

18+

A detailed illustration of a mouse with brown and tan fur, large black eyes, and prominent whiskers. The mouse is perched on a dark, textured branch. Below the mouse is a large, vibrant red rose with many layers of petals. The background is a soft, ethereal landscape with a greenish-blue sky and a white, misty ground. The entire scene is framed by a decorative, ornate border with a repeating pattern.

Werecat Choice

Enrike Fluence

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Werecat Choice

«Издательские решения»

Fluence E.

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Marianne learns that she is the bearer of the Beast in her blood. He is a werewolf, and the hunt has already begun for him. Going on an exciting journey through the snow-covered country of werewolves, Marianne does not even know who she will meet on her way and what to experience, what choice to make. What if this is where he meets true love?

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Содержание

Enrike Fluence	6
Werecat's Choice	7
Chapter 1. What is hidden inside	8
Chapter 2. Dead Man's Refuge	12
Chapter 3. Mignis	14
Chapter 4. Dark Energy	18
Chapter 5. Pursuit	22
Chapter 6. Ice Lake	25
Chapter 7. Who's here?	32
Chapter 8. Trap	40
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	44

Werecat Choice

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Enrike Fluence

Werecat's Choice

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Each person is beautiful in their own way, but seeing this is akin to art

Enrike Fluence

When I close my eyes, I see a red rose in the snow. Is it a rose? And also a beautiful bud covered with frost. A flower unknown to me, but very beautiful. I look at him and feel a rush of blood and warmth in my chest, near my heart. An unusual feeling. The contemplation of this flower excites me and warms me. I cannot let it freeze, turn into a fragile ice block of sharp ice.

Unearthly wonder at my feet, and another miracle of going on inside me.

In spite of winter
Grow out of the heart
Butterfly wings
Basho

Chapter 1. What is hidden inside

He walked over to the ajar door and froze on the threshold.

– Ah, Marianne Benton! Come on in, young man. Have a seat. We will have a serious conversation. Close the door behind you. And unfortunately, bad news awaits you.

Marianne closed the door, walked over and sat down on the indicated chair. If at first, when he was summoned to Director Defoster's office, Marianne was surprised and wondered on the way what the reason for his visit was, now he felt uneasy. And the next words of the director were stunned.

– Tell me, have you had nightmares in recent days?

Marianne looked straight into the headmaster's eyes. But he didn't ask. He knew.

“You've never seen such nightmares before, and they scare you a lot. Something huge bursts out inside you, but does not find a way out. It almost chokes you and breaks your heart.

Marianne opened his mouth in amazement. That was exactly what he had dreamed the night before last. This is what prevented sleep today. Marianne woke up drenched in sweat, it was hot and stuffy. And most of all I was afraid of fear, which came from nowhere. He did not fall asleep again and lay in bed until morning with his eyes open, fearing the return of an incomprehensible feeling. “Does the director want to ask me about my dreams?”

Defoster ran his hand over his long gray beard and, not taking his keen eyes off the young man, said:

– The reason for these dreams lies in you. These are your muscle cells. Now they begin to behave differently. They begin to “develop” in a different way.

Marianne did not understand what the director was talking about. In the last physical education lesson, he did not really lean on simulators. He played football with his classmates. Most likely, this was one of the useless lessons in the cognitive sphere, but the most anticipated one. On it one could fool around a lot without fear of getting a reprimand.

Marianne looked at the director incredulously.

– Is there something wrong with my muscles? Marianne asked.

– Right. They have a property that is actively developing now. It is rare... Oh, I guess I am speaking in very complex formulations?

Principal Defoster cleared his throat before unleashing a frightening truth on the student:

– You're a werewolf, Marianne! There is “It” in your blood. I can't say exactly when you will feel the call of a predator, but it will definitely happen.

“What's in my blood, Director Defoster?”

“Ah... We call it the” hidden beast. “Sorry for such a terrible name, but this is what it is called in our area. I see fear in your eyes. But that's not what you're worried about right now.

– Director, director Defos ... – Marianne hesitated for a moment, but then quickly spoke in a frightened whisper: – Are you sure? Are you wrong? Or was someone wrong? I've never heard anything like this about the Beast and about werewolves. And no one at school. After all, these are fairy tales. And we have not even studied them yet in the lessons of mythology or history...

“That's right,” Headmaster Defoster replied gravely, pausing to peer at the young man through his old-fashioned glasses. “Still, I ask you to listen to me and not interrupt until I'm finished. Do you remember the medical examination a week ago in the city of Svenstap? All classes went there. And your blood test showed antibodies to the hidden beast. While the body is still fighting. But sooner or later the hidden will prevail over the person in you. Above a sweet and ordinary young man, whom I now see in front of me. And when this happens, you must be ready and know how to save yourself and your mind. Otherwise, the werewolf might just ruin you.

You need to prepare yourself, take a course of special physical and psychological lessons. They really help. The fact is that you are not the first student in our school to have antibodies to the “hidden

beast” found in their blood. Therefore, I know what you need to do. Promise me that you will do whatever I say now. Can you promise me this, Marianne?

Marianne said yes, barely audibly. His thoughts were confused, and he said what the teacher wanted from him, without thinking about the assigned responsibility.

– First, give me your phone. You won’t need it, at least not for a while. He’s putting you at risk now. After all, by it you can easily find you.

– Director Defoster, but who needs to look for me? And I have all the numbers on my phone...

“You’re an orphan, Marianne. Like almost all students in my school. Therefore, I am not just responsible for you. I feel like your guardian. Unfortunately, I cannot protect you here. You need to hide somewhere else.

The director held out his hand, palm up, and looked sternly at Marianne. He obeyed. As soon as the fashionable thin iPhone fell into the palm of the director, he hastily put it into a drawer.

– Great, that will give a little more time. Having a phone in my office will show the persecutors that you are still in school. Perhaps you remember the Aalborg screening committee? She inspected our school a year ago. In fact, they weren’t interested in exam tests and educational programs. They look for young people like you and take them with them. Nobody ever hears about them afterwards. These young people just disappear. Even in social networks there is not a word about them. Also, their data disappears in the health insurance system. That blood test you took a week ago... They already know the results. I have my source at the hospital. And I just spoke to him on the phone. He never let me down.

– Why? Who are they”? Why are they doing this?

“This is a very ancient and secret Order. His power is great. Neither the police nor anyone else will help here. Until you know them under the name “Olburgsky Tribunal”. That’s enough for now. You can find out the rest later.

“But how, Director Defoster, do you know this? Maybe everything will be okay with me?

“There is no doubt about what I have told you. Otherwise, this conversation would not have happened.

– What about you and the other students? What will become of you?

– Don’t worry about this. St. Elvis’s School protects its students. You are in danger for now. Your departure will not change anything, either inside or outside the school.

The director’s words sounded convincing and firm as always. Marianne doubted the director was right. I really wanted everything I heard to be untrue, some ridiculous mistake. But the nightmares went beyond mere dreams. He remembered them and was afraid.

“Before these people come for you, you will leave the school building. And they will come very soon. There is one sure place where they will be waiting for you. The director lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper. To hear him, Marianne had to lean forward. “Almost no one knows about him. It is not on modern maps. It is called Wolf Mountain. You will go straight north. The journey will take several days. Someone managed to walk without preparation in a week. You have to handle it. Wolf Mountain is not to be confused. It is the highest and largest peak in the northern rims. The forest that covers it has a special power for werewolves and a scent. You will recognize her immediately, the blood will tell you. This place is the only salvation for you. Please forget your past. Now everything that connects you to him is more dangerous than important. Big changes await you.

Suddenly Marianne perked up in his chair and pressed his hand to his pocket. He heard a quiet familiar sound. His phone ringtone. But a second later I remembered that the iPhone was no longer in its usual place – in my pocket. A muffled sound came from the director’s desk.

Only now Marianne thought that he did not want to leave the familiar, reliable and carefree world of school life, and also because of friends. He did not want to leave them. Even Junia Claire – a girl from a parallel class – seemed now a kind and welcome embodiment of his world. He somehow pushed her in physical education, but instead of reprimanding him, he heard only a mischievous

laugh. Marianne looked into her eyes in surprise and realized that he clearly underestimated her. She was different from her classmates. Not so important and pompous. Cheerful and kind. Then she seemed friendly to him, after he realized that he really liked her. You might have been able to ask her out on a date in your next PE class, but it certainly won't. His thoughts were interrupted by the director's voice.

"You must go," he said, getting up from his seat. Marianne was already heading for the door when the director called out to him.

"Not through this door.

Marianne turned in amazement and saw that the director was waiting for him at the open door to the next room.

– Ah... I thought I needed to pack my things? – He agreed to leave the school, but without his things?

– I've already collected everything you need. Please come in.

Marianne has never been in this room. Private quarters of the head of the school. In the semi-dark room, a curtained square of the window was guessed. The director walked quickly into the darkness and after a short rustle opened a small door. Marianne obediently followed the director through it and found himself on the dimly lit narrow staircase of an abandoned tower. There were few people walking at all, since this staircase was removed from the classrooms. Ahead came the hunched figure of the director. Now to Marianne she looked old and feeble. He never perceived the director as a person with weaknesses. He was a symbol of the confidence and wisdom of the school. All his students, without exception, were afraid of him. And now, seeing the head of the educational institution hurrying up the steps, quacking and touching the wall with his hand, Marianne felt compassion. Before him was a feeble old man.

The staircase ended and they walked down a dark basement corridor. The director illuminated the way with his telephone flashlight. And Marianne was jealous that someone had a phone, but now he does not. At the end of the corridor, Director Defoster pushed the door open and it opened. Marianne wondered that the school doors were not locked. Even one that no one knows about. Coolness and evening freshness blew from the street. Marianne took the warm jacket handed to him. Standard school outerwear. Immediately near the door, a flashlight illuminated a small bedside table and several pairs of warm shoes. Marianne changed his shoes. The director put a hat on his head and held out a small but heavy backpack.

– Take care of the food. There are many things you can't take with you. You have to move fast. It should be enough for a week if spent wisely. And this, – the director held out a small glass bottle, – take one sip every evening. This herbal tincture will help you survive the transformation and soothe your sleep.

Marianne wanted to ask what the transformation was and when he would see the director again, but his tongue stuck to his throat. The feeling of parting squeezed my heart. Always so domineering and distant, the director now took care of him.

Defoster squeezed his shoulder and said wearily:

– Go. And one last word of advice, Marianne. Try to be always human! Good luck.

Marianne walked quickly away without turning around. North, he said to himself. He, as if intoxicated, could not ponder, appreciate everything that he learned. A narrow path had been trodden from the back door. She turned right and led along the walls. But Marianne went ahead. He jumped down the slope, fell into a snowdrift. I got out and wandered north, knee-deep in snow. Marianne was breathing heavily, but he could have sworn he heard the door creaking shut behind him.

Oh, how familiar this sound seemed! Marianne glanced back, but the director, the path, and the door could no longer be seen. Just old school walls and a dozen lighted windows. The castle that remains behind has never so attracted with its warmth and comfort. Why was it a hundred times harder to take every step right now? A week ago, Marianne could easily leave the walls of the school

and would not even be upset about it. And now it was more difficult. The corridors and staircases of the cramped small castle, immersed in the orange twilight (now such homely), came to mind. Even in the days of the knights, the offspring of noble families, and maybe even kings, lived here. But now this is no longer recognizable. There will be no more lessons on the history of the native land. The blue light of the small windows melted in the air and did not touch the snow. The lamps remained there, high above the peacefully sleeping ground. This is how this light does not see the velvety smooth surface of freshly fallen snow, so Marianne no longer sees herself in the castle. Somewhere up there, by one of these windows, Junia Claire is now sitting doing her homework.

Something trembled inside, taut, as if wanting to stay, but his legs carried him forward. Thoughts about the time spent at school became a sweet memory, and friends became a big and significant event in life, even if he studied here for less than a year. His heart felt big and hot as never before. This feeling gave strength and

confidence on an uncharted path. The hope and thoughts that he would return someday were inspiring. Even if this is only a pipe dream, an illusion, it is so necessary now.

Chapter 2. Dead Man's Refuge

Marianne did not notice the cold. The strong gust of wind felt like a light breeze on a hot day. Probably half of the werewolf imperceptibly took over the human. He did not even think that something was wrong with him, that something was changing, mutating in his body. Although, having been alone with yourself, running away from your past and from yourself as you knew yourself, you will involuntarily begin to reflect on the most terrible and impossible. And now Marianne thought of himself. About what kind of monster he can become, what will change in him.

He didn't feel sick or tired now. Rather the opposite. But he attributed the lack of loss of strength from a long journey to an emotional upsurge, and at first he did not think about it at all.

