

BOOK TWO OF THE DOMINIONS

A  
SUMMER NIGHT'S  
WISH

Lena Abram

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Editing by Wicked Words Editing

Cover design by GermanCreative



# CHAPTER 1

EVERYTHING started with Gabriel Rainforth.

That is, not literally everything. There were times when Gabriel hadn't existed, after all. For him to appear, his parents had to meet first, but for that meeting to take place, a whole series of events had to happen in the lives of both his mother and his father, which in turn had been the result of their parents' meeting... and so on, back to the first humans who had evolved from single-celled organisms, which had been the result of organic compounds melding, which in turn had been formed from inorganic particles. The origin of inorganic particles on this planet, of the planet itself, the moon, other planets, the sun, and the rest of the stars, along with objects such as black holes—it was a separate story.

Or rather a different fragment of it. Something like a prologue. That kind where a reader has no idea what is what, who is who, and what is going on—one that only its author understands.

Answers to the questions of who the author was, how they'd

gotten the ideas for this whole story, what tools they'd used to write it and where they'd even gotten them from—that was metadata. Encrypted.

*Before you delve into considerations of the technology used to encrypt it, a pragmatic part of Nika's mind interjected, I remind you that you were only supposed to remember.*

*The events of the last two days, her inner analyst specified.*

*For therapeutic purposes, Safety Advisor added. Go through it again, have a good weep, and waste no more energy.*

*It is not a waste of energy to ponder the nature of all things, Philosopher rejoined.*

*Cynic ignored her. There was also drinking on the agenda.*

Nika reached for a glass filled with red wine and took a long gulp.

And then two more, to endure the romantic setting. This wasn't the first time she'd meditated on a terrace, bathed in the rays of the setting sun, but it was the first in a long time when she had looked at the rippling sea not dreaming.

At the memory of dreams she often dreamed, bitterness pierced her heart like a thorn.

*First things first, Safety Advisor suggested.*

*And more wine, Cynic added.*

Nika took another sip and plunged into memories.

\*\*\*

It started with Gabriel Rainforth. Not everything, though Gabriel probably wouldn't mind such a statement, just as he wouldn't be offended by the comparison to a deity. Overconfidence was a common affliction among creators, and as the builder of the Tower of Babel, as the astronomical observatory on Svalbard was commonly called, and now also the Atlantic Route, the highway that would soon connect Great Britain and Canada, Gabriel was a model example. However, it wasn't his character that Nika thought about when she accidentally met him on one of the streets in Gdansk.

"Has heaven opened, or do I see an angel?" the dark-haired

man asked with a broad smile, blocking her way. As Nika instinctively drew back, he hastily removed his sunglasses, revealing the blue irises whose color was emphasized by his navy-blue polo shirt. "It's me, angel. Remember?"

They had only met once, at the conference organized by the authorities of Vineta, but how could she have forgotten? He knew the most embarrassing pick-up lines she'd ever heard. But that was not a problem. The problem was the attention he attracted. A handsome, wealthy twenty-nine-year-old at the forefront of the greatest magical project in history—this alone was enough for the media to want to talk about him. Because of his many affairs, they wanted to talk about him often.

"I remember," Nika said, scanning her surroundings and missing the sunglasses she'd left in the car. "And don't call me 'angel.'"

Several dozen feet away, she saw two police officers, but she was willing to bet that they weren't the only ones who patrolled the area. At this time of the year, crowds of tourists flooded the picturesque streets of the Old Town and police patrols weren't uncommon, but the wary looks the policemen were throwing at them left no doubt what their main task today was.

"Why not?" Gabriel asked, completely ignoring the scrutiny. "I'm certain that if you had a label, it would be 'made in heaven.'"

The corners of her mouth curved slightly upward, but when she noticed the gaze of a strange man who wasn't a police officer, they dropped. She was about to politely wiggle out of the conversation when the stranger, standing in front of a green-painted tenement house, turned his head in a different direction.

"You don't have to be so nervous," Gabriel said, gesturing for them to step aside a little. "I'm just passing through. Nobody knows me here."

Nika looked at him, slightly abashed. She didn't want to treat him as a potential source of problems just because he was famous, but...

He really was the potential source of problems.

Nika decided to be honest. "Forgive my caution, but it's rare that a photo of a woman you are talking to in a public place doesn't

hit the news. I have nothing against you, but I'd rather avoid the publicity."

His gaze sharpened. "Still hiding, angel?"

Nika felt warmth on her cheeks. She didn't know what Gabriel had heard about her, but she liked being asked about her life choices as little as she liked the sting of shame that always accompanied such questions.

