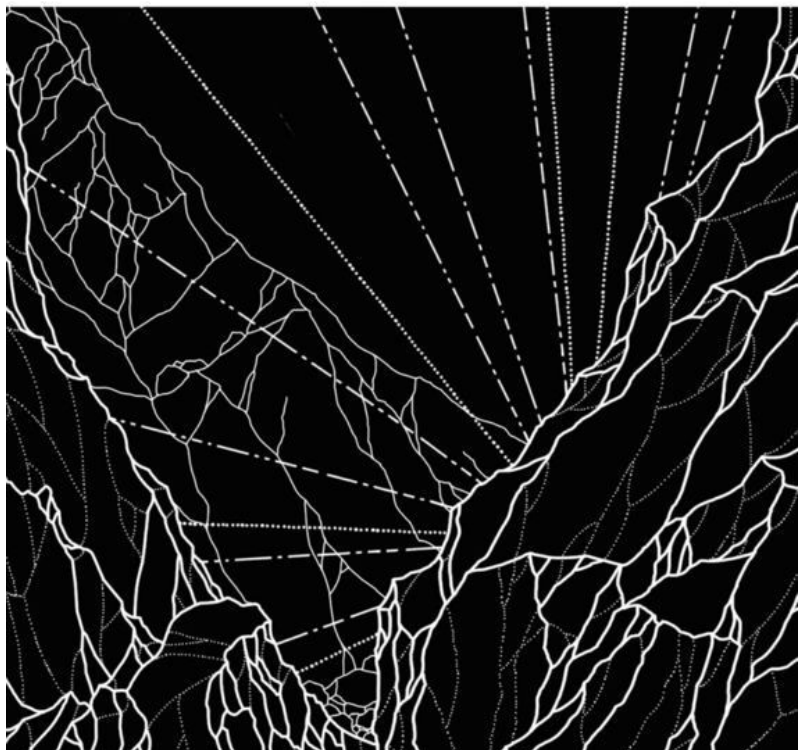


Asia Khafiz
Beyond the Great Mist



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Аннотация

During long summer evenings under the Central Asian skies, my little sister in her insatiable curiosity demanded new tales. And when all the famous stories had already been told, it became clear that the time had come to create. Thus, the novel “The Great Mist” was born. This fantasy tells the story of love and hate, of passion and longing, of dreams and reality – all on the edges of consciousness and subconsciousness. Wonderful illustrations were made by a talented illustrator, Ksenia Tkach.

Содержание

Foreword	5
Part I. Kiar and Amalu	7
Chapter 1. The Gray Kingdom	10
Chapter 2. The Magic Valley	21
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

Beyond the Great Mist

Asia Khafiz

*“We are such stuff as dreams are made on;
And our little life is rounded with a sleep.”
W. Shakespeare “The Tempest”*

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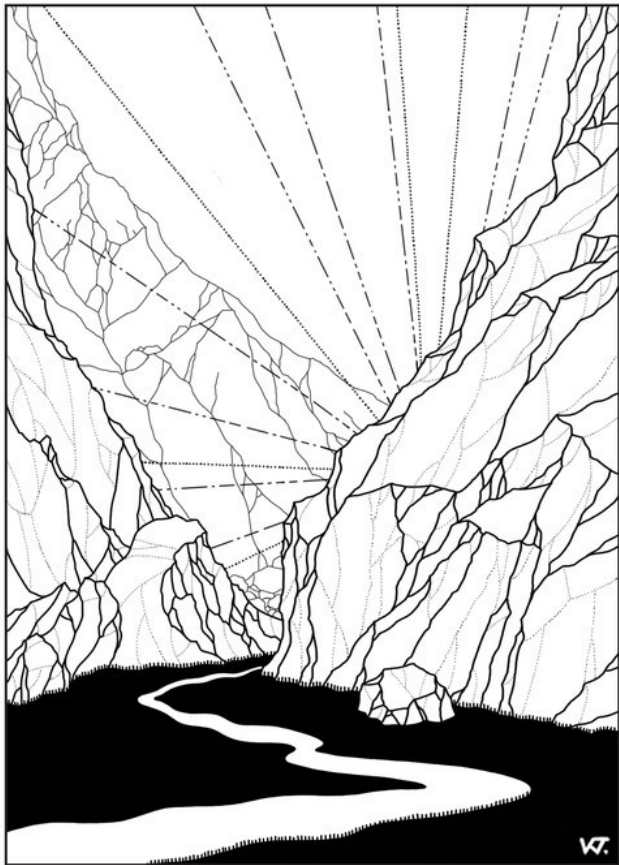
Foreword