So the first hour passed. Wandering in the forest and in his thoughts, he did not notice the increased physical strength, although he walked straight ahead, on impassable roads and without special equipment. This path will exhaust anyone.

And Marianne easily overcame uneven slopes and ascents. Sometimes deep pits and bumps, tree roots or frozen bushes appeared under the snow. Stumbling, losing a step, falling into deep snow, the young man walked forward.

The snow crammed into his shoes, melted and now gave Marianne unpleasant sensations. He stopped twice, leaned against a tree and hurriedly shook the ice out of his shoes. But my legs only became even more chilled. Annoyed Marianne began to think about a warm shelter, where you can warm up and dry your feet. Fatigue nevertheless crept up and began to shackle the body. Now Marianne was looking both ways, trying to listen and wondering where to hide for the rest of the night. There were only dense forest and snow around.

Twice he distinctly heard footsteps behind him and another rustling sound. And the second time is very close. Anxious Marianne immediately looked around, but saw no one. He was still here alone.

There were no indentations from footprints on the velvet smooth surface of the snow. Only those that he left. Between the trees, the figure of a pursuer or a wild beast could not be discerned. It seemed that there was no one but the only traveler in the whole area. "So it seemed to me."

Marianne continued to walk forward, blaming his fears on the rustle of his clothes and the echo of his own breathing. Suddenly a shadow slid along the ground on the right hand, overtook Marianne by several steps, but then just as quickly darted back and disappeared.

Marianne was frightened. Shadow? The moon has not been shown for a long time. Not a single star is visible overhead. Twilight reigned everywhere. Then what is it? And this time it was seen? Marianne immediately stopped, looked around more attentively, with suspicion of everything he could see. Something or someone was or was near. It should be here. There is no doubt about it this time. And it is now invisible, perhaps lurking among the black tree trunks. It followed Marianne for a long time, because the first time he heard an extraneous sound half an hour earlier.

– Who's here? Marianne asked loudly, trying to firm up his voice. But the sound of his own speech seemed uncertain.

Silence and loneliness suddenly surged in a wave. Fear was born in the lower abdomen, so light and weak that it could be mistaken for anxiety. And all around, it seemed, there was only an indifferent winter landscape.

Marianne hurried away. You need to leave this place as soon as possible. Ahead, the trees thinned and opened up a spacious lawn. Marianne headed there.

Twenty steps later, the trees parted, and behind them was a steep descent. Blue immense clouds hung low above the ground, sheltering the fantastic landscape from the silver light of the Moon. The cozy valley seemed to be a reflection of the shadows of the wavy sky. Underfoot in the twilight was a perfectly flat curve of the railway. A little to the left was a small yellow light. Marianne looked closer

and recognized the house almost covered with snow to the very roof. He must have been standing right next to the tracks.

Marianne decided not to waste time on a detour, but to go down the mountain here.

He stepped carefully onto the snowy slope. Another step, and Marianne lost her footing. The snow was slipping from under my feet. Falling and tumbling down the slope, Marianne rolled down. A few seconds of falling – and he felt a blow from his shoulder to the ground. In addition, the top was covered with a dense snowdrift. Unwittingly, he caused a mini-avalanche, disturbing the loose and unreliable snow of the slope, and now scolded himself for indiscretion.

Out of breath, Marianne, lost in direction, with sticky snow behind the collar and on his face, stood up on his throbbing legs. But he was stuck up to his waist in a loose snowdrift. My shoulder ached. After a dizzying descent, it took a while to recover. The rumble in my ears subsided. The cackling of anxious birds spread in the sky. There was anxiety and anxiety in him. Marianne himself has not yet seen a single night bird in this forest. Maybe it just seems to him? The unnaturally ringing clatter of hooves overlapped a displeased croak. He was walking right up to Marianne. No! It is a metallic rumble, frequent and sonorous. A second ago, barely perceptible, now he stood up as a loud curtain, an impenetrable wall for other sounds. A bright light emerged from the darkness, hit me in the eyes. Marianne, unable to escape, fell into a snowdrift again and, floundering in the snow, saw danger. He lay very close to the rails. Just a couple of meters and it would all be over. The train roared past with a roar, lifted up a whirlwind of small, sharp snowflakes and hit Marianne with a gust of wind. The iron giant had already fled far away before the youth could see it.

Something made me look up. And his breath stopped. Above him, at the very top of the hill from which he had just rolled, a black figure could be seen. Immobile. Surely this one was looking at him.

Marianne hastened to get out of here as quickly as possible. Having got out of the snow onto the rails, I again noticed a dim light of light in the distance, and now I was almost running towards it as fast as I could, turning around every ten to twenty meters. But I saw no one behind.

Chapter 3. Mignis

Marianne knocked on the heavy door. The knock was muffled. Marianne took off his mitten and knocked again. His knuckles ached, but this time the knock was louder. No sound came from behind the door. The young man pushed the door, and it yielded.

– Is anybody here? Marianne asked. There was no answer. Then he cautiously went inside and looked around. There was no one in the house, but the burning lamp was alarming. “Someone lit it.”

The room was small. Unpretentious furniture made of rough boards: table, bench. Marianne closed the door behind him.

A mouse sat behind the leg of the bench and looked at the guest. Black eyes gleamed from the lamp. And when this only inhabitant of the house noticed that they were looking at him, he immediately began to scratch behind his ears, rub his face and, in general, show with all his appearance that he did not care about the guest.

The lamp stood at the edge of the table. She flickered with a yellow light in the window. The light from the lamp itself was barely enough for half a room. It was cold in the house. The hearth stood out as a blackened spot against the wall. Logs lay near the hearth. One fell under Marianne’s foot as he came closer. Wood chips were scattered across the floor. The young man looked under the bench: the mouse was no longer there. Marianne looked around for a match, but in vain. He threw off his backpack and in a small side pocket immediately found what he was looking for. Lighter. He bent down for the chips, and a couple of minutes later cheerful tongues of flame danced in the hearth. First, Marianne warmed his hands by the fire, then looked around again. The room looked a little better. In the far corner, the darkness dissipated, revealing a shabby, dirty chest and a wad of rags.

The house looked abandoned, but there was no better place to wait out the night. There was only one room in the house, and not a soul. “Where is the one who lit the lamp?” Now this question worried the young man most of all.

Marianne sat down on the bench and put the mittens beside him. The dust on the table was disturbed. The marks of small paws and thin grooves were clearly visible near the lamp itself and on the edge of the table by the bench.

The mouse slowly crawled out, carefully treading with its paws. She picked up her tail and climbed onto the bench with lightning speed. She was not afraid of the person and behaved quite confidently. As a hostess. Marianne recoiled at first from the dark woolen ball, but then saw in it a mouse and calmed down. And she looked attentively with her eyes, in which the light of the lamp walked with sharp sparks, and moved menacingly towards the mittens. Marianne found this scene comical. After all, the mouse was very small.

Suddenly, a faint, thin voice, like the creak of old door hinges, said:

– Paul, by the way, is cold! Move over and don’t crush me inadvertently!

– What? – From surprise Marianne nearly fell off the bench.

– Winter outside, as you can see. You didn’t think that I would sleep in an ice-covered hole, did you?

Marianne instinctively wanted to grab the mittens, his hand was already reaching for them, but he thought that the beast might bite, and withdrew his hand. The mouse settled comfortably on the mitten and froze. From such insolence, Marianne was speechless. He wanted to object to something, but there was no limit to the surprise at what the mouse was saying. Marianne could only open his mouth.

– Have you ever seen talking mice? Asked a faint, quiet, thin voice. “Does she also read thoughts?”

Marianne said doubtfully somewhere into the room:

– You say?

And, to my surprise, I heard the answer in the same thin voice:

– Who’s talking? What does he say?

– Can you talk? You’re a mouse! – Marianne expressed his thoughts aloud.

– Mouse, mouse! The mouse undoubtedly said with feeling. – No respect, no courtesy. By the way, I have a name! Mignis. And I don’t remember being called a mouse.

Mignis drilled her guest with beady eyes, stopped rubbing her nose with her paws. Marianne burned with curiosity, looked at the mouse with an open mouth, bent over and hunched over, trying to see it better, but kept his distance from the unusual rodent.

“What if he still bites? Doesn’t all this seem to me?”

– What surprises you?

– No, nothing ... – Marianne lied.

– What is your name? The mouse asked.

– M-marianne, – answered the young man, and he himself thought, is it really all this happening to him or is he dreaming? “Maybe I’m dreaming?”

“Mimariann,” the mouse repeated quietly under her breath. Probably to remember.

– Marianne! He said more confidently. – Not “mi”, but “ma”.

Mignis ignored the comments and squeaked:

– Move the lamp to the edge of the table. It will be warmer.

Marianne obeyed, though he doubted it would make it warmer. The mouse seemed to be sulking at him.

He felt disposed towards the mouse. She was small, but rather brave. Talking to a person bigger than you, with a stranger! How would Marianne feel if he were in her place?

– Tell me, Mignis, who else is here?

The mouse looked at Marianne and hesitated to answer, as if pondering what to say.

– You see that only we are in the house?

“Who lit the lamp, Mignis?”

“Yes, Mignis,” said the mouse. Marianne did not understand the answer.

– So someone is about to return? Probably gone to get some brushwood or water?

Mignis looked at the door.

– If anyone comes, then Yakov. Now is the time for him to appear.

– Who? Who?

– Jacob. The old hunter. – The mouse turned its nose to Marianne. “He comes almost every night if the lamp is lit. Somewhere in this hour.

Mignis looked at the wall. A dusty clock hung there. They seem to have stopped long ago. The hands froze at five to eleven.

“So you’re not alone here. Does Jacob live here?”

“No,” the mouse answered shortly. – Does not live.

Marianne thought Mignis was not that talkative.

– Maybe it’s coming to light? Or can’t find the way without it? A thought struck Marianne. – So he wanders around here?

The mouse didn’t answer. She wiggled her mustache listlessly. She seemed to doze off. Marianne looked at the mouse for a minute and said quietly:

– I saw someone here. I couldn’t really see it myself. “And I thought to myself: “Is this old man sane? And then, the mouse called him a hunter. This means that he knows everything in the neighborhood like the back of his hand. Maybe ask him about Wolf Mountain? Or at least the direction to the north.”

The door trembled, the window pane creaked in the wind. It probably would have rang if it was not almost completely covered by snow. There was a heavy, muffled knock on the door and a knock on the threshold outside. Marianne froze in place with horror. A figure seeped through the door, huge

and broad-shouldered, gloomy, like a transparent shadow. The ghost was tall, dressed in a fur coat, and this made him look shaggy. He moved silently around the room, ignoring Marianne. The ghost swam through the air through the room and froze, bending over the chest. As if tormented by his thoughts, it stood like that for a minute. Marianne was afraid to move, where to run. Numbness and terror seized him. Goosebumps ran down my skin, my blood froze in my veins.

Mignis did not react in any way to the appearance of another guest.

Suddenly the ghost turned to Marianne and looked at him. His beard was tousled. Black holes gaped from beneath thick and knitted eyebrows. The ghost had no eyes, but Marianne did not doubt the severity of his gaze. The mere presence of this disembodied creature made it noticeably colder in the house. And the thought that the ghost was looking into your eyes made you feel uneasy. Marianne regretted that he had wandered into this house, that he was sitting next to a lamp that perfectly illuminates it. In the twilight of the night he would not have been noticed.

So another minute passed. And then Marianne thought with hope that the ghost did not see him.

It was hard to tell if he was looking at Marianne or at the table, whether he was a threat or not. But the realization that there was a ghost in front of you imposed a mute numbness and icy fear. “The mouse was talking about a lamp. Is he looking at her?”

And then Yakov went to Marianne, turning first sideways, then chest. There was something unnatural in his movements. Legs moved limply above the floor, but did not touch it. The ghost held an ax in his hand. Marianne shuddered, and the heaviness in his muscles eased slightly. He got up and took a couple of steps back. Then another step and another, away from danger. The back rested against the wall. There was nowhere to retreat. He and the ghost were only three steps apart. A massive figure moved closer, enveloping the room in darkness.

Then, in the blink of an eye, a dark figure lunged at Marianne. At the same moment, the front door flew wide open and hit the wall. Outside, a bright light jumped across the snow. A loud hum, a metallic rumble burst into the house. The flames in the hearth dived down behind the logs, and fiercely jumped there, thinning and melting before our eyes. All the air shuddered, white snowflakes swirled, turning into clouds of white mist. Marianne squeezed into a corner and raised his hands in front of him. The ghost froze in front of the young man. A little more – and would have touched him with his huge chest, but turned around at the sound.

