimmed hair the relic of an older, simpler time. To them we might be sweet singing milkmaids, torn right out of some wealthy man's pale pastoral wallpaper. I did not have a dulcet singing voice, but I smiled at our clients as sweetly as I could.

"Rose," Undine called softly. "Come here and help. Quickly."

My second sister swept through the threshold in a crinoline gown, her bared shoulders as sharp as kitchen knives. She took in my hair, and Undine's angrily flared nostrils, and sighed. Our mother's ivory-handled comb lay on our bureau, a bit of my dark-blond hair snarled in its teeth.

But Rose, being the second sister, was gentler. She began to work through my curls with the comb. The last time anyone had done so was my mother, and that was years ago.

Rose managed to tie up my hair with a ribbon, in some butchered emulation of the Oblyan women's hair. The pink silk ribbon matched my dress, a crinkled cranberry with a neckline low enough to make me blush. Not that it mattered very much. Pinned between my beautiful sisters, I was little more than a piece of furniture, a particularly elaborate candle stand.

The clock gonged ten, and then we were off.

Through the garden, the damp soil sucking at our shoes. Arm in arm, we picked our way past the scrying pool, as bright as a tossed coin, through the thistles with their purple buds, careful to bypass Rose's delicate meshwork of baby's breath and feverfew. The flowering pear tree coughed white petals at us, but all the monsters were cowed or slumbering.

Still, we were quiet. We could not risk waking them, or worse, waking our father. We had risked tiny rebellions before—or at least, Rose and Undine had—but never something so large and

illicit and wrong. This rebellion was like a book with all its pages torn out. I did not know its beginning, middle, or end.

The thought of Papa seeing us made me woozy with dread, and our very own garden began to feel terrible and strange.

To outsiders, it was always terrible and strange, even in the daylight; they were not accustomed to it the way we were. There were the glass apples, which tasted sweet and made you wine-flushed if you could bear to put those hard, sharp bits in your mouth. There were the black amber plums, fat as bruises, which were suffused with a fatal poison. Our father had nurtured an immunity in his daughters by feeding us slivers of the fruit from the time we were infants, and now we could bite into the plums and taste only the tang of their rotted bitterness, not the poison underneath.

But even we were warned never to touch the juniper tree, which bore berries of the most dangerous variety: both poisonous and sweet. Whatever sick thing was in them, we could not be inured to it.

In my twenty-three years, I had seen the garden come to be occupied by a number of other things, and I had come to consider these things *ours*. Our fiery serpent, which looked like a regular snake until it caught the sunlight, and then its black scales glimmered with a flame-bright sheen. It spoke in a human voice, without moving its mouth; the voice seemed to enter your head as if you were the one conjuring its words. It would promise you silken handkerchiefs or ceramic beads, and if you accepted, its gifts would materialize in your hand, spun out of nothing—for a price: the milk from your breast. But even if you paid, in the morning all the gifts would turn to straw and manure. I didn't know what would happen if you asked it for something more than trinkets, or why it would be so terrible to give suck to a serpent. I watched it wind through our garden now like a slick of oil, leaving pale coils of shed skin in its wake.

There was also our goblin, the poor thing, who had lost its home when the Rodinyan land surveyors drained the marshes outside of Oblya. Its single eye shone like a lantern in the dark, its beard as long and white as lichen grown over a log. In its gratitude for our hospitality the goblin had become excessively protective of my sisters and me, and had taken to trying to bite our clients in the ankle when they crossed through the garden into the house. After the goblin cost us a hundred rubles and nearly brought the city's Grand Inspector to our door, my father made sure it was always shut up in the garden shed whenever we had visitors. Last time when I'd gone to let it out, it had already chewed a hole through the wood and was sulking in Rose's bed of tarragon.

We had patched the hole painstakingly, each taking turns keeping an eye out for Papa, and then shut the goblin in again. Undine had wanted to gag it, to make sure its tears didn't wake him, but such a thing felt unspeakably cruel and I managed to convince her out of it. As we passed the shed I heard its cowed whimpering.

My least favorite of all our creatures was Indrik, a bare-chested man with the legs of a faun or a goat. He was forever bemoaning his fate as a refugee, as he had fled the mountain where he'd lived when Rodinyan miners had begun to plumb it for silver. He languished by Undine's scrying pool, mournfully examining his reflection, claiming he'd once been a god and everyone in Oblya had worshipped him. They'd left him offerings of slain geese or painted eggs and their prettiest, bleating ewes—I shuddered to think what he had done with those ewes, given the lustful way he'd eyed our milking cow before she'd died. I didn't know if he'd ever been a god at all, but it was no use trying to argue with him; he would only weep.