Before she could react, Gabriel smiled. "Don't worry," he said and put back on his glasses. He waited for a group of people to pass them and added, "In the photos you mentioned, I usually do more than just talk. Even if some journalist is now taking a photo of us, compared to the previous ones, it would be so boring that nobody would want to publish it."

Nika gave him a weak smile. Yes. In the company of women, Gabriel usually did more than just talk.

The man slipped his hands into the pockets of his white pants, adopting a laid-back pose. "But if you feel like crossing breaths, we can go behind the kiosk."

Nika snorted. "Is that the Text of the Month?"

"Nope. The Text of the Month is: 'I would chew your mouth like raw bacon.'"

"Oh, my God."

Overall, it was a fun encounter, even with the police hovering around. After a disquisition about how his first name matched her last one—Serafin—and how that made them an angelic couple, Gabriel asked her about places and restaurants to visit, then said goodbye, stating that he was going to buy a map because he was lost in her eyes. He was outgoing and eloquent, and it wasn't difficult to figure out what women saw in him, but what Nika found impressive and what she envied him was his unwavering confidence. No matter what embarrassing or spiteful things people wrote about him or how many eyes looked at him, he dismissed them with a shrug and carried on as usual, and that mostly meant producing other reasons for gossip.

But self-confidence was a trait she admired in all the people who had it; besides, her thoughts had been dominated by another

man for years, so however charming Gabriel was, her heart didn't flutter a bit.

That is, figuratively it didn't flutter. In reality, it was working as usual...

...until she remembered what she had been thinking about before Gabriel had surprised her. At that point, it stopped, and then resumed work at a slightly accelerated pace.

*I can't tell him*, she thought in horror as she turned onto the street where she'd parked her car.

*You promised Lila*, Philosopher reminded her. *And she held up her end of the bargain.*

*Spectacularly*, Cynic seconded her.

Nika couldn't argue. She and her friend had a deal—they were to confess their feelings to the men they were in love with: Lila to a guide she'd met on At'alan, and Nika to Artur, whom she had liked for years. But Lila had gone a hundred steps further and not only confessed to Isha her feelings but also proposed to him.

After a month of acquaintance.

*Two, actually*, Pragmatist said.

*Two, but only one they spent together*, Analyst clarified.

*Good gracious*, Nika thought, getting into the old silver sedan. *What was she thinking?*

\* \* \*

*Two days ago...*

"It just happened," Lila said when they were talking via a video chat app.

Nika gaped at the partially embarrassed and partially amused face of her friend. "What do you mean by 'it just happened'? Such things don't just happen!"

"So..." Lila stammered, then smiled helplessly. "I got carried away."

Nika's eyes were as big as saucers. "But... but... but Isha agreed?"

Lila nodded.

For a moment, they just stared at their digitally processed faces.

“So... you are engaged?” Nika asked.

“So it seems,” Lila replied.

Silence.

“But for real?”

“I think so.”

“You think so? Then you don’t know for sure?”

Lila let out a chuckle. “It wasn’t a conventional proposal.”

“So others might not acknowledge it?”

“Isha thinks it counts, so it counts.”

Silence.

Lila tucked a strand of brown hair behind her ear. “You aren’t going to congratulate me?” she asked, a little hesitant.

Nika denied hastily, “No, no! Congratulations! I’m happy for you! You’ve just surprised me. Stunned me even. Actually, I’m shocked! Of all the weird things you’ve done, this one tops everything!”

“Weird things I’ve done? It was you who persuaded me to come here! Twice!”

Yes, it had been like that. The first time, Nika had persuaded her friend to send an e-mail with a request for permission to visit mysterious At’alan, the second time to go there as a representative of Vineta and confess her feelings to Isha. But the truth was that it hadn’t taken long to convince Lila. It was something she’d wanted to do—what she’d had the courage to do—she had just needed a little incentive. Nika, who didn’t have the courage to do so many things herself, couldn’t watch such resources of it go to waste and had given Lila a lot of incentive.

And gotten entangled in the process.

Lila must have thought the same thing, for, having received no answer, she smiled, and a defiant gleam appeared in her brown eyes. “Your turn.”

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*You still have two months,* Security Advisor said when she was



driving through the jammed streets of Gdansk.

*Less than six weeks, Analyst specified. You had two months when you suggested this bet.*

*Why did I even do this?* Nika asked herself. *Lila could be persuaded without it.*

*You got carried away,* Cynic said in a sweet voice.

*Maybe you needed an incentive yourself,* Philosopher mused. *You are afraid, but you are also tired of this situation. You want to move on.*

*You have reason to be afraid,* Security Advisor chimed in. *You are business partners. What if he doesn't love you back?*

*It will be awkward?* Cynic suggested.