Then, for a reason known only to him, the ghost quickly flew out of the house, passing through the wall next to the door, while issuing a hoarse half-roar, half-voice, in which Marianne caught sight of the word: I-ako-ov!

The rumble died down, darkness reigned in the doorway. Stumbling, Marianne ran to the door. On the rails, the train swept away, casting rectangular patches of light beside it. Another second, and he disappeared behind an invisible bend, leaving behind a whirlwind of snowflakes. Marianne closed the door, bolted it and said, rather to himself:

– Wow, Jacob! How frightened! – Marianne was shaking. – Yes, and the train made this noise. – And then he added: – Maybe just by the way! After all, if not for this trouble with the train, Jacob would have attacked me.

It was not a question, but the mouse responded in the same thin voice:

– I do not know. I’ve never seen him like this before.

Mignis was still sitting in her place.

– What a warm wool! – quite quietly she said, sniffing the mitten. Jacob’s arrival did not interest her at all.

Marianne drew back from the door, listened, and, hearing nothing from outside, sat down again on the bench next to the mouse. The bravery of the little animal was admirable.

– It seems he’s gone. What can a ghost do? Is it worth fearing them?

– It is only worth being afraid and avoiding that you do not know. That’s how the spirit world differs from the shadow world, you say?

– Isn't it the same thing? Ghosts are ghosts.

“No,” Mignis said very quietly and cautiously, as if some other ghost might hear her. “And I think both of these worlds are both interesting and have dark energies. Sometimes this energy is released. Especially when these worlds intersect.

Marianne was amazed at Mignis's response as well as the appearance of the dreaded Jacob. And the mouse, not noticing this, thoughtfully said:

– A manifestation of these forces is a rare, dangerous, but bewitching phenomenon.

Marianne did not like the answer and generally the topic of dark ghosts. To distract himself a little, he stirred the coals in the hearth and threw in fresh logs. Then I decided to see what he had in his backpack. He reached under the valve and pulled out a plastic water bottle. Only when he saw the water did Marianne feel how much thirsty he was. He hastily unscrewed the lid. Breathing heavily after long gulps, Marianne noticed that the mouse was looking at him strangely. The guess immediately flashed through my head. He carefully poured water into the bottle cap and placed it in front of Mignis. She sipped water, closing her eyes while drinking, then began to diligently rub her muzzle with her paws. Marianne was a little touched by this sight. He liked the mouse more and more. He smiled.

“This is much tastier than melted snow,” said Mignis, seeing Marianne's incomprehensible smile.

Marianne continued to investigate the contents of the backpack. A package of sliced bread, ten wagons of cheese, cracker packages, about ten chocolate bars, and a second plastic bottle of water. They ate dinner with sandwiches. Mignis, however, ate quite a bit of cheese. She only smelled her own piece of bread and did not touch it. He had to be put back in his backpack.

Chapter 4. Dark Energy

There was a knock on the door. Marianne's heart sank into her heels.

"Jacob is back!"

Marianne was confused. Now he is trapped. This time, nothing will distract Jacob. Then he will kill Marianne. The knock was repeated. And oddly enough, now at its sound it became easier. The ghost would pass freely through the door. Marianne dared to come closer. Someone pushed the door, then the words were heard:

– Open it! Let me in, please!

"A living person".

Tired quiet voice. Marianne opened. A stranger wrapped in a fur coat quickly entered the house. He closed the door behind him, took off his hood and exhaled heavily.

– Uh-uh, finally warm!

He threw off his burden and sat down by the hearth to warm his hands. He had a short beard and bushy eyebrows. He looked Marianne up and down and said:

– Didn't expect to meet anyone here. – Then he looked around the room and continued: – My name is Viator. And you? How did you get here?

– I'm Marianne... strayed from my class.

– Well, you look like a student. – Viator looked at Marianne's jacket. – Are you alone here? – asked the guest, making sure that there was no one else in the room.

– Yes...

Viator was thinking about something. Marianne asked:

– Are you a hunter?

– Am I a hunter? – Viator almost laughed. – You can say so. Better tell me: how did you get off your own? And where are those of yours? Do they walk anywhere nearby?

– No. I'm lost, "Marianne said partially. Then he wondered what else to answer? Can't he say that he has a "hidden beast" in his blood? Viator gave Marianne a displeased glance.

– My class and I went on a hike, and on the way back I fell behind. And then he fell off the hill. I went to this house by rail.

– On a hike? – asked Viator. – Nobody has been here for a long time. Especially on hikes. And how did you fall?

– I went to the edge of the mountain and stumbled. I was washed down by an avalanche.

– Yes, it happens. And what kind of school?

– Saint Elvis. I recently entered there.

Viator nodded.

– Yes, there is one. She's a little south of here. I heard that the disciples there are called "saints". And yet it's just wonderful that you got here.

Marianne had never heard anyone call him or another student "saint." It seemed to him that this was an unflattering nickname, and he looked at Viator in surprise.

– Wild lands here. You could freeze to death. ... Well, I'll help you.

Viator looked around and went to the chest in the corner. He put his backpack down next to him and began examining the insides of the old chest. Marianne hesitated, and then asked a question that was tearing him to pieces from the inside, although he felt that it was better not to ask:

– How did you end up here? Are you hunting here?

Viator chuckled to himself again. Marianne was embarrassed, and he decided not to say anything more. At least until the morning.

– I'm lost too. Just like you, – Viator smiled at his joke. – I walked with a friend to the east. We wanted to get to Esterby. His brother lives there. But they quarreled as soon as possible, and parted.

I chose to walk along the railroad. And he – directly through the forest. Here's a story. Now you can't tell who was right. I'll have to spend the night here with you. And he is probably already in Esterby. Sleeps, snores in a warm bed, my old friend. Like this!

Viator slammed the lid on the chest. Noticing Marianne's questioning look, he explained:

– I left something here. Last time.

Then he fixed his gaze on Marianne's backpack. Viator's eyebrows came together on the bridge of his nose. He walked thoughtfully to the hearth, sat down by the fire and began to put logs. His face, lit by flames from below, looked stern and hard.

Marianne saw that Mignis was no longer on the bench. Looking more closely, he noticed her under the bench. She diligently dragged the woolen mitten into her burrow.

Marianne called out to her, but stopped short. He didn't want Viator to see her. The man stared inquiringly at Marianne. Mignis disappeared into the shadows, leaving her mitten behind. Of course, she will come back for her.

– And how did you go hiking without snowshoes? – suddenly asked Viator.

Marianne shrugged.

“Lost,” he thought quickly.

– You are probably already looking for? – Viator took the phone out of his pocket and looked at the screen.

– I could tell who needs to, call the school, but there is no network. There is no signal at all in this area. Nowhere. Wow, it's almost midnight. – Tomorrow I'll show you the way. Don't worry, go back to your school. Go to bed now. I'll settle down on the bench. Not against?

Marianne settled down near the hearth. It's warmer here than anywhere else in the house, he thought. Having warmed up by the fire, he felt an overwhelming weakness. Thoughts were confused, eyes closed themselves, the crackling of wood in the hearth soothed.

“And what tomorrow? Walk a little south until this Viator disappears, and then immediately north?”

Through sleep, Marianne felt someone nearby, a careful rustle and fuss. Something touched my ear. But the young man did not pay attention to it. “Mignis, I guess.”

Suddenly the dream washed away. Through the veil of slumber, Marianne heard a muffled exclamation, full of fear and horror. A yellow flash before his eyes seemed to burn his eyebrows. A strip of steel from a long knife blade flashed overhead. An indistinct black figure hovered in the air. And at the same instant fell on him. Marianne leaned to the side. The knife hit the floor where Marianne's head had been a second ago. Ragged breathing smelled in my face.

A new acquaintance attacked him. Marianne covered himself with his hands, preparing to reflect the next blow, but Viator only managed to swing his knife.

A shadow slid from under the table. A wide, shapeless and dense haze, from which the hair fluttered as if from the wind. She crashed into Viator's figure, and he crashed to the floor. Then she dragged him to the corner of the room. There were screams of terror and the noise of a struggle. Viator frantically waved his knife, trying to wound the ghost, trying to get up, to break out of the mortal grip. But Jacob was much stronger. He pushed Viator to the floor and sat astride him.

Marianne jumped up, throwing things that fell under his feet, and drew away from the fighting.

Suddenly, Jacob's shaggy figure rose to the ceiling, while the ghost wheezed in a low, terrible voice, and once again fell upon its victim. Viator died down. A faint groan of exhaustion completed the cacophony. Jacob slowly, not paying attention to his victim and not noticing the frightened Marianne, slipped through the wall. In his hand, Marianne made out an ax.

For a minute, Marianne stood still, recovering. Then he moved slowly towards the shapeless figure in the corner.

– He is dead? He asked barely audibly. He took a step towards the body, which was sprawled on the floor, and noticed that blood was slowly spreading across the floor. I did not dare to come

closer. He knew he couldn't help. And Marianne felt sorry for Viator, despite the fact that he tried to kill him in his sleep.

– If not for Jacob, Viator would have killed me, – whispered bitterly in Marianne's voice, after thinking a little. And then he turned around.

“Where is Mignis?”

“If you hadn't fallen asleep so soundly, you would not have killed,” came the voice of the mouse. – I tried to wake you up. Yes, it's good that Yakov was under the table all this time. I didn't like this “hunter” right away.

– He saved me? Marianne marveled, not entirely sure what had happened. – It turns out that Yakov saved my life?!

Mignis crept slowly from under the bench.

– He took a picture of you.

– What? – did not understand Marianne. Mignis was looking not at Viator's immobilized body, but at a rectangular object nearby.

Marianne approached cautiously, recognizing the familiar outline.

Marianne picked up the phone from the floor. Password protected. Graphic key, standard lock screen. Marianne ran his thumb across the screen, connecting the dots with lines to form the letter O. Nothing happened.

“I don't know the key,” Marianne said.

Mignis ran to his leg and squeaked:

– Give me.

Marianne put the useless device in front of the mouse and turned it to face her, not understanding why and following Mignis with interest. “What's the use of this? She doesn't know how to use a telephone, can she?”

Mignis touched the screen with her small paw and slowly traced it over it, forming a “Z” shape. At the same time, she had to climb over the phone twice on outstretched legs, which looked very funny. The lock screen went out, and the application icons appeared on the background of a bright picture of the sea and clouds.

– Wow! – Marianne sincerely admired. He fell on his knees in front of the mouse and looked at the phone. – Mignis, you are a miracle!

– Come on, – Mignis was shy, but was very pleased with the praise. – I saw how he ran his finger across the screen.

Marianne touched the middle of the touchscreen and brought up the downloaded app. A white and yellow picture with lines of different thickness opened.

– It's a map! – The scale was too large to understand what kind of terrain. – There's a marker here. Goal. Yes exactly. Look, here are the coordinates displayed. Marianne pointed to the corner of the screen. – The phone is receiving GPS signals. Navigation software. I have one on my phone. Hmm, looks like a laid out route. This line shows the path traveled. This point in the center is the current position of the phone. Yes exactly. This line is a railroad. So this is our home. It is not on the map.

Marianne was silent for a short while, then said:

– The target on the map matches our position. It turns out that he was heading here. This place is the goal of his path. And he was talking about Esterby.

“Look closely,” said Mignis. Marianne tilted his head to the side. “What else is there? The map is unmarked, there are no names nearby.”

“Viator told you he was heading east. East is on the right side of the map. He came from the east. And he walked west.

Marianne quickly zoomed in on the map. Mignis was right. Viator came from the southeast. And the starting point of the path also did not have any settlement nearby.

Marianne sat down on the floor and thought. “Viator lied about Esterbi! What for? What did he want here?”

“He also talked about his friend,” Mignis said. A sense of renewed unease swept over Marianne.

“Of course, Viator could not be alone!”

– Right, I also don’t like Viator and what he told me. Marianne looked around the room. The lamp did not burn, the hearth was almost extinguished. The backpack is in the same place.

– I have to get out of here! – Marianne perked up. He had long forgotten about the photograph he wanted to find on his phone. He didn’t like this house any more.

– How far are you going? Mignis asked with a plaintive note in her voice. – Take me with you.

Marianne stared at the mouse. This thought did not occur to him, although he did not want to part with Mignis. She was the complete opposite of the gloomy house and became a friend in the last hours.

– Of course, with joy! – blurted out Marianne and smiled at Mignis.

– I’m hungry and cold here. Let me out in the first warm house. And even better – in a hotel or in a tavern. Or wherever you want. I’m not demanding at all ... – said the mouse quickly, as if Marianne was trying to persuade.

He nodded, wondering where to put the mouse.

“Shouldn’t I put it in a backpack?”