To make sure Indrik did not catch us as we left, Rose had fed him a sleeping draught. I saw the blurry shape of him

beneath one of the pear trees, the coiled muscles of his back as huge as boulders. His snoring was a soft whistle, like the train that I could sometimes hear very distantly from my bedroom window.

There were other creatures that I could not name, ones that I could only refer to as monsters. Badger-looking things that snuffled the earth for roots and truffles; spiny-tailed weasels with beady red stares, such as the one that liked to hide under my bed; eyeless ravens that winged blindly through our rhododendrons. They ate the rabbits and squirrels that came to masticate Rose's herbs, so we let them stay, and besides, we didn't know what would happen if we chased them out. There were no stories about these types of monsters, or maybe the stories had been lost. Either way, my sisters and I were all afraid we might wake up cursed just like our father if we did them any harm.

But all precautions had been taken, and none of those creatures were roused tonight. When we reached the gate, Undine swung it open, and we brushed all the dirt from our shoes and the hems of our gowns. Like we were serpents shedding our skin, we swept the mustiness and sorcery of the house off of us.

While I stared down the cobblestone road that unspooled before us, my stomach knotted with fear.

"Come on, Marlinchen," Undine said, looping our elbows and giving me a vicious tug. "We only have a quarter hour."

We sprinted down the street, as quick as our crinolines and corsets would allow. I could feel the cobblestones through the soles of my slippers, all of their hard ridges that seemed to lurch up at me with every step. We passed the day laborers, dull-eyed men slouching toward the brothels and taverns, or back to their apartments above the shops. Whenever their gazes spun toward us, I felt another thread of panic loose in me, but Rose and Undine only pulled me along.

Kanatchikov Street bore us into the city plaza, a glorious facade of buildings that ringed the massive fountain. Dolphins leapt from the stone basin in arrested motion, water shooting from their spouts. A marble sea god sat in his chariot, thick brows drawn over his eyes, frozen and immortal. He was not a god that I recognized from my father's codex; he had vague and hurried features, as if the man who had carved him was trying to remember something that he had seen only once, many years ago.

Oblyans were gathering in the square, women in their puffed-sleeved gowns and men in their top hats, all herding toward the ballet theater like sheep trussed in satin and lace. Their mingling voices had the low tenor of rolling thunder. Pipe smoke rose in greasy clouds. All the smells and sounds pressed in on me, and a gasp came out of my throat.

My sisters had made such trysts before, but I'd never had the courage to join them. Tonight I had been yoked into their rebellion like an ox, intoxicated by the promise of something newer and brighter and better than any of us had ever seen. But now that I was here, everything was too new, too much.

"I don't want to go," I whispered, leaning closer to Rose than to Undine. "I think I've changed my mind."

"Well, it's too late now, isn't it?" Rose gestured vaguely toward the theater, but her voice was not unkind. "There's no one to walk back with you. You'll have to stay." She must have read the horror on my face, so she went on more gently, "Listen, it will be all right. Once we're in our seats—"

"Oh, she's being a baby, as usual," Undine snapped. "She doesn't want to come, but she doesn't want to be left behind."

I bit my lip on a reply; Undine was right. The last time they'd left at night without me, I'd gone paralytic with fear. Although my body had been at home in bed, my mind raced down a thousand dark alleys, wondering what awful fate my sisters were

meeting, or worse, wondering what my father would do if he woke to find them gone. I would have been the only one there to answer to him, to swallow his fury like gulps of seawater and pray I didn't spit them back up again until he had stormed out of my room and slammed the door shut behind him.

Rose had found me asleep under my bed that night, face streaked with salt, our spiny-tailed monster nibbling anxiously at my garter belt.

It was only because of Undine that they'd started leaving at all. A year ago, it had been unthinkable. Our father had barred us from setting foot outside the garden, not with his spells, but with his words and threats. Oblya was as dangerous as a viper pit, he said, and something or someone would snap you up in an instant. I believed him. The men who came to see me, my clients, were frightening even in the safety of our own sitting room.