I was born and raised in Central Asia, at the crossroads of the Turkic, Persian and Arabic cultures. The gardens and vineyards bathed in the southern sun, the towering mountains with sharp peaks abutting the vast Central Asian sky, the bustling eastern bazaars with an endless assortment of condiments, oriental flat bread, fruit and vegetables – and filled with all of the sellers and unique aromas of spices – always inspired and fascinated me. And the tales of *The Thousand and One Nights*, the travels of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta along the Silk Road, and the poetry of Omar Khayyam, Hafez and Rudaki, strongly influenced the formation of my world view. Indeed, my heart and soul are deeply rooted in the East, with its charm, slow pace and its overflowing energy – a spicy hot melting pot in which hundreds of nations and cultures have come together. At the moment, I work as a winemaker in Central Europe. Additionally, I travel frequently and enjoy studying the cultures and gastronomic specialities of different countries. I am particularly interested in folk epics, tales, myths and legends.

During long summer evenings under the Central Asian skies streaked with Milky Way constellations, and with a piala of green tea, my little sister in her insatiable curiosity demanded new tales to help her sleep better. And when all the famous stories had already been told, I felt like Scheherazade on the 300th night! It

became clear that the time had come to ignite my imagination and create, create, create. Thus, the novel “The Great Mist” was born. It came together like a khan-atlas patchwork. Like a solid stained glass with a colored mosaic of legends from the East and West. In time, on paper, the novel began to live its own mysterious life. This fantasy tells the story of love and hate, of passion and longing, of dreams and reality – all on the edges of consciousness and subconsciousness. The prophetic components of the story have come true with an unobtrusive effect on the readers, changing the course of their lives in a mystical and unknown way.

Part I. Kiar and Amalu



Chapter 1. The Gray Kingdom

In a gray-gray land, where the sun never shines, the trees do not grow, the rainbow streams do not sing and the trills of a nightingale are never heard across the fragrant gardens filled with moonlight; where, instead of air, there is only a gray, dense mist and the earth is scattered with dull stones and shabby bushes with sharp thorns – there is a small village surrounded by impregnable mountains.

Once upon a time, the village was called “the Kingdom”, and it was filled with the laughter of children and the fragrance of freshly baked bread. Whitewashed cozy houses on either sides of the road, paved with colorful pebbles, were smothered in flowers. The plain, on which the now-windswept wasteland with prickly-as-wire bushes and heather was spread, bloomed with endless gardens. And every autumn, the tree branches bowed deep to the ground under the weight of juicy fruits.

Now, above the gray, silent village, fear was looming. It paralyzed the hearts of the sullen people. It strangled their joy and dreams and swirled like a heavy mist throughout the abandoned houses. And if you looked into the dark windows of the houses, into the gaping black eye sockets, it seemed as if ghosts were moving in the depths of darkness.

If you looked at the mountains behind the wasteland, you could see a small crevice. It was said that a road was there,

leading from the village. But no one could confirm this, because anyone who had ever gone to take the road had never returned. However, in the Kingdom, there was a legend that said: in a past time – of which anyone alive now has no recollection – someone called Udr, an evil and extremely powerful wizard, enchanted the road. But people were afraid to speak about it.

People here had little contact with each other. Each lived in his or her fantasy world, filled with memories and regrets about their past. About the times when the sun was shining every day in the Kingdom; when manly, handsome princes and beautiful princesses walked along the road while sounds of marvelous music and jousting tournaments were heard from the castle on the top of the mountain above; when the Kingdom was full of flowers and children's laughter.

Now all adults were gone. They followed the road in the hope to find a better life, and possibly remove the curse. Whatever they found – none of them came back to tell about what they saw. It was said that at night the heather fields behind the wastelands glowed with blue lights; those were the small folks prowling around, searching for children, and turning them into ugly and stupid trolls underground, where they would be forced to look for treasures in the very bowels of the earth.