But Mignis was already climbing up Marianne’s clothes with her tenacious paws. He pressed his head into the collar as it climbed onto his shoulder. Then Mignis went down to her breast pocket, opened the valve with her nose, and climbed inside. Marianne listened, expecting what would happen next. Inside the pocket, Mignis seemed to be digging with her paws or biting something. The fabric twitched. Then a small hole formed at the bottom, in which a mouse nose appeared for a second and then disappeared. “Mignis can look outward through such a hole with only one eye,” Marianne estimated when the mouse looked out of his pocket.

“Don’t forget the mitten,” she squeaked and disappeared into her new hiding place.

A mitten lay in the middle of the room.

Stepping to the door, Marianne touched something with her foot. The object bounced off and rang across the floor. Viator’s Knife. The young man recognized him with disgust. But then he decided that the knife in the forest was a useful thing, and he picked it up. And from Viator’s belongings, Marianne took snowshoes with him.

Chapter 5. Pursuit

Marianne unlocked the door and looked out. The familiar gloomy landscape has not changed. No one is visible, and silence reigns. Marianne looked at the snow. There were footprints around the house. Someone approached the window. From the shape of the prints, one could say that this man had snowshoes on his feet. The snow was trampled down more under the window. Viator walked around the house and watched Marianne through the window before knocking on the door.

Marianne hurried away from the house with the dead man. The forest was left behind on the mountain, the snowy steppe stretched behind the house, conifers darkened on the horizon. This means that the forest was waiting for the traveler again.

Marianne stepped into the snow, glad to have the snowshoes on his feet, which he had taken from home. It became much easier to walk. He walked for several minutes on flat snow when he sensed that something was wrong. The shapes appeared on the left. There were about a dozen of them.

People were previously invisible in the shade of the trees on the slope. A little deeper in the forest, the red glow of the fire gleamed.

Marianne looked around at the people and continued walking forward. Short roll call, cautious exclamations. These people must have been on the alert. When Marianne appeared, they immediately got to their feet and surrounded him. In fur coats, massive build. They looked like robbers. They wore the same clothes as Viator.

The largest of the hunters blocked Marianne's path and shouted:

– Are you in a hurry somewhere, boy?

The stranger's voice was hoarse as if asleep, but it was harsh and harsh. The man glanced around Marianne defiantly.

Marianne went to the right.

– But we don't think so. – Big guy got over to the right and got even closer. He stared into the youth's face. Marianne stopped.

– Hey, Ulysses! Check how Cassius is doing. Something you can't see. Had he escaped with our little gold, eh? You look, and his trace is gone again? He is a weak coward. And everyone knows about it. I should have sent you, Ulysses, on reconnaissance.

The robbers looked at each other excitedly. The thought of stealing some gold seemed to seriously disturb them. The thinnest and the smallest ran quickly to the house.

“Ulysses?”

Marianne had a guess: most likely, this is still a very young guy. Perhaps his age.

– Well, so what's wrong with you? – the chief turned again to Marianne. – Let's take off your clothes! We'll turn out the pockets later and see if you are hiding anything of value there.

Undress? Had he heard wrong? It seemed these people didn't care what happened to Marianne. Or rather, on the contrary: they wanted him to freeze to death. Marianne did not move. The leader of the gang did not like it. He shouted angrily:

– Something I look, you are in no hurry. We'll have to spur you on.

And he threw the weighty gun off his shoulder. Several approving laughter rang out from his associates. Meanwhile, the circle of hunters was narrowing. The two bosses behind Marianne came very close. There were now less than ten steps between them. The young man took out Viator's knife. It was stained with blood.

Noticing Marianne's gesture, the leader added:

– I, frankly, do not care who you are and what your name is. I have nothing personal to you. But we have to live on something. And maybe we won't kill you. I don't want to get dirty with your blood.

The tone of voice with which this was said was still harsh. And even gloated. Marianne will definitely be killed. The leader is just fooling him.

“I won’t undress,” said Marianne. – Let me pass.

These words caused a friendly laughter Marianne saw nothing funny here. So they were laughing at the gesture of the leader, who threw up his hands, as if saying “try” or “can’t you see how many of us are here?”

A streak of pearly light fell on the snow and on Marianne’s face. He raised his eyes to the sky. The moon illuminated the world sleeping in the snow with mystical radiance.

Suddenly Marianne felt a powerful surge of strength and energy. He blissfully inhaled the frosty air, delighted in the sparks of countless small pieces of ice. Serenity and freedom burst into his lungs. How strange it was to feel like that now. It seemed like a forgotten, huge and warm feeling from his childhood. This feeling attracted and pushed Marianne into her unknown world. The world that was waiting for him right now. The doors were open...

“It’s the moon!” – suddenly thought Marianne. She is the source of his inspiration and inspiration for life!

“She’s so close and warm now, almost like the sun. She touches the very heart with her love scent. Its soft light transforms the forest and hills into a crystal paradise.”

Muscles throughout Marianne’s body tensed and then groaned in languor, wanting to release boundless energy. The young man even grew above the ground, became taller. At least he felt like the tallest and strongest being on Earth.

Then the silhouettes in fur robes came into view again. He did not hear them, but he felt them. For a moment, Marianne forgot about their existence. They dropped out of his field of vision, out of his thoughts, and now they again loomed around. The light of the moon clearly illuminated both the snow and people.

The leader of the gang fired a shot in the air, and then aimed the muzzle of the gun at Marianne. A loud bang, like thunder, scattered around the area.

– Take off your clothes! He shouted, choking on saliva and shouting curses at Marianne. – I will not repeat again!

Marianne, inspired by the moon, was not afraid of either the shot or the threats. His meeting with the robbers was no longer worried.

“I can easily run away from them!”

Marianne wanted not just to break out of the encirclement and run away, but to fight. Not to kill, no, but to punish the offenders. To teach a lesson. And he chose the main one as his goal. Maybe he really didn’t want anything bad and was trying to delay the death of the victim? Or perhaps his teeth spoke. Distracting attention while his buddies stab from behind.

The muzzle of the gun was staring at Marianne, and not one. You can’t hesitate any longer. Marianne lunged forward at the leader of the gang, crashed into his chest. The blow was very strong. The big man grunted loudly and flew head over heels into the snow. Marianne ran over it and dashed away. Shouts and abuse were heard from behind. And Marianne had already straightened up and ran as fast as he could. Then he glanced over his shoulder. Just in time: one of the men raised his gun and aimed at his back. Marianne darted to the left, ducking his head as he ran. A shot rang out. A bullet whizzed nearby. Marianne fell into the snow, then got up and ran again. Two more shots rang out. Marianne never looked back. He ran like a spirit across the snowy steppe. It is necessary as quickly as possible to reach the nearby trees and hide behind them. Now breathing was in his ears, the beats of his heart pressed into his throat, but Marianne did not slow down. Two more minutes, and he fell into the snow behind a saving tree.

Wiping the sweat from his face, he crawled and peered cautiously out of his hiding place. It turned out that he managed to overcome a fairly long distance. Much more than he thought. A group of people in black robes sprawled across the plain. Two or three people were far away. Harsh screams echoed into Marianne’s ears. Someone moaned, someone cursed. The leader among them could not be discerned. The pursuers slowed down. Some stopped completely, one of the robbers turned back.

Or so it just seemed. It was difficult to make out from a distance. Only the two most enduring and strongest continued to walk towards Marianne, but they could no longer see him.

Marianne figured he had no more than a minute of head start if the two continued to chase.

“We must move on.”

He straightened his snowshoes and was glad that he did not lose them during the race. He looked at his pocket, afraid to touch it with his hand.

– Mignis, are you all right? Mignis?

The pocket stirred. Marianne even saw a pair of thin tendrils peeking out of the hole. Hoping that Mignis was okay too, Marianne walked quickly into the woods, figuring out how not to leave footprints in plain sight.

The gloom thickened. It became completely dark. Low clouds covered the moon. This lifted Marianne’s spirits: it will be more difficult for robbers to find him in the dark, and soon they will abandon this venture. A gust of wind showered the youth’s face with ice flakes. Marianne pulled on his hood tighter. He turned around, looking at the fresh line in the snow, trodden by him. How soon will the snow cover it with new flakes? Now we need to get away from the chase as far as possible. A sleepless night lay ahead.

Marianne walked and walked. The coniferous forest sometimes thinned and climbed an untouched snowy hill, then became a dense wall near a shallow clearing.

The walking pace became lower. Marianne felt tired in his legs. The moon gave him strength. When will he see her again? Tomorrow, in a month? Or maybe at all... But it’s better not to think about it. Tomorrow night he will be waiting for her. And it will definitely be as intoxicating as it is today. He looked up hopefully: maybe even tonight she will appear in the sky? The black furry tops of the fir trees swayed overhead, and the falling snow obstructed the view. In such weather it is hard to see anything even ten meters around you.

Soon something hard came under my feet. The snow here was not deep, it became easier to walk. Marianne looked around. There are no trees in sight.

Marianne went out onto a frozen pond or river. In such a blizzard, he could lose direction and go to the side or walk in circles, so he decided to walk along the left bank. In addition, Marianne was afraid to fall on fragile ice and fall into the water. But now the mood has improved. He left less noticeable traces, and the blizzard will quickly do its job. The chase must be deadlocked in the morning.

Chapter 6. Ice Lake

Marianne walked for a long time. The wind howled dejectedly in the forest, and it always seemed that someone was around. When dawn began, Marianne was completely exhausted. He could not go further, and besides, he wanted to sleep. The sleepless night completely wore him out physically and emotionally. Marianne looked out for a secluded spot under a tree, surrounded by tall snowdrifts.

“A good place for temporary shelter – no wind.”

He hastily made a depression in the snowdrift and lay down. Fearing a terrible night, a nightmare or something like that, Marianne remembered the medicine, but it was not in his pocket.

Marianne prudently lay down on his right side, so as not to crush Mignis in his sleep, and opened the flap of his pocket. He remembered nothing else. Consciousness fell into the abyss of dreams.

Snow and trees. This is the same forest. I think this place is familiar to me.

I see a red rose in the snow. Nearby is a beautiful bud of a flower unknown to me. I look at them and feel a rush of blood and warmth in my chest, near my heart...

I've seen them before. Am I dreaming all this?

This is a dream? Realistic vivid, but still a dream?!

And I can feel it... now, under my heart?..

Weird dream. But I like.

And where does all this come from in my brain?

I bend over and take a closer look at the miracle.

A plucked bud thrown in the middle of the snow. Its petals opened barely noticeably.

Covered with thin white sparks of diamonds, a beautiful creation of nature. Flower. The symmetry of shape and curved lines conjures up a blooming garden of vibrant colors and scents. And here is white snow and cold, lifeless, frozen forest. There is silence in the air. Not a soul in the area.

Where did the flower come from here? Who brought it? After all, someone cut it off, ripped it off. Why left here? Or maybe it's not a rose next to him? Maybe it's all the same...

Through the enveloping cold in his legs, Marianne felt himself awakening.

“This is a dream... just a dream.”

Marianne woke up late in the afternoon. Birds shouted loudly somewhere. The sun was shining brightly on the frozen surface of the frozen lake, and the ice glittered with many small sparks.

Marianne felt completely chilled. Besides, I was very hungry and thirsty. In his sleep, he never changed his body position and was now rubbing his numb legs. Mignis looked out of her pocket as soon as Marianne stirred and sat on his shoulder. The mouse's whiskers looked crumpled, and she began to diligently rub her muzzle.

– Bad dream? Mignis asked worriedly.

– No. Very beautiful. It is a pity that it ended. I didn't want to wake up, “Marianne admitted, closing his eyes and trying to keep in his memory even vivid images. – And yes. A little bit bad... Everything is as in reality, and I'm really worried.

– Take it easy. It was a dream. There are no robbers here, “Mignis squeaked, taking a seat in front of Marianne's face.

“There were no robbers in it. Only... Flowers... In a dream I find a flower. Very beautiful. So much so that not goose bumps. Can you imagine?

– And what is this flower? – asked Mignis, looking into the eyes of Marianne.

– It's hard to say so right away. Hmm... Both white and yellow. Sometimes it seems like purple and pink streaks and lines slip through. As if reflections on the surface of metal or silk, glass or mirror. Maybe it's the sun's rays that play on its velvety petals?.. Royal flower. I don't know why I called it that, it's just spinning on my tongue. This is the most appropriate name for him. It also gradually

freezes, becomes covered with ice. I'm sure he's still alive now. If you put it in water in a warm house, under the rays of the sun, it will thaw and... It will give roots, it will live.

It should be so. And so it will be.

– You like flowers. Maybe that's why you dream about them.

– It's not just a flower. There is something attractive in him. There is something else in this dream that I cannot see. I feel someone. I don't know why, but it worries me very much.