But all of Undine's clients were half in love with her and went weak-kneed with her every word. And one day one of them had, in lieu of rubles, offered her tickets to see an orchestra play downtown. She had refused at first—or so she said—but the man had insisted. And once the thought of leaving was in her mind, it grew and grew like reaching vines and could not be hacked down.

That first night had planted the same flowering seed in Rose's mind. Their seats, she told me, were in the very back row, so they had to strain to see the stage over a topiary of feathered hats, and the heat of so many bodies had made them both return soaked with sweat, but there was a magic to it all; I could sense that even from a distance. A sly, coaxing magic had drawn my sisters out of their beds at night, reveling in the recklessness of it all, the thousands of possibilities that flitted around them like moths.

For my sisters, it was revelry, or even just the petulant thrill of knowing they had disregarded our father's orders. For me, it

was fear. I did not want to be left behind, not after that one awful night.

So I let Rose and Undine drag me through the crowd, chest heaving beneath my corset. The scents of strangers, sweat and violet perfume, soaked my skin like rainwater. Words poured into my ears.

“. . . found his heart torn out, like someone had plunged a fist into his chest . . .”

“. . . liver gone, too, just empty . . .”

Stomach tensing, I leaned toward Rose again. “What are they talking about?”

“Some nonsense from the penny presses, I’m sure,” she said, eyes trained forward. “The Grand Inspector found two men dead at the boardwalk, and someone started the tale that they’d been killed by a *monster*. More likely they beat each other down in a drunken brawl, or just drank themselves to death, which would explain the comments about the liver. But that doesn’t make as lurid of a story, and it doesn’t sell very many papers.”

I nodded, my belly uncurling just a little bit. Rose seemed to be able to understand things about the world that I could not, even though we were all trapped in the same house, under the same aegis.

She also must have done a good enough job wrangling my hair, because I did not receive any lingering stares. Women’s eyes passed over me and angled toward my sisters with suspicious jealousy. Men’s stares swept past me as well, landing on the cleft of Undine’s breasts or Rose’s bare shoulders. I could see the hunger, but also the guilt running under their gazes, the quiet fettering of desire. They knew anyone who desired a Vashchenko girl was doomed.

More voices swam toward me.

“. . . paid double the price to see him, but I don’t regret it . . .”

“ . . . said it was the best show she’d ever seen—brought tears to her eyes . . . ”

This time, I did not have to ask Rose what they meant. We were here for the same reason as the rest of them. As Undine maneuvered us toward the ticket booth, I drew in a steeling breath. My corset felt strangling-tight. She produced our three tickets and then smiled at the attendant, batting her lashes. I did not know how much they were worth—I hardly knew how many kopeks made a ruble—but judging by the size and eagerness of the crowd, I suspected it was quite a lot. Perhaps this particular client was even more in love with my sister than most.

Two attendants in black velvet bowed to us and pushed open the oaken double doors. Undine and Rose let go of my arms, knowing I had no choice but to follow. I trailed after them, gaze on the ground, my brow shining with sweat, and the ballet theater snatched us up and shut its jaws behind us. Another thread of fear loosed in me. When I raised my head at last, I was dizzy with the lurid brightness.

Volutes of gold clambered up to the domed ceiling like vines wreathing the trunk of a tree. Between each gilded column were a dozen seats, upholstered in crimson velvet. The chandelier whirled gently with candlelight, each flame glinting like a knife-point. The ceiling was one sprawling fresco, painted the pale blue of the sky in earliest spring. Satyrs—which remarkably resembled Indrik—chased bare-chested nymphs across it, and burly men lounged on riverbanks, wearing nothing but laurel crowns. A flush prickled my face.

In the time I’d spent staring at the ceiling, I’d nearly lost Rose and Undine. I followed the bright pearl of Undine’s blond head and caught up with them as they were sliding into their seats. My throat was dry with anxious embarrassment.

"I think they recognized you," I told Undine in a whisper. "The ticket attendant, the men in line—"

"Well, of course they would recognize me," Undine said briskly. "But they won't tell Papa. They know they'd never get to see me again if they did."

On my other side, Rose let out a low, laughing breath. She was my ally in exasperation at Undine's vanity, and she showed her chagrin more openly than I ever dared. Luckily, Undine was usually too preoccupied with herself to notice.

More whispers started. The voice of a silver-haired woman in the row behind lisped past my ear.

"They say his rib cage was crumpled like a sunken roof. They say his eyes had been plucked out and replaced with plum stones."