Everything was gray: the gray fog, gray rocks, looming gray clouds and even the people turned gray. It was as if someone had stolen the sun and light and all the children except Kiar and

Amalu. They were often found in the heather on the border with heath, where the road made a sharp turn to the gray bush.

And if they only had a chance to see the world in colors, then Kiar would see a charming little girl with unusual gray eyes. It was not a dull gray color that surrounded the eyes all day long, but it was a light smoky hue with small droplets of sun running from the pupil. She had thick and wild red hair that would shine in a heavy copper color in the sun. She had a slightly elongated face framed by a few freckles. Her little red mouth was created to smile, but more often it was impacted, so that the lips formed a narrow line.

Looking at Kiar from under her long dark copper eyelashes, Amalu would see an unusually pale thin boy with jet black hair, a slightly elongated and narrow face with touching, sorrowful folds at the corners of his mouth, and heart-stopping eyes – eyes that were deep-set, strikingly blue and full of unspoken yearning. Only when Kiar looked at Amalu, his eyes softened and were filled with warmth and infinite love.

The children loved each other with that gentle, sincere and selfless love of which the young and pure of heart could be capable.

And now, sitting on a rock near the road and tearing dry twigs of heather, Kiar asked:

“Amalu, do you know what happened to your parents?”

“No,” the girl said sadly, shaking her head. “I have often wondered about it, and asked my grandmother, but she was always afraid to talk about that subject. She only cried when she thought I wasn’t looking at her. Once she let slip that they left by this very road.”

“I will also follow the road when I grow up! I am tired of sitting in the gray mist, waiting for something to happen and being afraid of everything!” Kiar exclaimed angrily, as his black eyebrows instantly converged on the bridge of his nose. “Will you come with me?”

“Of course,” Amalu said, and then smiled before beginning their favorite topic of conversation. “What do you think is there beyond the gray mountains?”

“Probably there is a castle and another good Kingdom where there are many children living with their parents. Ah, I would do anything to escape from here! We could become wandering gypsies and trot around the whole world!”

“Yeah, I can’t wait to grow up and go on a journey!”, Amalu exclaimed, throwing her dreamy eyes to the leaden and overcast skies. “Do you think we will be able to find our parents?”

“I do not know. Why did they leave you and never return? And

who are my parents? And what happened to them?” Kiar sullenly drew unknown figures on the ground.

“I do not know,” Amalu said sadly, and then sighed as two tears rolled down her cheeks onto the sand.

“I’m sorry, Amalu, do not cry,” said Kiar gently as he pushed back her fluffy hair and ran his fingers in surprise down the lachrymal traces of her face, leaving a black mark. “Let’s imagine what will become of us when we grow up?”

Hand in hand, they went home. The house where Amalu lived with her grandmother stood far from the main road, where the gray rocks crept closer. The house was small but cozy with a tiled roof and large windows that allowed sunlight to warm wide windowsills with embroidered cushions. But now as there was no sun, the windows were draped with a thick cloth, and the cushions embroidered with flowers were the only reminder of the magnificent flower garden in front of the house.

“Well, when I grow up, I’ll become as beautiful as a princess,” Amalu said, kicking a stray pebble from the road. “We will go on the road through the mountains, and you will fight for my favor at all tournaments.”

She glanced slyly at Kiar, watching his reaction.

“Well, I already have your favor,” Kiar chuckled with confidence.

“Actually, the favor of a beautiful lady must be won – as it is written in all the books!”, Amalu said with a flare of resentment. “I could give my favor to someone else, you know! Anyway I’ll be so beautiful in a red skirt, I’ll look like a gypsy lady, and everyone will admire me!”

Amalu’s favorite book was about the wandering gypsies. Imprisoned in a Gray Kingdom, she thought that one could not imagine a better life than the life of wandering, noisy and funny gypsies.

“But you will still love me, right?”, Kiar looked at Amalu peacefully and took her hand again.

“Of course,” at once surrendering, Amalu smiled.

“You know, I would have found and fought Udr himself for you!”

“Oh, do not say that, please! What if he wins? I could not bear it.”