Only then did Marianne feel how cold he was. Enough talking, it's time to act.

The first thing he did was gather some branches and build a fire. But no matter how I tried to kindle it, nothing came of it. The ignited light was immediately extinguished. The air was humid and so were the branches.

"I'd better do it," said Mignis. Marianne ran down her hand to the tinder laid in the center of the branches. Marianne froze in amazement. Mignis again managed to surprise her. A fire broke out. Not a small spark or tongue, but immediately a large and bright red flame. Marianne drew her hand with the lighter away from the fire. Mignis instantly jumped onto her sleeve.

– Great! – Marianne sincerely admired. – Do you still know how?

He hurried to put the branches in the fire, then sat down close to the fire and held out his palms.

"Maybe I can," Mignis said happily, and then added: "I love fire. I remember always lighting it up when I wanted to.

Having warmed up a little, Marianne and Mignis had breakfast with cheese sandwiches, washed down with water from a plastic bottle. And Marianne ate the chocolate bar with great pleasure. The mouse has given up its share. She didn't even smell him.

Marianne's mood rose, her strength increased. The pain in the muscles reminded of yesterday's journey.

Marianne took out his phone. As soon as I looked at him, against my will, I remembered Viator and his tragic death. Marianne unlocked the phone and looked at the screen. He made a zig-zag path, fixed on the map, and moved more east than north. Marianne tried to find Wolf Mountain or something similar. But here the card was powerless. The battery remained at thirty-three percent, and Marianne switched off the phone. The GPS application was constantly receiving signals from satellites, calculating coordinates and, therefore, consuming a lot of energy. And the charge must be saved, otherwise the phone will quickly become useless.

Marianne decided to better explore the lake. From the open ice, you can see everything in the area further. In the north, the forest went up – there was a high hill. And to the northeast, the forest was barely visible at the very horizon. The smooth surface of the ice rushed there and hid behind the right bank, on which there were much fewer trees. The right, eastern bank was very close. Marianne walked on the ice and almost immediately not far from the shore on the flat surface of the ice he saw a blue spot – unfrozen wormwood.

Coming closer, I noticed that the ice of the hole is uneven, knocked down by something hard at the edges. The ice is about thirty centimeters thick. And the polynya itself is a little less than a meter in diameter. Why such a large hole could be needed, Marianne did not know.

The lake was deep. The water seemed black and motionless, beckoning to itself with a serene charm. For a moment, Marianne's heart fluttered with magical peace.

Marianne filled one bottle with water. Now you don't have to melt the snow.

The water was not as cold as Marianne had expected. He took a few sips. Great taste as if from a spring. The surface of the water rippled. Large bubbles of gas from the depths disturbed the surface. Marianne leaned closer to the water, but saw nothing in its thinness.

He was worried that someone had cut this "well" in the ice and might come here again. It snowed yesterday, and all traces were covered with snow.

Marianne hurried back to the fire. The weakness still squeezed the muscles of the legs, but the closer the evening approached, the less the pain was. Marianne felt better and better and did not feel sleepy at all.

“Do you think, Migny,” Marianne said to his companion, “is it a good idea to hit the road at night?”

Mignis sat on the branch of a tree overhanging the fire, and dozed, inhaling the smell of smoke. But then she revived.

– It is possible at night. If you walk along the coast in the same way, then it is even quieter at night. It’s harder to see us at night.

– Yes, that’s right. But we’re heading north. Here the coast goes to the northeast. We’ll have to go through the forest. Have you heard of Wolf Mountain in the north?

“I don’t remember...” Mignis answered after a minute. – Is there a big and warm house?

– Yes, of course, that’s exactly what I’m going for. Look for protection in it. – And he figured that he did not know anything about this place. Only the fact that they had to find refuge on Wolf Mountain, that there were people like him, not like ordinary people, but werewolves, inspired great hope. And that Mignis would like it there, Mariann had no doubt.

“At night, so at night,” said the mouse. – It’s up to you.

– It will soon get dark. Let’s wait a bit and go.

The wait was unbearably boring, but Marianne decided to rest his legs before the long journey.

New branches were required for the fire. The weather was good. Mignis also went with Marianne, sitting on his shoulder. She wanted to see the forest. Marianne got carried away collecting branches and went deeper from the parking lot than he expected. The fact is that he noticed a large old spruce, the branches of which hung low over the snow. Coming back, Marianne went straight ahead. He was approaching his fire from the opposite side when he saw...

– Mimarian! Squeaked Mignis. – Look!

“Traces! Fresh”.

They were located above the parking lot, were sheltered from it by high snowdrifts, which protected the fire from the wind. Marianne dropped some of the collected branches, wanted to pick them up, but then caught himself and threw them away.

Mignis left her place on her left shoulder and climbed to the top of the hood.

“There’s someone here. Traces left by man. A robber?”

A small step, probably someone crept up and watched Marianne, did not come close, kept a distance. Then this unknown person went back on his own way. Marianne moved to the track of the footprints, looking around carefully. He thought of the knife and felt for it in his pocket. Who could it be? He was sure that he had left his pursuers and now scolded himself for being naive.

The tracks were large, shapeless. Of course, this observer was in snowshoes. And where did he go now? Maybe he left this place, or maybe he hid until dark in an ambush. It’s not safe in the camp now. And there you need to return for a backpack and then run from here. Now Marianne was faced with a new choice: to return to the camp in the way in which he came here, or to follow the trail, see where they will lead him.

The first option seemed safer. If you follow other people’s tracks, there is a very high probability of coming face to face with an unknown observer. There was a third option, but it still did not seduce Marianne: go straight through the snowdrifts to the camp. Fortunately, the haze of the fire is visible. But then he will be caught between two fires. On the one hand, the enemy could enter the back, on the other hand, the same enemy could already be waiting in the camp or near it.

Marianne hastened to leave the way he had come, and, before picking up the backpack, decided to carefully study the situation around from afar. The branches he collected were left to lie in the snow and were striking. It came to Marianne’s mind too late when he made a detour around the trees and turned around for the tenth time. In vain he did not sprinkle them with snow. He did not go

back to them – every minute was precious – and hoped that the branches on the opposite side were not so noticeable.

Mignis got down from Marianne’s head and sat on her shoulder. Marianne saw, when he turned around, how she stood up on her hind legs and moved her long mustache. Mignis was his eyes from behind.

– Do you see anyone? Marianne whispered, barely audible.

Mignis crawled to her ear and said:

– Nobody.

Marianne nodded. Mignis’s tail slid across her cheek, and the mouse was gone. The young man crept up to the lake and looked around his camp.

“And really nobody. Where has this man gone? Gone or is hiding somewhere nearby?”

Behind, from behind the lake, there was a prolonged howl. Wolf. A deadly cold ran over Marianne’s skin. This guttural sound burst into the peace of the forest like a thunderclap on a sunny day. It seemed that needles fell from the branches of the fir trees.

The source of this sound was nearby, somewhere behind the trees on the other side or closer.

Marianne ran to his backpack, forgetting about the fear of entering the camp. He threw it over his shoulders and rushed to the spruce. It seemed to Marianne that this was the only way out.

To his surprise, Marianne very soon found himself almost at the top of the tree. It was impossible to climb further – the branches bent dangerously, bent down and cracked. The palms were scratched, the jacket was covered with snow and small spruce needles.

Marianne looked down. Through the many branches below, the place of the fire was guessed. A faint haze rose from that place. The fire was almost extinguished. An excellent view of the lake opened up from the tree. No one around. No wolf, no man.

“Maybe the wolf will pass by?”

Marianne had no idea that he was afraid of wolves. Suffering to panic, Marianne forgot about everything. Now he found composure.

– Blink? – She is all right. Her nose was visible from a hole in her pocket. In addition, Marianne had to cover the fire with snow and hide the traces of his sleepover. Wolves can probably wait a long time under a tree if they realize where it has gone.

And then a cry came to Marianne’s ears. Quiet at first. Then a loud cry of pain. It was the voice of a man, not a wolf. And he called for help. Without hesitation, Marianne rushed downstairs. He flew from the tree, hitting thick branches and scratching against the rough bark, ran to scream. It was not far away. A man lay in the snow.

“Rogue!”

Judging by the clothes, one of them. The snow beneath him was scarlet red. The man floundered on his back and wheezed, holding on to his throat. A dog-sized animal was sitting on the robber’s fur coat. His fur shimmered with a silvery sheen as it fluttered. A giant fish with the paws of a lizard tore the robber’s chest with its paws and mouth, and he tried to throw off this creature. Marianne quickly took out a knife. Shouting: “Get out! Go away! ” – rushed to the lizard fish and swung his knife. When he slashed the creature across its shiny back, it jerked, bristled, and grabbed even harder into the arms and neck of its victim. Marianne struck again and again. The creature’s body arched and fell into the snow. A bloody mouth with long, sharp teeth appeared in front of Marianne’s face. The creature screeched disgustingly, turning into a whistling whisper. Marianne stepped back, stumbled, and fell to his elbows. The lizard fish crawled away with unnatural movements, leaving a bloody line behind it. Marianne jumped to his feet, knife held out in front of him. But the creature didn’t think to attack. She crawled away and still hissed disgustingly. Marianne felt something pressing on his chest. It was Mignis who could not find a place in her breast pocket.

– Hush hush. She left. She’s gone, “Marianne said quietly, as if afraid that the creature would rush at his voice. Then he turned to the wounded robber. He looked awful.

Marianne dropped to his knees in front of the man and covered the wound on his chest with his hands. He saw in an educational film how to provide first aid to the victim, but in reality he realized that he was helpless.

The man's neck was scratched, the fur coat on his chest was torn into small pieces. The victim first held his hands in front of his face, then carefully laid them on the snow. Fingers on both hands were seriously injured. What was left of them looked more like minced meat. The frightened eyes of the older man stared at Marianne. His face was also covered in blood, his mouth was twisted in pain.

Marianne shouted:

– Help! Anyone! “Perhaps the robber is not alone here. Then his friends will come to the rescue. – Help!

Marianne screamed and screamed until he was exhausted. Nobody showed up and shouted back.

The man was breathing heavily and looking at Marianne. It was clear from the wounds and blood loss that he would not survive without medical attention.

– Are you alone here? Marianne asked. – You need a doctor. Tell me where is the nearest village or at least one person, and I'll go for help!

The robber was silent. Marianne looked around. See no one. I tried to remove my hands from the wound, but the bleeding intensified. I had to press on my chest again.

The man stuck out his tongue, then swallowed and asked:

“So you didn't kill Cassius?”

– What? Whom? – did not understand Marianne.

“What he says? About whom? Is this the time to think about some Cassius?”

“And Barclay was furious. Thinks you killed him with an ax. – For a moment a smile flashed on the lips of the man. – I didn't believe it... But Barclay thinks differently. Damn him with his ideas! I see you are just a child, you could not have done this.

– Cassius? Maybe you mean Viator? – did not understand Marianne. – I did not kill anyone! Didn't kill! – He was shaking. – Better tell me where to find your friends. I will bring them, they will call doctors, rescuers. They will help you!

The man shook his head.

– Its end. And I managed to move here. In such cases... There is no one here. Even wild animals bypass these places... Here is my payback. And this damned Wolf Mountain is very close. So that she was wrong!

The man was confused in his thoughts, but the words about grief abandoned in agony alerted Marianne.

– Do you know where Wolf Mountain? – blurted out Marianne. – Are there people there? Can they help?

– Wolf Mountain? I saw her from afar. What kind of people are there! Inhumans! That's who is there. A strange place. Damn anyone. No, people don't live there. They look like you and me, but they are not. Even animals feel them and are afraid. Nobody knows how many there are and where they came from...

The man exhaled and closed his eyes.

– Oren Hadley. That's my name. Tell people if you get out of here that I am dead. Tell me where it happened.

– Why don't you tell me where to look for help? Marianne asked, not noticing that he was shouting. Now he was sure that this was one of yesterday's robbers. – Where are your friends? They are close? I will call them...

Oren shook his head and croaked:

– Maybe before I die I will do at least one good deed. I will save you. And my soul will be sent to heaven. But my heart is still heavy...

Marianne did not know what to say to this.

– You have to leave these places. Go east. Oren tried to nod in the right direction. – Sooner or later you will go out on the road. On it you will come to the city.

Marianne shook his head. Tears ran down his cheeks.

– Only to the east! Do you hear? To the East!

Oren fell silent, closed his eyes. It seemed that he had already departed into another world, but his chest was still faintly heaving.

“Stay away from anyone you meet...” Oren said in a very weak voice. – There are different types here. Trust no one and...

The chest froze. Oren’s lips never moved.

Oren Headley.