I whipped my head around, and immediately Undine slapped my arm. The effect was so instant that I thought my body had punished itself; who else but me could be so in tune with my own aberrations? Undine's blue eyes were thin.

"Don't," she snarled. "It's rude to eavesdrop, especially *here*. You really don't know anything about the world, do you, Marlinchen?"

I couldn't tell if by *here* she meant the ballet theater, or if she meant Oblya as a whole, the huge, gray sprawl of the city outside our garden walls. In the theater we were hemmed in by the men and women of the upper curia, as colorful as candied fruits in their silks and satins; outside in the streets we were surrounded by drunken day laborers, with their fox-lean faces and their loose, fat lips. I did not know which was worse. I raised my shoulders and sunk down in my seat. Rose was thumbing through a pamphlet, each page embossed in gold.

"They're doing *Bogatyr Ivan*," Rose said. "They must do it every night. If Papa knew that, he'd have one of his fits."

I cringed at the thought. *Bogatyr Ivan* was Oblya's most famous ballet, and it was a corrupted version of one of the stories in our father's codex, transfigured by Rodinyan influence and otherwise eroded by time. The titular Ivan had gone from steppe warrior to saint, and his bride had gone from chieftain's daughter to tsarevna, and any number of other small changes had turned the story into something else, something that was scarcely recognizable to me.

But it pleased the Oblyans, and, more important, the Rodinyans. These newcomers arrived waving the tsar's banners, talking of things like *land development* and *city planning*, or else under the emblems of private companies who squeezed every drop from Oblya's day laborers and then vanished, only to be replaced by other men, under different emblems but with the same goal of bleeding the city dry. They were the reason Oblya's port bustled with trade from the east, and the reason why our streets were laid out as neatly as wheel spokes. I did not think much of them, except that when they came to our gate, our father instructed us to ignore them until they left.

But now the theater was packed elbow to elbow to see one Rodinyan incomer grace the stage. I peered over Rose's shoulder at the pamphlet, searching for his name, like I might glean something important from the particular arrangement of the letters. Her finger went up and down the page, skimming his biography.

"They say he's the youngest principal dancer in any Rodinyan ballet company, *ever*," she said. "Only twenty-one. That's so sad, isn't it?"

"Why is it sad?"

"Because," she said, "what do you do when you're twenty-one and you've already achieved everything that most people can only dream of? You have the rest of your life in front of you, but nowhere else to go."

I felt sorry, somehow, that I had asked.

Before I could say another word, the orchestra warbled out its opening notes and the velvet curtains parted and the whispers around me went silent, all eyes drawn toward the single light onstage, round like a rime of ice. Cellos sang languidly under the trilling of flutes and oboes.

I had never seen *Bogatyr Ivan* with my sisters before, so I could not anticipate the crescendos and decrescendos and when the snare drum would kick in or when the harp would add its sultry voice. With every unfamiliar beat I felt something plucking at me like a string, my bones rattling, my blood singing. I knew the vague shape of the story, but the music added something new to it, something that made it almost too big for my eyes to hold. The first ballerinas flurried across the stage, like snow drifts in their white tulle. Male dancers in red bounded after them; they were the Dragon-Tsar's animate flames.

The ballerinas swooned dramatically. I knew from the story in Papa's codex that they were the spirits of ice, of pure virginal frost, of Oblya's land before the conquerors came to burn and spoil it. Blackclad, the Dragon-Tsar mimed laughing as the cellos droned gravely. I knew, too, that eventually Ivan would enter, clumsy and swordless, just a farmer's son and a peasant until he became a warrior—and, in this version, as the pamphlet's synopsis had told me, a saint. There were no saints in Papa's version of the story, but there was always Ivan.

Though I had spent so many years conjuring an image of Ivan in my mind, I was not prepared to see him now: black hair streaming, chest bare where his shabby jacket parted. As soon as he was there under the lights, it was impossible to look anywhere else. It was impossible not to follow his path across the stage. In his presence, the flame-men wilted like cut roses. The snow-women stirred, silver faces brightening with nascent hope.

He stumbled past them to the Dragon-Tsar; even his floundering was graceful.

The Dragon-Tsar reared, as if to strike him down, and then the pretty tsarevna danced between them, pleading with her father while Ivan retreated and the snow-women simpered. The Dragon-Tsar swept offstage with his flame-men, leaving Ivan and the tsarevna to circle each other like hesitant wolves.