Kiar smiled, and children rushed to the house

At home, the nourishing dinner was, as always, laid out for them: boiled wheat grains and goat cheese; steaming porridge embracing a slice of slowly melting butter. The hungry children ate it all quickly. They had a lot of time before darkness fell, so they began to look through a small library. While studying the beautiful and unusual pictures, the children coaxed their grandmother – who was by the fire, knitting a long, warm and fluffy afghan – for the umpteenth time to tell them about the ancient legends of valiant warriors, about the unknown and wonderful countries, about mythic creatures that had once inhabited this world! Turning the pages of a book about gypsies, Amalu saw her beloved picture: a young Gypsy woman with a huge rose in her wild, loose hair was spinning in a whirlwind of frantic dancing.

“Oh, how beautiful she is! How I want to be like her!”, the girl cried out, looking with fascination at a rose in the dancer’s hair.

“I’ll search everywhere in the Kingdom and find the same rose for your soft hair!”, Kiar exclaimed.

He felt a little embarrassed, as he had never told Amalu how much he liked her, and how he loved her delicate and fluffy, soft hair that smelled so wonderful. Sometimes, when they made their daily rendezvous on a rock in the wasteland, Kiar pushed the strands of Amalu’s hair through his fingers. He was happy with

the feel and smell of her hair, something that calmed him down. Of course, this was not the reason that they were there – they did not sit for the entire day on a rock just to make up Amalu’s hair! They waited and waited, hopelessly and unceasingly, to hear the clatter of hoofs and the hubbub of cheerful voices; for people to come and save them, rid them of that terrible curse, to return their beloved parents. But it was only a cold wind from the mountains that rustled through the dry heather.

In those days of late autumn, dusk came early. And at night, when the fog fell on the village, the first frosts painted the windows with fancy curlicues. Soon, Kiar decided to go home; he did not want to be lost in this thick and sticky fog. His home was near, even closer to the rocks. It was small and abandoned. Almost all the time Kiar spent with Amalu, and he came home only to sleep. No one knew who his parents were; they have simply never been seen by anyone. According to the stories of Amalu’s grandmother, one gray afternoon at the age of three years, Kiar appeared in an abandoned house close to the rocks, where Amalu had found him. Because of this mysterious appearance, people disliked and feared Kiar. It was even said that the heath-elves had left him there. But, as reasonably questioned by Amalu, why would they leave the children if they stole them? So children decided that Kiar was too obnoxious and nasty a troll, so the elves had to return him back to the joy of Amalu.

Every evening, after chewing a piece of bread and drinking some warm milk, Kiar sat by the window and watched how the sea of mist descended from the sharp peaks of rocks, it eddied like the waves of a huge tide and flooded the village, slowly creeping up to his house and completely swallowing it. And no matter how much he tried to make out anything in the gray-black velvety gloom, at least the tiny lights of the heather elves, he could not.

The night passed slowly, and sleep did not come. Kiar would doze and re-awaken continuously. His thoughts became jumbled and the line between dreams and reality became thinner. If only there were the Sun or the Moon! Even just for a little while! How things would change! Colors would return to the world, the fog would clear, and from the window he would see the house of Amalu, where on a wide windowsill with a candle, she would be reading a book while wrapped in a knitted blanket. And through the open window, the scent of roses would pour inside. He could just look at her in the moonlit glow of the candles, playing with her hair, and be perfectly happy. He would be able to pick a rose from her garden and decorate this wonderful hair.

“Roses! Yes, roses... I guess that would be the smell of Amalu’s hair”, thought Kiar.

Early in the morning, unable to sleep, Kiar went to the window. It seemed as if an unknown voice from the very heart

called for him. His hot forehead pressed against the cold glass. Kiar looked longingly at the fog. Maybe someone has stolen the Sun and the Moon; maybe the elves had wandered among the rocks with their lights? What a hero he could become, if he was able to return the Sun to the people, if he could free the Kingdom from the evil spell.

Later Kiar could not remember what prompted him to make this desperate step. The desire to become a hero. To fulfill the dream of Amalu and give her a rose? To perform this act of bravery in her name? Who knows what drove us when we were twelve years old, and of what unspeakable madness we were capable in the name of a first love?

Kiar took a candle and opened the door. Like an army of little imps, fog curled for a moment of indecision at the threshold, and then rushed into the house, washing over Kiar as a cold wave. Kiar made a step and walked into the unknown.