Marianne slowly climbed off the blood-soaked body. He looked at his bloody palms. He felt very sorry for Oren, he was impressed by the death of this stranger. To distract himself from his worries, he began to wipe his hands on the snow, not noticing the cold.

A familiar sound sounded somewhere. Motorcycle motor.

The roar of the engine grew louder. Marianne stood up. Someone was riding a snowmobile on the ice of the lake. Another appeared after him. Marianne wanted to wave her hands and scream. But Oren can no longer be helped.

“What if they are yesterday’s robbers?”

They will be glad if Marianne falls into their hands. He was afraid of any person in these places. If he’s already figured out anything, it’s that he must stay away from everyone in this forest.

Marianne hastened to retreat from the open area, then rushed to his camp. They may not have noticed him yet. The sound has become quite loud. Marianne bent down by the tree and looked at the lake.

On the snowmobiles there were people dressed in white overalls – winter camouflage. They raced across the ice of the lake and were in full view. Having approached closer, we slowed down and parted in different directions. Then one, the one that was closer to the dead body, screamed. People on snowmobiles drove up and rushed to Oren.

Marianne heard the words of one of them:

– Who was that? Who attacked you? Was it a werewolf? Speak! Have you seen a werewolf here?

“He’s already dead, don’t you get it?”

– Yes, I just gave up the spirit. Did our werewolf do the job?

– Ha, this is too cool for a sucker!

And they both burst out laughing. In their hands, the people were holding some kind of short shotguns wrapped in white cloth. The first poked his weapon at the snow nearby.

– Look. What is it? It looks like scales. Aha! So the trail goes on the ice. Saber-toothed fish!

– There are still traces.

Two men in camouflage stood with their backs to Marianne and, bending over, looked at the find.

Marianne rushed to his camp, seeking cover.

He jumped to a hole dug in the snow – a hole in which he slept at night, and rushed into it. He began to quickly dig deep into the snow. One second, one more. Time is too short. Marianne hit the roof of the hole. She crumbled, covering him with lumps of snow.

The young man listened.

The snow was thin, and the light of the setting sun filtered through it.

Marianne was afraid that his hiding place was not enough for him and people in camouflage would notice him. And the snow could crumble unevenly, somewhere stronger, could bare legs or shoulder and give Marianne.

The footsteps came very close. And then he heard something that overtook even more fear, if he had not been scared half to death.

Loud frequent puffing. This man was sniffing the air. The wheeze grew louder. Marianne held her breath. He was smelled. A small lump of snow in front of my eyes shifted, opening a small hole outward. Marianne saw the shoes of a man who had approached.

– You are not looking there, Ersus! His breed should be looked for in the trees, not under them. Look, the branches over there were jammed. It was as if someone was climbing on it.

Footsteps rang out a little further. The boots trampled in place.

– Nobody. Ugh. Zero again!

– Look, there are traces too. Let's see there?

– Wait, I'm behind the snowmobile.

There was silence for a minute. The boots were out of sight, and Marianne hoped they were finally gone. But he was afraid to get out of the snowdrift. The warm breath melted the snow, and the hole in the snowdrift became larger. Marianne huddled all over his jacket.

The second of the people started the engine and drove up to the first.

The boots appeared again.

– Well, what did you find?

– There is no one there!

– I'll inspect that site now! – The end of the phrase was drowned in the roar of the engine. For a minute, a roar was heard in the area, now moving away, now approaching. The man who was near Marianne moved to a nearby tree.

There was a radio click and characteristic noises. Then a new voice came from her, like a growl:

– How are you? Get on the guy's trail? No?

– He seemed to have sunk into the water.

– Well, well, – the man from the radio grinned. – And I can't get better. I caught Junia Claire! Junia Clare! Parallel class girl! And what is she doing here?"

Marianne could not believe his ears.

– Wow! You are clever. And where is she ... – But the voice from the radio interrupted the man in camouflage.

– Which of you was torn to pieces by howling during the day? You are giving yourself away! Show your presence!

– I could not resist. There will be a great moon tonight. I can already feel it.

– Come here, to me. I need your help. She bites like a street cat! And without howling! – The crackling in the radio was gone.

– Ersus, did you hear? – Shouted the first from afar. – Let's go. It's clean here!

– I could say to the radio, – grunted the displeased Ersus. The footsteps hurried away. There was the rumble of snowmobiles. Then he began to move away.

Chapter 7. Who's here?

“Junia!” Marianne snapped something inside. Fear of new robbers faded into the background. Thoughts were now only about the girl.

“Is Junia here? Why? Where from? Was she grabbed by one of these men in white camouflage?”

Marianne the director's words about the secret order “Olburgskiy Tribunal”.

“These are people from the Order! They've caught Junia, they're hunting the likes of Marianne. These are the Hunters. So Junia is also a werewolf?”

Previously, Marianne was sure that the circumstances were unfavorable only for him. He had to run and hide in the ice forest. But it turns out that Junia also left school, and now she is even worse than him. It is not known what she experienced and what awaits her. The tone of the unknown hunter's voice, coming from the radio, did not bode well and did not like Marianne. Junia is the only person who was dear to him now. And she was in trouble.

Marianne climbed out of his den and looked after the figures on snowmobiles disappearing into the darkness, heard the invariably fading sound of engines. Now this is the only thread leading to Juniya.

Marianne's appearance was rather intimidating and shabby. It seemed that he had climbed the mountains for several weeks and lived in the forest. All the clothes were torn and dirty. The face is smeared with blood. He got dirty as he wiped away his tears. In addition, he dropped one of the snowshoes somewhere.

It was impossible to hesitate, and Marianne rushed after him. I had to throw off the second snowshoe, otherwise it was inconvenient to run.

Dusk was gathering over the forest. The sun shone with a red glow behind the distant trees, and the moon was not yet there. The next hour was expected to be dark. It was easier to run along the track of a fresh track, and it was not difficult to see the tracks from snowmobile tracks. It was lighter on the ice of the lake than under the trees in the forest.

Marianne fled into the unknown. He had no idea how he would look for hunters in the dark forest.

“They talked about the moon. She would rather ascend.”

Far ahead, two beams of yellow light loomed. The people on the snowmobiles turned on their headlights. Another minute, and these rays of hope disappeared from sight. They seemed to turn right. Marianne raced as fast as he could. With every minute the hope of tracking down the hunters in camouflage faded away.

The snowmobile trail crossed the entire lake from west to east. Soon Marianne passed the middle of the lake, turned ashore and headed up the slope. Here the snow was deeper. Marianne slowed down and walked, breathing heavily. He needed a little respite. It looks like the hunters in this place also had to slow down. This was evident in the tracks. There was still a chance to catch up with them. “Am I not going into their hands myself?”

Now, if the howling resounded over the trees again, Marianne would have known that these people were not so far away, but there was a silent silence in the forest.

The moon appeared in the sky. The whole world seemed to bloom with a pale blue and silver light. Marianne perked up.

A fabulous landscape opened up before him. Large trees with crooked rhizomes protruding from the snow rose high up. The moonlight penetrated the interweaving branches of the crown of blue snow, casting spider webs, fantastic laces of soft shadows at Marianne's feet. Cold snowflakes shimmered like diamonds. An owl hooted overhead. There was a faint rustle of wings, and a shadow

slipped between the trees. Marianne lifted his head, but could not see the bird. But I saw the moon. It lit up his face. Its light penetrated into the eyes and spread through the veins.

Marianne felt heat all over her body. It stabbed my fingers. Marianne began rubbing his palms, then thrust his fingers into the snowdrift. The pain disappeared, melted away with warmth. It seemed that now the hands were numb, something squeezed his fingers. The snow eased this sensation. Marianne wiggled his fingers, checking the sensitivity. It became easier and even pleasant. The pain and tingling sensation disappeared. Then Marianne tried to dig the snow with his hands. He liked it and found it funny. It was ticklish. There was no more heat in my hands. The snow must have cooled them.

But in the rest of the body, there was still a bursting pressure. Marianne took a deep breath of the frosty air, took his hands out of the snow, looked them over and gasped in amazement. Long, slightly curved claws protruded through the mittens. Suddenly, it also hurt in my eyes. Marianne closed his eyes and pressed his knuckles against his eyelids. The pain was gone. He slowly opened his eyes. Nothing has changed around, the vision has remained the same. But what happened to the fingers?

Now Marianne sat down carefully in the snow and wiggled his toes. Feelings were common, except that the shoes were a little stinging and tight. Probably, there were no claws on the legs. At least, if they grew up there, they were not as long as on their arms.

Marianne was excited and very interested in the transformation in her own body. How will he live with such nails? It is impossible to write notes with them. And generally hold a ballpoint pen.

Hoping that this transformation will not last long, because he is a werewolf, Marianne felt lightness throughout his body in a minute. He stood up, felt a surge of strength and energy. The state of health was excellent. I wanted to jump and run. Marianne looked curiously at the nearest tree. He was drawn to do something. Marianne jumped as high as possible and grabbed the trunk. The claws on the fingers firmly and confidently held on to the bark. He climbed up. He liked it too. Lips spread into a smile. He figured out how stupid it looked from the outside.

Marianne quickly climbed to the very top.

– Blink, can you see that? I have grown claws!

He looked at the hand. A fluffy little ball slid over it.

– They are delightful! – concluded the mouse. – Just like mine. Only humanly large.

“Yeah,” said Marianne.

Mignis ran to the other hand. Probably, make sure that there, too, with claws, everything is amazing.

“Look,” Mignis said quietly. – There’s fire.

Marianne froze and stared at the faint, tiny speck of light that trembled between the branches of the trees.

Mignis always feels fire. Even if you can’t see it. And here she, of course, was right.

– Bonfire?

– It’s a big flame. Bonfire, Mignis said. Marianne was thrilled by this discovery. All is not yet lost. He will find Junia Claire.

– It’s probably a kilometer and a half before him?

– No, further. – Mignis climbed on Marianne’s head.

– Well. Marianne’s voice was full of determination. The nose could smell burnt wood and scorched meat. He seemed to make out the haze of a fire in the air.

He climbed down from the tree. The descent turned out to be even easier than it seemed. The young man again began to run on the tracks from the snowmobiles towards the fire. The moon has energized Marianne. The muscles, tired after a long run, stopped whining and started working with renewed zeal.

When the fire flashed between the trees, Marianne slowed down, began to step more cautiously and listened to the reigning nocturnal sounds. Besides, I had to calm my own breathing. As he ran, he puffed like a steam locomotive.

In the shadows that appeared around the fire, Marian could see people. At some distance from them there was a large shed, under which there were snowmobiles and some other things. Marianne decided to approach from the side of the canopy, to leave with line of sight. The canopy was an excellent cover. The awning was stretched between four large trees. Here the snow was trampled down, which means that Marianne will not leave traces. In case of danger, you can take refuge in the trees.

Three hunters in white camouflage were sitting by the fire. Marianne learned their names from the overheard conversation. The largest and most sedentary was called Ersus. He spoke very little. Nero was short and thin. Pontius is the tallest.

– Do you feel it? Pontius exclaimed suddenly. At these words, Marianne’s soul sank into her heels.

– Yes! The voice answered enthusiastically.

“I’m hungry,” said a third voice, very quiet.

Marianne cautiously crawled back, afraid to betray his presence not only by the smell, but also by the crunch of snow.

– Ersus, buddy, look at the sky! Nero said enthusiastically. – The moon! And you mean food! How can you even think about anything else now?

Marianne huddled against a nearby tree. The voices fell silent. The sounds of fussing, puffing and grunting were heard. Marianne peered out cautiously.

Something strange began to happen around the fire. Something unnatural, frightening and even devilish. Shadows in the snow twisted and trembled in unnatural curves. Even the flames of the fire turned red and roared. The three hunters trembled, leaned towards the snow, rose and then fell again. It was over in a minute. The figures were half-sitting-half-lying in the snow and did not move. Marianne stood up.

– Oh! A rough voice bellowed, and one of the bodies stirred. Marianne dropped to the trunk of a tree, but continued to follow the people around the fire. Now it was impossible to call them just people. Although, one might say, they were not even before that.

– How long I have been waiting for this moment!

The hunter who said this stretched out and squared his shoulders. Marianne saw his face in horror. It looked like a wolf’s face. An elongated nose, protruding teeth and large eyes. And everywhere on the face there is wool!

The largest of the three coughed. And it sounded like a muffled bark. Then he crawled to the fire.

– The meat is not ready yet! – Nero shouted at him.

The answer was a drawn-out growl.

– Not ready? Asked Pontius. – Now just something to chew. Teeth itch. No urine to wait!

– You will scratch soon! Nero grinned. – I would have killed this girl myself, if not for the agreement.