Ivan's threadbare shirt tumbled off his shoulders, and in that moment I felt as if all the audience was holding the same long breath. Sevastyan Rezkin was so lovely under the livid candlelight that I had to force myself to exhale.

My eyes traced the delicately corded muscles down his abdomen and along his thighs. He took the tsarevna's hand and kissed it. Her movements seemed somehow clumsy next to his, as if she were counting the steps in her head. Sevastyan's steps were as fluid as a spill of water, as though he could not imagine moving in any other manner. He lifted the tsarevna's leg. Her fingers stroked along his face.

I felt like a voyeur, like some uncouth intruder witnessing a tender miracle not meant for my eyes. I felt the same way I did when I watched the gulls and cormorants arc from the pier over our rooftop, embarrassed of my own heavy, flightless body.

His knee parted the tsarevna's thighs, and I blushed so profusely I knew Undine would mock me for it, if she had been looking at all. But every face in the theater was turned toward Sevastyan. He was the beacon of a hundred unblinking stares.

Whatever my sister's suitor had paid for the tickets, I would have paid double. Triple. For the first time I began to understand Undine's and Rose's reckless desire, the thrill of possibility that drew them out of their beds at night, shucking our father's dire warnings.

My fingers curled into a fist in my skirts, and I did not unclench them until the final act, when Ivan emerged as a saint. Sevastyan

was bare-chested again, wearing only thin nude stockings that he looked like he had been poured into, for all the modesty they afforded him. His chest was leafed in gold, whorls of gilded paint that crawled up his throat and spiraled onto his cheeks. Even his lashes were daggered with false pearls. Over his shoulders he wore a winged mantle, white feathers ruffling with his twirls and leaps.

I could not fathom how he spread his legs so wide, or how he jumped so high, or how he didn't crumple with the shudder of inertia when he landed again. As the music quavered to its end and Sevastyan and the tsarevna bowed, half the theater lurched to its feet at once, thunderous with applause. Several of the women around me were weeping, kohl tracked down their pink faces.

"I *told* you," Undine said as she hauled me out of my seat. Even her voice was breathy, her blinks too quick. "It was worth it, wasn't it?"

But the curtains had closed, erasing Sevastyan from view, and I felt as though I had been left unanchored, adrift in the sea of voices. The noise was pressing into me and the heat of all the warm bodies was making my head swim. The air tasted sour with so many tittered words. And once again I could scarcely breathe, like some hot, invisible hand was closing around my throat.

Faces pinwheeled past me. I could not tell the wolves from the sheep.

"I have to go," I managed, jerking my hand from Undine's grasp. My voice sounded like it had been wrung from wet cloth. "I have to get out of here."

Rose made a garbled protest as I pushed past her, but I did not stop. My steps fell clumsily on the red carpet. I could hear the rustling of silk as the audience members shuffled from their seats, though a haze had fallen over my eyes, and everything

looked as bleary as the grass covered in morning dew. By some gift of mad, manic instinct, I found a side door by the left of the stage and barreled through it, gasping as I tumbled out into the cold blue night.

Relief felt like the snapping of a thread. I leaned back against the side of the building, my forehead damp with a cool sweat. My hair had come loose from Rose's pink ribbon and fell in coils all over my face. I brushed it back as best I could, fingertips buzzing.

The alley stretched out to either side of me, boundless and black. Overhead, the stars were smog-veiled, and the only light was leaking through the windows of the ballet theater, a pale yellow film. It had only just occurred to me to be afraid when the door swung open, and someone else staggered out.

The man was doubled over, one arm bent across his abdomen. With the other hand, he braced himself against the wall, turned away from me, coughing and spluttering.

"Are you all right?" It was all I could think to say. Reeling, my mind still addled with its ebbing panic, I picked my way toward him and leaned down to examine his face. "Sir, are you ill?"

He retched, sick splattering the cobblestones and the hem of my skirt. I was so well accustomed to the sight and sound and smell of vomit that I didn't flinch. Instead I leaned closer, squinting at the man's face in the dark.

"Sir, please," I said. "You're ill. I'm no healer, but I can fetch my sister—"

He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and looked up at me. The curve of his cheek caught the light, and I froze like a rabbit mid-leap. I was staring into the misty blue eyes of Sevastyan Rezkin.

A white silk blouse had been pulled haphazardly over his shoulders, but it was sagging open at the chest. I could see the gold paint flaking off his skin, off his cheeks, smeared where

he'd rubbed at his mouth. A single white feather drifted from his black hair.