Pragmatist admitted, *Probably yes, at first. But if you both don't make a big deal out of it, then you'll get used to it.*

*Easy-peasy,* Cynic commented. *Don't worry about rejection, and tell Artur not to worry about you either. You will return to your programming cave, he will return to managing the entire company, and you can continue your quiet, carefree life.*

Nika felt the knot tighten in her chest. The worst part was that it was so tangled that she didn't know which thought hurt the most: the one about Artur's rejection or the one about shifting all responsibility for the company onto him.

*He may return your feelings,* Security Advisor spoke hastily. *But then you'll have to be careful that your feelings don't affect your work.*

*Easy-peasy,* Cynic repeated. *You will hide in your cave, he will manage the entire company, and you will talk about feelings after work.*

*And what if you argue?* Analyst asked.

Pragmatist started, *If you don't argue about business matters...*

*You won't,* Cynic broke in. *You don't argue now; why would you suddenly start? Just do what you always do. Leave all decisions to Artur.*

*But what if you have a different opinion about the company?* Analyst insisted. *Or he finds he is unable to work with you, knowing about your feelings? Will you give him the company or run it yourself?*

*Of course you will run it,* Cynic sneered. *You are raring to go! But don't worry, your parents will help you. You won't starve, and you won't have to work for someone you don't want... For about three years. Then*

*you will have to ask your younger sister for help, have a baby, or start to fend for yourself. Or all those things at once.*

If these weren't the same arguments she'd been repeating in her head thousands of times, instead of going to the company, Nika would probably have gone home and finished her work there, too depressed to be around people. But this wasn't the first time she'd fought this battle, and rather than shame, pain, or fear, it was fatigue that pestered her. She'd been in this state of limbo for so long that it'd simply gotten boring.

The problem was she couldn't get out of this loop of feelings and thoughts. As soon as she decided to tell Artur how she felt about him, her excitement was immediately overshadowed by fear of the future. When she leaned toward the safe decision to leave things as they were, she was overcome with doubt about whether that decision was really so safe. After some thought, she decided it wasn't because it carried exactly the same problems as the first one minus the awkward situation between her and Artur. Thus she concluded that it wasn't her relationship with Artur that was the cause of her fear and irritation, but her own indecision. She wanted to try a relationship with Artur, but at the same time she was afraid that the fact they were working together would start bothering her. She didn't want to run the company, and Artur knew it—he had known it from the beginning and accepted it—and yet she still felt she wasn't doing enough. Or rather, that she was having fun and he was working. An argument like “he wouldn't do it if he didn't like it” didn't convince her for long. She didn't want to be the boss, yet she couldn't imagine not having the freedom she had now. She could come and leave whenever she preferred, or just work remotely if she felt like it. It was her ideas that the programmers executed and the company's products were based on. She chose her tasks. Where else would she have such freedom?

*On Vineta, Pragmatist prompted. You'd just have to be careful not to drop a satellite on people's heads.*

*Amazing alternative, Cynic remarked.*

She wanted freedom.

She didn't want responsibility.

She wanted to pursue her own projects.

She didn't want to manage people.

She wanted Vineta to exist.

She didn't want its fate to depend on her.

She wanted love.

She didn't want children.

Pragmatist suggested, *Do something and react to the consequences, or do nothing and stop whining.*

*And react to the consequences of doing nothing,* Cynic added.

And so on and on, until she wasn't sure what she wanted and what she didn't.

But one thing she knew for sure.

She needed a change.

She just didn't know what kind.

\* \* \*

Nika parked the car in the underground parking lot, grabbed her large beige purse from the seat, and started toward the stairs. She rarely used the elevator, even in the ten-story apartment building she lived in. She may have been oversensitive, but it was the kind of oversensitivity that her bodyguard, Aleks, would call caution, so she didn't reproach herself for it anymore. Even if she would have enjoyed the small, confined space and the small talk some people felt obligated to start in this kind of room, there was still the matter of limited self-defense options and the lack of escape route, right? Besides, the use of stairs not only improved her condition but also cut the time when someone could look at her to a minimum. Useful when wearing sneakers, camo joggers, and a loose t-shirt in a building full of people in suits.

The building that was now the headquarters of her company—hers and Artur's—was one of those inconspicuous low-rise office buildings that from the outside could easily be mistaken for a school or other public facility, but unlike offices or educational institutions, which were usually decorated in a bland, sometimes strange, and in extreme cases ugly way, the interior design was modern and elegant. Nika liked its inconspicuousness just as much

as she liked the non-work-related neighborhood—white houses with red roofs and lots of trees—but she still missed the old office, which may have been as glassy as the skyscrapers of the nearby business park, but inside it was easy to find cheerful color accents on the walls and startup employees in the hallways who didn't care too much about formalities. Not that the people working here were stiff and inaccessible, no—just the atmosphere of this place was more... serious.