Immediately it became quiet and scary. The candle went out. How could the uneven light break through the fog, so thick like currant jam. Kiar walked and walked, as he thought, to the rocks, but in this fog it was impossible to be sure. And suddenly, he was obsessed with panic. What had he done, fool? Why did he go out of the house? How could he find his way back? Who knew what awaited him in this fog? All the old legends suddenly came to life in his imagination, and the silence of the moving mist pressed down strongly on him. Unable to stay on his feet, he

sat down on the wet ground. It seemed to him that the unknown and ancient ghosts surrounded him and narrowed their demonic circles more and more, performing silent dances around him. He wanted to scream, but could not; he wanted to get up, but his legs stopped obeying him. He could not remember how long he had sat in horror on earth. It could have been for a mere moment. Or maybe his entire life had passed.

But then in this suffocating silence, he thought he heard a weak soft chime. “Ding-ding”. And then “ding-ding” again. What was it? Was it the trick of imagination? But no; once again, “ding-ding, ding-ding.” What was that? A quiet, quiet song as if from under the ground, or not a song at all. But the chiming bells, bells that were certainly from the very yellow gold that had been collected by the old monk on the deserted shore – it had been melted from the crown of a great king! This was Kiar’s conclusion, and it gave him strength. The fog began to disappear, forming the opening to the rocks, which blurred lines he saw at the end of this tunnel. The further he walked into the unknown, into the thick darkness, the clearer and louder he heard the chime. This gentle sound drew him like a magnet, and it seemed that the darkness parted and gold, mysterious light poured from a small slit in the rock. Golden light! Not white, not gray and not black, but truly golden! Kiar held out his hand to feel the tingling warmth of this wonderful light and the fog was gone, the Kingdom disappeared, and he found himself in another world.

Chapter 2. The Magic Valley

The abundance of light, colors and scents made Kiar dizzy. The immense valley bathed in golden sunlight stretched out before him. Fluffy white clouds slowly slid across the blue sky. Small streams singing like tiny golden bells ran from the rocks. They washed the flowering meadows where butterflies fluttered and cicadas cracked in the midday heat. They glided through the gorges and ravines, where majestic pines with heady scent grew. The streams murmured and sparkled, falling into a broad and deep river, carrying away its heavy waters. The fog was gone; it curled only at the sharp peaks of rocks, as if afraid to go down, recalling the other world.

Kiar's heart was filled with unrestrained joy and delight. He looked and looked around, unable to move. Here in this Magic Valley, filled to the very brim with life, he wanted to live with Amalu. The thought of Amalu gave him energy and power, and he rushed back to awaken Amalu and to bring her here. But the rocks closed; the slot was gone. Only a solid mossy stone wall was before him. Kiar ran along the cliffs farther and farther away, but the rocks stood inexorably and the gentle streams murmured, as if trying to persuade the boy to stay. Kiar ran along, and it seemed as if the rocks were growing, as if they were getting higher and stretched farther. And the Valley grew with them, immense and infinite, and terribly beautiful. However Kiar was not scared:

the farther he looked into the distance, the more intrigued he became; he did not feel any fatigue or frustration, but enthusiasm and curiosity instead. And gradually, he had forgotten why and to where he ran. He forgot about Amalu and Gray Kingdom. He ran and ran, listening to the rushing streams, birds singing, and soft murmur of the deep river. He admired the quiet backwaters with blooming lilies, the sun reflecting in the clear water; he admired the pebbles on the bottom, so reminiscent of the pebbles on the road in the Kingdom, although those pebbles were colored by the play of lights and shades. The taste of the water was different – sweet and slightly salty; it quenched his thirst and beckoned him to drink it again and again.

Kiar laid down close to the river with his hands behind his head. Tall grass surrounded him, rustling from the wind that was blowing from the south. The sound of the river calmed him and, almost asleep, Kiar thought that the mermaids, the beautiful and menacing mermaids, should definitely live in this river. But the elves from the wasteland just could not be here! Elves live only in the gray mist, and guarded this Valley in such a way that not a drop of color could seep through the rocks into the Kingdom. When Kiar woke up, the silver night fell upon him.