I mumbled something that was unintelligible, even to my own ears. Sevastyan held my gaze, eyes wavering. The whites of them were cracked through with red. I remembered his soft and graceful landings, the way his thighs tensed beneath his tights, the way his hips had pressed taut to the tsarevna's, and my face went torridly hot.

His lashes fluttered with their false pearls, a fringed shadow over his sharp cheekbones. His skin was as pale and unblemished as the ivory handle of my mother's comb, smoothed by so much time spent in my or my sisters' hands. Thinking of it only made me blush further.

Even now, sweat-dewed and smelling of sick, he was so beautiful I couldn't look away.

Before either of us could speak, the door swung open again. Another dancer, sandy-haired, still wearing his flame-red blouse and tights, burst through and sighed. His breath was a white cloud in the cold. He looked between Sevastyan and me and folded his arms across his chest.

"Come on, Sevas," he said wearily. "Derkach is looking for you."

Sevastyan stood up, wincing and holding his side. "Lyoshka," he mumbled. "My hero."

Sighing again, the other dancer took him by the arm and began to lead him toward the door. Sevastyan's gait was unsteady; all his steps lurched sharply toward the left.

"Wait," I said. My voice sounded too loud, as discordant as a gull's cry. "You can't—he's very ill."

The other dancer—Aleksei—paused and turned. The corners of his mouth quivered, and I could not tell if he meant to smile or to frown.

"He's not sick," he said. "Well, I suppose he *is*, but there's nothing you or I can do for him, miss. In an hour, he'll vomit up

another half a liter of vodka and then fall asleep, and his body will punish him in the morning.”

With that, he took Sevastyan through the door, and they both vanished as it swung shut. Several moments passed before I could bring myself to move again, my own belly churning like laundry in a washtub.

Undine scowled and slapped my arm when I found them; Rose sighed and smoothed back the curls from my face. I did not tell either of them about my encounter with Sevastyan—I could still hardly convince myself that it was real.

As we hurried down Kanatchikov Street, I trained my gaze on the stained hem of my dress, the splattered toe of my slipper. My mind kept circling back to Sevastyan’s damp, shining face and his bright, quivering blue eyes. The whites of them were split like hairline fractures in Papa’s good porcelain. I could not fathom how he had managed to dance like that after half a liter of vodka; perhaps Aleksei had exaggerated. I’d never had a sip of vodka myself. Maybe a liter was hardly anything at all, just a little blurring at the corners of your vision.

I told myself that, but I didn’t really believe it. When we came to the gate, it unlatched for us so easily, without a sound, that I was astonished. It was like a wanting mouth, eager to swallow us back down. The goblin had ceased his whimpering. Indrik still slept. The eyeless ravens had not stirred from their perch.

My mind should have been spinning out like a compass point, fear turning me manic and unmoored. Yet the walk back through the garden passed me by almost obliviously. I was focused only on Sevastyan. All other thoughts had been momentarily evicted. It was as though I had forgotten how to even feel afraid.

Was this the magic that kept pulling my sisters out of the house? In that moment it seemed almost as strong as Papa’s

spellwork. The city was a song that crooned unceasingly in my ear, and if my mind was a compass, Sevastyan's face was true north.

Back in my room, I removed my dress and unlaced my corset, fingers trembling. I extracted all the dead leaves and wheat stalks from my sheets and tucked them under my bed, where the monster was snoring softly. When it was sleeping like that, I could not see the red ovals of its eyes.

They say his eyes had been plucked out and replaced with plum stones.

My teeth came together with an audible click. Lurid tales from the penny presses, nothing more. That I could let myself believe; Rose's assurances were as easy to swallow as cool stream water. The only monsters left in Oblya lived here, under my bed or in our garden, and none of them had any lust for human flesh. All *those* sorts of monsters had died out long ago.

I climbed into bed and pulled the quilt up to my chin. I had expected my limbs to feel heavy with exhaustion after our nightly sojourn, solid, weighty relief lowering my eyelids. Yet my legs felt light and delightfully cold with the memory of the frigid outside air.

I could not sleep. I could only think of Sevastyan, his naked chest daubed in gold. My mind wandered back through the garden, down the dark streets, and into the alleyway again, to where I had stared at his sweat-slick face in the pallid light.

I thought of him, and my fingers slipped between my thighs. As I stroked myself, I bit down hard on my pillow, so that I would not risk making a sound.