Marianne stared at the painting by the fire in mute daze. Hunters in white camouflage appeared before him in a new guise. Werewolves. The loose clothing did not give a complete picture of their bodies, but Marian could see the claws on their hands. Judging by the changed voices, the metamorphosis affected the throat, and therefore the entire body. At the same time, the mind of the werewolves was not affected, as well as the memory. Instincts Marianne could only guess, but it seems they have become wolf. Otherwise, why are these words about teeth?

“Look,” Pontius said with a cheerful tone. – Our kitty seems to be scared.

“Yeah,” Nero agreed. He walked away from the fire and disappeared from sight.

Footsteps were heard, then a metallic clang. Nero returned to Marianne's line of sight, but was still alone.

– Everything is good. Kisa will not run free. And now, maybe, the desire will diminish.

Various terrible thoughts swarmed in Marianne's head. Others made my heart groan in pain. He tried to see where Junia was.

He began to make his way to the place where Nero had gone. The problem is that there were fresh traces. It was necessary to seize the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Nero. But the risk of being noticed is too great. Marianne made up his mind. He will retire twenty steps from the fire and only then will he come to the place where Junia is.

The young man began to slowly walk around the werewolves, all the while remaining in the shade of the trees and trying to make out the girl. She must be very close, or Nero would not have returned so soon. Marianne looked closely. Snow, trees, snow again...

There was something else between the trees.

Meanwhile, a lively conversation was resumed, word by word, by the fire. Nero enthusiastically recounted:

– I chose an observation post by the lake. Everything is visible at a glance. All I did was glance into the thermal imager. I look, there is something warm on the ice. I drove to the goal. And there is. Here are the footprints in the snow. And here is Miss Claire herself!

Marianne held his breath.

“He's talking about Juniya!”

– In short, you sat and did nothing! And we chased with Pontius all over the area!

– Why nothing? I caught the girl! You have to move your brains, Ersus. I noticed a good spot and waited in ambush, “I shouted rudely at my friend Nero and stirred the meat on the fire.

– Wait? Lying in the snow and taking time off from searches. And he sent us to “these screams”.

Pontius looked towards Marianne.

– Okay, things got off the ground, and that's good.

– I want to eat! How much longer? – howled almost plaintively Ersus.

– Wait. Just a little bit left. – Nero examined the pieces of food on the spit and waved away the smoke.

– You, of course, caught her with a net? Pontius asked Nero. – The girl.

– Yes, with a net. She darted on the ice in different directions. A cat is a cat. One accurate shot from the gun and the kitty is caught.

– Great! – exclaimed Pontius.

“Anyone can do that on a snowmobile, Nero. Just try to keep up on foot,” said Pontius. – The main thing is the snowmobile. And you, frankly, were lucky that you even looked into the thermal imager.

– No. The main thing here is to wait for the moment. – Nero missed the reproach in his address. He liked to talk about his hunting merits. Now he turned to Ersus. – If you miss, there will be no second chance, no. I have everything thought out. I come in from the left side. The girl shies aside like a rabbit. I taxied and squeezed on the right side. And I'm already taking aim. I know where. And, of course, she again sharply to the side.

Then I shoot. I even slowed down and released the steering wheel. In order not to miss the mark, I hold the shooter with both hands.

Ersus took something out of his bag and began to chew, glancing towards the fire. The story did not interest him. Then he said:

– I can not wait any more. It is very tasty and raw!

He reached out to the spit and cast a sidelong glance at Nero. He looked at the meat, swallowed and said:

– Damn you. Let me myself! And then again you chop off the biggest piece for yourself!

And the werewolves were moving around the fire, feeding themselves food.

Marianne took advantage of this moment and walked quite close to the shapeless dark spot. There were only ten steps between them.

By the tree sat, curled up, a figure barely visible in the shadows. She seemed small and thin against the background of this stately old forest and completely defenseless next to these rude men.

Junia. She was tied to a tree, her hands tied. From under the jacket of the school hood, a pair of eyes looked at Marianne. The girl was scared and trembling. A black chain could be seen at her feet and then on the tree trunk.

Junia shuddered and sighed softly. She saw Marianne. This faint exclamation was heard by the fire, because Nero loudly and rudely shouted in their direction:

– Sit still! I'll bite your neck myself if you're going to arrange a circus here!

Marianne stepped back behind the tree and in time. Approaching footsteps were heard. Then there was silence, only the crackle of branches in the fire. Marianne bent down to the ground. Will they notice him or not? Narrow shadows slid past the tree behind which Marianne stood. Then a satisfied "Hehe" flew to the ears! Marianne peered out cautiously, trying to gauge his chances of being discovered. Nero shone his flashlight on Juniya.

He seemed to admire his prey. A thin girl tied to a tree.

– Sit-sit. And don't rock the boat! – Nero spoke deliberately affectionately.

– What are you missing there? – shouted one of the hunters around the fire.

Nero turned reluctantly, but did not have time to answer. A wolf howl sounded over the trees. He walked from afar. Nero hurried to the fire, froze at the very flame and, raising his head, listened. His friends also listened to the howl, but it was repeated only once.

– Not early? – Nero worried and looked at his watch.

"The moon has already risen," Pontius said. – Maybe someone decided to clear his throat and that's all?

Howl answered another, who came a little closer.

Nero dropped the flashlight and took out his radio.

– Welcome, says "Invisible Five." Will the big hunt start at seven? Answer!

Pontius opened a folded sheet of paper and peered at it carefully. Meanwhile, the howl was repeated.

"We're in the Four Di's. Ta-a-ak. Howl was from here and somewhere here.

– Welcome, this is "Invisible Five." We're in the Four Di's. Will the big hunt start at seven? We've heard the callsigns.

Nobody answered him.

"It all fits," Pontius said, turning the map to Nero. "You see, they moved north. Everything was as agreed.

But Nero did not glance at the map Pontius held out.

"The hunt has begun," Pontius repeated, shaking his map.

– I see, and earlier for two whole hours! Idiots! – said Nero.

– You are always dissatisfied with everything. Relax and let's enjoy the Hunt. Put the radio aside. Now she is not needed. Nobody will answer. Now everything is offline.

Pontius lifted his head and uttered first a guttural wheeze, then a powerful loud sound. Howl.

Nero turned sharply to the howling comrade, swung, wanted to argue something, but silently threw the radio into his backpack. Ersus chuckled softly and howled too. But he didn't do it so loudly. Yersus's howl was uneven and short.

– We are already in the Hunt! He grunted contentedly and cleared his throat.

"I have other plans now," said Nero, packing his things into his backpack.

Ersus looked at his comrade with interest.

– I will deliver the captive where necessary, and I will get much more pleasure from it than from your Hunt, and not only, – Nero grinned under his breath. – Come on, take part in the Hunt.

– Great, I didn't want to miss such an event, – Ersus was delighted, apparently, he was not tempted to mess with the captive. When he heard the howl, all perked up and looked discontentedly in the direction of Junia.

– And put in a word about us. We're on your team, "Pontius asked. – It is not for nothing that we ran through the woods here.

– Yeah, we are your friends, – supported comrade Ersus.

Nero nodded.

"Yes, friends," he grunted, not quite satisfied, then turned and pointed a finger at Pontius. – Keep your walkie-talkie with you, okay?

"But it's forbidden to use any of these new things on the Great Hunt! – objected Pontius.

– I'll call you as soon as I deal with this kitty. Once I'm within earshot, you'll answer. Got it?

"Okay," Pontius agreed and put the radio back in his pocket.

Ersus looked at his friends and smiled contentedly. Then he tried to howl again, but coughed.

Marianne, taking advantage of the new care of the Werewolves, crept up on Junia. She watched his every careful step closely. Marianne touched the girl's hands. They were cold and were tied tightly with a rope. He loosened the knot a little. These fetters were not difficult, but it was impossible to remove the heavy metal chain that encircled the girl's waist.

"Castle," the girl whispered, barely discernible, touching a heavy object on a chain at the roots of a tree with her foot.

"I'll save you," Marianne said almost with his lips. The same eyes that he remembered were looking at him. Only now they seemed to Marianne a little different.

"Junia is a werewolf! Cat werewolf!"

The girl kept her head a little to one side, as if she were embarrassed by her appearance, but when Marianne bent down to her, she straightened. Junia saw that Marianne was just like her. Also with feline features.

– I will help you, everything will be fine. Just wait, "whispered Marianne and jumped back into the shadows, returning in his tracks. Then he took refuge with the folded things between the trees. It was a risky act, but Marianne couldn't think of anything better.

– And how are you going now? It's not easy with wolf paws, "Pontius asked.

– Not the first time. I'll finish. I'll be there by morning. And there my hands will return. And don't be stupid, take your guns with you, "Nero said, kicking his backpack.

– Don't be insulted, okay? – put in Ersus.

"By the way, guns are not by the rules," Pontius said. – I try to honor the traditions of the Hunt. If the Wolf Council finds out...

– We have net shooters, – said Ersus. – Why carry an extra load with you?

Pontius nodded and continued:

– And I can not shoot from a gun with this, – showed an outstretched palm and nodded at the backpack. "And I don't want it to rub my back.

– Yes, not according to the rules, Nero, – repeated Ersus. – Again we will get it because of your cunning.

Nero, meanwhile, fiddled with his backpack, pulled out a gun. It was uncomfortable to hold him in his hands with his claws. Nero took it between his teeth, but immediately threw it away.

– Well, to hell with you. I'm worried about both of you! And for the success of the business. And you and the net shooters are going to Wolf Mountain? Well done!

The comrades made no objection. Ersus sat closer to the fire and looked at the flame. Pontius scratched his leg with his claws.

Looking at the Werewolves by the fire and making sure they were busy with their packing, Marianne crept up to the outermost of the snowmobiles, pulled the hood. He gave way, revealing the inner tie rods and a small plastic reservoir. Marianne didn't know if it was for oil or fuel, but the idea of throwing snow at him seemed great. Marianne slowly unscrewed the lid of the tank, holding the hood with his other hand (the sharp smell of gasoline hit his nose), then threw a handful of snow inside, scooped up more with his palm.

“Melting snow will disable the snowmobile”

Marianne was sure of it. At least I hoped very much. Footsteps were heard. They headed straight for the awning. Marianne, in a panic, somehow attached the tank lid, quickly pulled his hand and returned the hood to its place. The footsteps stopped.

– What is it? Nero asked sharply. – Do you smell it?

Marianne backed away, cuddling as low as possible to the snow.

The werewolves must have sniffed. There was silence. Marianne quietly crawled further and further, then turned behind a tree and froze.

– Gasoline, – said Ersus.

Nero appeared under the awning, froze by the snowmobile.

– Yeah, gasoline. Nero examined the snowmobile, throwing the hood open with a crash. – Who didn't screw the lid down to the end? She can barely hold on. Hence the smell.

Ersus and Pontius exchanged glances. Ersus shrugged his shoulders.

– This is your scooter. You know best, “Pontius replied.

– Is the tank leaking? – asked Ersus.

– No, the tank is all right. The lid is barely screwed on. Nero walked over to the other snowmobile and removed the canister from the trunk.

– Just in case, I'll refuel. No, though. The tank is almost full. Nero looked at the fuel gauge. There was a dull sound. Marianne tried not to breathe and listened to what the oolki were doing. They could smell it, but now the smell of gasoline spread in the air like a sickening curtain. Nero fiddled with the snowmobile for another minute, then pushed it out from under the shed. I inserted my gun into a special cover located under the steering wheel.

Now, in the vacant space formed under the canopy, the tree behind which Marianne was hiding was perfectly visible.

Marianne waited for the Werewolves to talk about something again, and quickly climbed up the tree.

From a height of five meters, he looked down, tried to make out the werewolves. Two by the fire. One is missing. Nero has gone somewhere.

– You will jerk, you will run behind on a leash, – heard Marianne a disgusting voice.

– Why are you messing with her? Let the blood out. Or let me do it.

Nero was near Junia.

“It won't hurt her.

– Just let out a little blood. Liter. And she will be as submissive as your backpack. Will lie unconscious for another week.

While Nero led Junia to his snowmobile, the remaining two Werewolves extinguished the fire, threw their net shooters behind their backs and now silently watched Nero. Ersus and Pontius went hunting light.

They covered their snowmobiles and some other things under a canopy, secured with a metal cable around the tree trunk.

Ersus was carried away by brushing his fangs with his claw, when a quiet, drawn-out howl reached them.

– Are you still here? – threw in their direction Nero. – Run! The hunt has begun.

Pontius lifted his nose as if trying to smell a howling brother.

– I will contact you on the radio, okay?

“Yes,” Pontius nodded. He patted himself on the pocket.

– Come back quickly, – admonished Ersus.