The moonlight and a soft soothing song, the most beautiful song he had ever heard, woke him up. He turned to the backwater and saw a mermaid drenched in the moonlight. She was sitting on a flat stone at the river bank, and her very long and straight, green hair filled the water, with a torrent sweeping it away. Thousands

of white-blue fish brushed her hair with nacre, or was it the moonlight that sparkled and trembled on the water surface? Kiar came closer to the mermaid, the scales on her strong tail glittered and she beat the water with it, pouring a sheaf of silver spray over the boy. Her eyes, bright and filled with the moonlight, were as shiny as the luminous, enchanting stars in the sky. Kiar stretched out his hand to touch the mermaid, but she only laughed and disappeared into the air, and her voice, which resembled the murmur of fast-flowing streams, continued to laugh as her silver-green hair turned into river algae.

Kiar was astonished and enchanted, he stood there with his hand stretched out, when suddenly he felt a cool heaviness on his palm: there was a smooth white stone, still wet with water. It seemed that the stone was pulsing and murmuring something in an unknown language. Kiar put the stone close to his ear and listened to it: the dried stone became lifeless, only the light murmur continued to pray for something. Kiar dropped it into the water. Right in the place where the circles of dark troubled water were approaching the bank, there appeared a boat as white as the moon. He did not understand how he knew what to do, as if a soft mermaid voice whispered to him. The boy climbed into the boat and it rushed him with the torrent to the cool breeze and mysterious sighs of boundless seas. The song or laughter of the mermaid continued; it grew sadder and sadder.

Kiar awoke from the broaching calls of seagulls on the wet sand, and the boundless blue sea sighed noisily and muttered

at his feet. The stars faded, the sky paled, the dawn was approaching. Kiar stood undecided at the very edge of the approaching waves. The sea was calling after him; and with every cell of his body, he wanted to become a part of it. Yet he was undecided. Somewhere deep inside, he felt the need to return. He tried to remember to where, to whom and why – but he could not. The first rays of the rising Sun shone on the white foam, and Kiar saw laughing mermaids. With their white hands outstretched, they were laughing and calling after him. He found himself running towards the foaming waves, where he was picked up by the sea mermaids and carried away in the underwater kingdom.

Long iridescent hair of sea mermaids sparkled even in the gloomy depths of the bottomless sea; their voices were giggly and happy. Mermaids whispered something funny to Kiar while they were rushing past the peculiar rocks, the lost cities and the sunken ships, all dotted with heaps of shells gnawing at their wooden flesh. There, where the sun's rays penetrated the thick dense greenish water and reaching the sandy bottom, white corals grew, studded with variegated flowers with transparent fluttering petals.

Mermaids did not have any palaces or houses. They never sleep. They only rush through the water of the seas and oceans, sing beautiful songs under the full moon or during storms – causing ships to sink and brave sailors to forget about their life on earth. And so Kiar was rushing with them over the vast spaces,

forgetting everything; he was happy and comfortable with the mermaids, the fish, the bizarre marine plants. And gradually, he began to feel as transparent as a drop of water, with the sun's rays penetrating through him. So they continued to sail, surrendering to the will of the currents. They sang the sea songs, and during storms, they jumped into the rushing whirlpools from the foamy edges of waves. And Amalu was not in his thoughts anymore, there were no memories left of the elves from the wasteland or of a Magic Valley. Once, on a moonless night under the rushing clouds, the mermaids started singing. They sang about a girl who cried and her tears flooded the vast sea. Together with the girl, the skies cried with rain. The sun could not reach the seabed, and the flowers did not tremble anymore from the gusts of sea currents. And Kiar remembered: he remembered the Kingdom, he remembered Amalu, he remembered the gray rocks and the extinguished candle and sticky dense mist.

And at the same moment he was lying again on the soft grass in the Valley, full of colors, moonlit. Somewhere an invisible river mermaid was singing. And in his hand was a smooth mermaids stone. But Kiar knew he should not listen to its whisper and should not throw it in the water; otherwise, even the tears of Amalu would not save him from the sea. Only the magic of their love brought him back. He was unable to throw the stone away, so it could be lost with hundreds of the same stones on the river bank. Kiar stared at it, painfully trying to figure out what to do, how to act, and, in the end, with a bitter sigh, he put it

in his pocket. So infinitely happy Kiar had never been before, and he wanted to go back there, to merge with the sea, to become part of it. But the time had not come yet. Amalu was waiting for him. Maybe someday he would use the mermaid stone – but not now. Not now. And as always, the thought of Amalu led him out of his stupor. He remembered that it was necessary to find a way out of the Valley, remembered how far he ran away from the mossy rocks.