The engine whined and Nero, without looking at his friends, drove away. Ersus and Pontius ran in the opposite direction. Where the howl called.

Chapter 8. Trap

Marianne did not immediately dare to get down from the tree. A minute later, Marianne began to panic from inaction. The sound of a snowmobile engine roared far beyond the trees. It grew quieter all around. Nero drove further and further with Junia.

And Marianne made up his mind. He almost fell off the branch, so he hurried down. Once again he froze for a second, when he was on the ground, he listened – silence reigned around the warehouse under the canopy. An idea came up, and he began hastily to search for something that would surely destroy the Wolves' caches.

Marianne found the canister, unscrewed the lid, and doused both remaining snowmobiles with gasoline.

“Blink, I need your help,” he whispered.

The mouse crawled out of his pocket and sat on his sleeve. She clearly did not like the smell of gasoline – she spread her mustache and turned her muzzle to the side. Marianne brought a branch to Mignis. The mouse jumped at her, a bright spark shot up in the air and slowly flowed down the branch. First, a small drop, like red dew. Then two, three crimson drops appeared. A second later, the branch was engulfed in a strong flame. Mignis, not fearing to burn herself, walked through the fire, as if appreciating the work, and returned to her sleeve.

Marianne unclenched his fingers and stepped back. The flames roared over the gasoline.

A yellow glow spread over the snow and rose to the stars. The flames quickly consumed the snowmobiles and the canopy, spreading to nearby trees. Heat and acrid fire hit my face.

One thing is done. The second is left.

Marianne started to run. How soon will the werewolves smell the smoke, understand what happened, and guess who did it? Perhaps they are already very far from here. In support of this thought, a wolf howl flooded over the forest. The werewolf that issued it was far away. Marianne thought it was Pontius howling.

How much time has he lost? Snowmobile sound cannot be heard. So Nero had gone very far. The hope of saving Junia was dwindling before our eyes. Marianne tried to run even faster. He stumbled and sank knee-deep in snow, but he could not keep up with Nero's snowmobile. He decided at all costs to follow in the footsteps of Nero. “We'll see if it's too late or there is still a chance to save Juniya.”

Marianne didn't run as much as he thought when he saw a snowmobile tilting in a snowdrift. Junia, bound, lay a little further away. But the main character was absent in this picture. Nero. Marianne woke up from the numbness that seized him and clung to the nearest tree, instinctively hiding. Then he looked around the trees. The figure in white camouflage is nowhere to be seen.

But he's here. Marianne knew it, he was sure. How long ago did the snowmobile stop? Where did Nero go and why? Marianne took a few more steps and froze, trying to make out the footprints of the boots in the snow, to catch them on the blanket around the snowmobile and the bound Junia. Marianne's eyesight was excellent. The metamorphosis of transformation also affected the eyes.

From the nose of the snowmobile, there were ten steps ahead and that was all. Further, the trail was hidden behind a snowy canvas.

There were only tracks on the snowmobile itself. It looks like Nero got off the ground and walked up to the nose of the snowmobile. To the right, to the left, he did not leave. There were no tracks. Then where did Nero go?

Did the snowmobile break down due to the snow trick or did Nero stop it for another reason? It is not known for certain, but now one thing is clear: Nero heard Marianne running after him and now...

The heavy breathing prevented him from hearing the whistling sound, but his eyes noticed movement. Marianne jumped to the side and ran on all fours for the trunk of a nearby tree. A net shot from a net shot flew overhead and tangled in the branches behind him.

The enemy had enough time to set up a trap for the pursuer. He left the snowmobile in a prominent place, while he went around in a wide arc and waited to attack from behind. The feline reaction and vision helped Marianne out.

A gray silhouette of a werewolf appeared from behind the trees for a second and took cover again. Marianne peered cautiously in that direction. Nero fiddled with the same tree. Only now did Marianne see part of his white camouflage.

Marianne came out from behind the tree and ran at Nero.

Another biting bang against the barrel rang out over the left ear. Then – an abrupt crack. The released net tore off the bark and fell into the snow. Marianne was wrong – the enemy was not reloading the weapon, but aiming. Marianne was very lucky this time too.

Nero is huge. He seems much more now than half an hour ago by the fire. The weapon is not visible in the hands. There will be no next shot. Nero is hunched over, ready to jump, and ready to charge.

Their gazes met. Nero's eyes were not eyes. Red glazed dots looked at him from under the brows of a shaggy black head. The wolf's face is twisted into a grin. Nero was now insane and more a wolf than a man. Marianne could not believe that even five minutes ago he had heard human speech, intelligent words from the mouth of this creature. Nero smiled. He looked at Marianne. The short guy in the school jacket seemed defenseless in front of the Werewolf.

Marianne lunged forward at the enemy. Nero seems to freeze. Now he knew for sure that he was just a student, if he had not yet understood it. A loud growl filled the air. It bounced off the trees and sounded from everywhere, pierced to the bone, could shake confidence. It's hard not to notice him. But you can ignore it, try not to think that this threatening evil sound may be the last thing you hear in your life.

Marianne ran very close to the enemy. Here are his eyes, red and lifeless. The grin of sharp fangs turns into a satisfied smile. Nero is glad to meet you. A new, or perhaps a long-awaited prey found him herself. He did not doubt his victory. His huge body, as if disheveled, is ready to rush. The roar grew louder, inhuman, but not wolfish either, somewhat reminiscent of the cry of a winner. Nero is already sure that he won, is about to sink his fangs into Marianne...

It's hard to think sensibly in such a situation. Marianne raised his hands in front of him. The claws are directed forward. He's still running. He will knock the werewolf off his feet.

Nero jumped, the growl turning into a squeal on a new high note, cold and wet breath hitting Marianne's face. The claws ripped open the school jacket, but only tore off the button and scratched the air. Marianne's reaction was faster than Nero's. He jumped instinctively, dodging the huge mass of the enemy, and the werewolf slipped under him. For another split second, Marianne grabbed Nero by the back, but he walked past, slipped by inertia through the snow. Marianne rolled in mid-air, clawing at Nero's back, and fell into the snow.

The youth hurried to his feet. Just in time: Nero had already turned around and was heading for him again. Nearby is the thick trunk of a huge tree. Marianne waited until the last moment before jumping up and grabbing the trunk. The roar from below ceased. Nero crashed into a tree. Marianne jumped down, trying to land on the enemy with as much force as possible. Nero was just rearing up, opening his mouth when he was kicked in the head and back. Marianne slid over the Wolf's body. White camouflage cushioned the fall. Marianne grabbed Nero's neck with all his might, both rolled in the snow. Marianne quickly worked with his hands, scratching the neck and head of the enemy, and he tried to throw off Marianne, turn to face him and tear him to pieces with his teeth. But Marianne wrapped his legs around Nero's waist and tried to keep his grip.

A sharp pain gripped my right leg. Marianne screamed, then felt a strong blow from his back against something solid, his head spinning.

Claws and palms seemed to burn. Blood appeared on them.

Marianne felt Nero free himself. A moment's clouding from pain – and Marianne loosened his grip. Now you need to get to your feet as quickly as possible. The young man raised his head. The forest floated before my eyes, dark spots doubled and multiplied between the trees. Marianne crawled to the nearest tree, stood up, grabbing the trunk. A black wolf's face appeared. The white hood is not visible. The same red eyes with thick fur above them. Teeth covered in blood. The fangs are huge. This black head was heading straight for Marianne.

The limbs themselves grabbed the trunk of the tree and quickly started working. Pain throbbed in my right leg.

Another blow to the leg almost threw Marianne down. He screamed, but held on and pulled himself up even higher.

Under the tree, Nero ran on all fours and threw himself over and over again up the trunk, but he could no longer reach the young man. And the barking full of hatred turned into human abuse.

Madness fueled rage. The helplessness pissed off Nero. But a minute later, with an incredible effort of will, he curbed his wolf instincts, sat down under a tree, took a breath and shouted:

– I'll get you anyway!

Marianne watched closely the werewolf below. Now he looked at the snowmobile and the bound Juniya. The girl was lying in the snow and, it seems, was trying to free herself from her bonds.

– You're finished, kid! Shouted Nero. – I'll skin you alive!

And a quiet, menacing roar came to Marianne's ears. We had to act quickly. He decided that Nero's hot temper could be beneficial. You can try starving Nero out. "Probably, he cannot think logically at all in a fit of anger. We must not give him time to move away from the blinding anger!"

Marianne dangled his left leg down and said, trying to hide the fear in his voice:

– You can't even get my leg! And you'll never get me! Where can you strip off your skin? Only yours!

Before Marianne could finish, Nero shot up into the air, clutching his leg. His teeth clicked loudly. Marianne managed to pull himself up and immediately hung with one hand on a branch, bending it down. Snow fell from the branch onto Nero's head. He closed his teeth, but caught only the snow. Then he closed his eyes and began shaking his head, shaking off the snow flakes. Marianne smiled deliberately, reached out to a nearby branch and brushed the snowball off it. Nero was ready, deftly dodged. Not a single snowflake hit the Werewolf. Marianne dangled his leg again. Nero immediately jumped after her. A roar, a cry of anger echoed in the air.

Marianne did not remove his leg. He threw out the second and collapsed onto the Werewolf.

Both of Marianne's boots hit her grinning mouth. Hit. A short screech escaped the fallen Nero. Marianne landed heavily on him, and there was a crunching sound. Probably the neck of a werewolf.

Marianne bounced off the lying Wolf, still fearing him. But the body in white camouflage did not move, the head was turned on its side and hidden in the snow.

A faint groan escaped the limp enemy. Better not to waste time. Of course, Nero suffered, but not enough to give up the spirit here.

"Have I won?" Marianne hoped to gain the upper hand over Nero, although he himself did not have a clear plan. But when he appeared in the formidable guise of a wolf, there was almost no hope of a positive outcome. And here is such a gift of fate! Or a lucky coincidence. The branch broke off, and there was nothing to do but fall into the werewolf's mouth.

Marianne walked away from the Wolf. Limping, he walked over to Junia and leaned over to her. She did not move, she just looked at the defeated Nero, then at Marianne. She recoiled a little, as if she were afraid of Marianne. If you think about it, he really looked distrustful. Although in the guise

of the Werewolf Cat, he still looked like the guy from the parallel class with whom the girl crossed paths at school. Marianne threw off her bonds and helped her up.

– How are you? In order?

Junia nodded.

“Marianne,” she whispered, barely audibly, and staggered. He rushed to her and supported her. Junia hugged him. – Is that really you?!

Marianne responded to the hug. He looked back over the girl’s shoulder, still wary of the appearance of the Werewolf.

The girl’s breath was hot and ragged.

“I’m glad I found you,” Marianne said, and looked into Junia’s face.

Her wide-open eyes seemed to glow green from within. The shape of the eyebrows, the nose – it was the old Junia. Only now there was a change in her face. It was neither fear nor surprise. Junia looked tired. Even exhausted. But the eyes are just as beautiful. Junia seemed to be smiling at him through them. The same Junia that Marianne remembered from school.

– He is dead? The girl asked in a trembling voice.

– I don’t think so. It looks like unconscious.

A new fright gripped Junia.

– Oh my God! Oh my God! She murmured softly and sobbed.

– Let’s get out of here!

Marianne ran, pulling Junia by the arm, then letting her go ahead of him. He constantly turned around, afraid that Nero would catch up with them, but he was not behind. They ran along the snowmobile trail back to the tent camp. It was easier to run along the trail and, most importantly, faster, but Marianne did not want to return to camp. Five minutes later he held on to Junia, and when she turned around, frightened and agitated, he croaked briefly, choking on the cold air:

– This way!

He was the first to step into a deep snowdrift.

Now they were running in a different direction. Marianne wanted to get as far as possible from Nero, his two friends, and in general from this place. Perhaps Nero has already contacted them by radio, and now the danger lies in wait in front and is catching up from behind. Turning aside, Marianne and Junia bought time and walked away from two chases at once.

At least that’s what Marianne thought. And in a critical situation there was no time to guess. You need to make decisions quickly. The leg at the site of the bite ached and ached. The jeans were soaked in blood. But Marianne tried to ignore it. The blood stopped flowing. This is good news. He will not leave a trail of blood and will not die from blood loss.

Marianne and Junia had been running for two hours. The guys were exhausted, their steps were getting slower. It was quiet in the forest. There was no chase. They ran away.

I had to take at least a short break, catch my breath, recuperate. The wounded leg was on fire. Marianne lifted his trouser leg and took a quick look at the wound. The bite site on the ankle was swollen, turned blue, the marks from the fangs turned dark red. Marianne was in pain as he walked. Junia was horrified at the sight of the wound.

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