But somewhere deep in his soul he knew that it was impossible to get away from them. They would stand there so inviolably and menacingly, on the border of the Valley and the Kingdom. They would look at him sternly from a distance, and at their very tops the gray mist would swirl treacherously. They would not call for him, as opposed to the sea, but Kiar had already made his choice and went toward them.

Going back was hard. He was so tired, his legs were leaden, and heavy sleep strove to close his eyelids. Kiar thought about Amalu, and that he should not fall down and sleep – the very idea frightened him because, otherwise, he would not get out of here.

The Valley held him and would not let go. It seemed as if it were saying to him: “Stay here with me, listen to the water, listen to the earth, listen to the clouds and you will be happy forever!” But Kiar stubbornly went ahead.

Kiar was not far away from the rocks. He could see the patches of moss and hear gurgling streams, but then he smelled a distinctive scent; it was warm and lovely. He stood mesmerized,

unable to make a single step. What was that scent? So familiar and so dear? Amalu! Yes, that was exactly the smell of her hair, her beautiful, soft hair. But she could not be here! Kiar followed the smell; it seemed to waft from the huge tree nearby, its thick, old branches intricately intertwined and its trunk so huge that an entire house could be in it. However, the smell was not from the tree – but from the flower that grew on its roots. The closer Kiar was to the flower, the more potent was the smell. Rose! It was a rose, exactly the same as in the hair of a dancing gypsy from the book of Amalu.

“I have to take it with me! How overjoyed Amalu would be! She wanted this rose so much!”, he said to himself.

Still enchanted from the scent of the flower, Kiar plucked the rose, and its sharp peaky thorns dug into his palm. Drops of salty blood watered the earth, and it let out a mighty and terrible cry. A cry that made Kiaf’s hair stand. A cry that shook the Valley, agitated the sea and made the rocks tremble. The river turned black, and the whole Valley fell silent, as if to strike. The cry was heard from all sides, and clouds in the sky formed a huge vortex that expanded faster and faster. The sky whirled, reminding Kiar of the clumps of gray fog. And then a figure of a woman began to emerge from the mist. She was beautiful and terrible at the same time. It was impossible to look away. But looking at her hurt his eyes; she glowed with a bright light in such a way that

only the outlines of her body and hair were engraved in Kiar's memory.

“How dare you, a mortal, disturb my peace?”, asked a deep voice, which reflected from the rocks. “How dare you disrupt a particle of my soul? Is it not enough that you were happy in the sea? I, the queen of the Valley, the great Norna, called after you, allowed you to be here and be happy, and you betrayed me! For this, I curse you! Your soul will not know peace, and you will never be happy, neither you nor the one you love!”

The fog covered Norna and started to fill the Valley. Kiar, unable to move, was watching how the wall of gray fog was rushing towards him. His arm ached, and he looked down. There laid a rose with its thorns ingrained deeply into his skin. “Amalu!”, he thought, when the fog engulfed him.

“Kiar, Kiar! You're back! What's the matter, can you hear me? What happened? O Lord!”

Kiar opened his heavy eyelids and saw Amalu, his beloved Amalu. But something had changed, she had become an adult, her hair had darkened, she was taller and more beautiful, but gray eyes with golden rays looked at him with unchanged love. And the lovely scent of her hair was soothing.

“Where am I, Amalu? What happened? Norna?! She will come after us, she will take away our happiness!”

Kiar tried to get up.

“Hush, hush, darling. You’re in the Kingdom, in my house. Everything will be fine.”

“The rose – where is it?”, Kiar whispered, struggling, feeling that energy was leaving him.

“It’s here, with you.”

“Oh, what have I done! I have stolen it for you,” he said.

Then Kiar became dizzy again, consciousness fading, and he began rushing through the waves of a raging sea, surrounded by the sea mermaids.

Kiar had suddenly appeared one misty gray morning. Amalu saw him lying prostrate and unconscious at her window. His hands were bruised and bleeding, and next to him was a rose. It was the same rose as in the picture from the book of her childhood. The joy of meeting was replaced by fear: what if he had already died? What had happened? But Kiar was breathing. Amalu took him quickly into the house and put him on the bed

that had once belonged to her grandmother. In the house, little had changed over the last ten years. Only a chair by the fireplace, where the old lady loved to sit, was empty.

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