Adult-like.

Despite her sentiment, Nika knew that more than the place, only a mile away, she missed the time she'd spent there. Especially the first months—when only she, Artur, and Norbert had been sitting at a wide table in a small-for-an-office bright room in the business incubator building—seemed to her like a distant dream. They hadn't yet worried about whether they'd be able to find enough customers or pay employees. Back then, all that mattered was the next lines of code, enthusiasm, and shared passion, and the future goal of developing the business was overshadowed by the current one—creating a good application.

Nika had liked the joyful simplicity of those days, but they hadn't programmed for the sake of programming, and eventually, they'd had to show the application to people. They'd started with a student party, the organizers of which Artur had become acquainted with, and testers bribed with discounts from sponsors. They'd ended up at the technology and transportation fair, where Artur had found their first customers.

And there was also Lila, who had tested the app during her travels and posted a review on her blog, but that had been a bit later.

They'd faced the predictable truth: programming was not enough to grow a company. They'd needed someone to answer all those emails with inquiries from potential clients and someone to answer the phone when the existing ones had problems. Someone who would take care of the advertising and someone who would control the documentation. They could no longer rely on random testers. They'd had to act professionally.

And when in addition to the app for transportation and logistics companies, they'd decided to develop a version for travelers, and one project had become two, they'd needed even more help.

Their small office had become cramped, and they would have moved out even if their contract with the incubator hadn't ended. They had been no longer a startup. They had become a regular company. Small and still developing, true, but profitable—even though the latter had been as much a result of luck as of effort.

Nika climbed up to the third floor and turned into the short corridor leading to the heavy oak door of their new office.

*The current office, she corrected herself. It was new months ago.*

Even though they'd landed not so far from their previous location, it'd taken some time to find a place that had not only been within their budget but also met their requirements. Nowadays, open space was in vogue, and most of the office was arranged this way, but after a few months of working in one room with people whose main task was talking on the phone, all programmers agreed that it would be better to look for an old-style office consisting of several separate rooms. It had ended up as always: Artur had heard from a friend who had a friend who... Then a story of how someone had something or knew someone they just needed and how Artur had gone to investigate a case that usually ended happily. This time, they'd gotten a venue that hadn't yet hit the bulletin board. In previous cases, it had been either external collaborators or new employees, whom Artur seemed to conjure out of thin air.

Nika smiled at the dark-haired Blanka, whose desk as a secretary was right next to the door of the first room situated along a wood-paneled corridor, and waved at Ida, who was responsible for marketing together with Kamil, sitting opposite her. Nika passed the closed door of the second room filled with the sounds of phone calls and was about to enter the programmer's room when Artur emerged from his study.

Actually, the study was also hers, and besides, Artur usually stayed in one of the other three rooms, while the last room served as a place to receive guests, but all that didn't matter against the warm look of bright eyes and the spontaneous smile that appeared

on Artur's face when he saw her.

*Breathe*, Security Advisor said.

*He often smiles like that and not just at you*, Pragmatist added.

Artur was a wiry man with a long, clean-shaven face and dark blond hair arranged in a fashionable hairstyle. He always took care of his look, though in the past he'd dressed more with a casual elegance similar to that presented by Gabriel, and not like now with the ostentatious class of a businessman.

The sexy businessman.

*This is not the time for such thoughts*, Pragmatist warned.

"Got what you wanted?" Artur asked.

"Yes," she replied, her tone light. "It took five whole minutes. You won't guess what I was doing for the rest of the time."

Artur looked at her with feigned seriousness. "You certainly didn't get stuck in a traffic jam."

"Certainly not."

After they exchanged smiles, Artur passed her and entered the next room.

*If he found you attractive, he would show it*, Pragmatist said.

Philosopher protested, *Maybe he has similar concerns to you.*

*He never touched you. At least not on purpose.*

*You didn't touch him either. You don't show him in any way that he attracts you.*

*He's the one who should make the first move*, she thought, not for the first time.

*Stereotype*, Philosopher remarked, not for the first time.

Nika entered the room occupied by the programmers and testers and waved hello to everyone, for the second time that day. She took a seat by the window, next to the desk belonging to a tall, stocky, brown-haired man who combed his bushy hair neatly upwards, let his bushy beard grow carelessly to the sides—but only up to a certain point—and wore a round steel earring in his left ear.

She had known Norbert from university. He was the first person Artur had convinced to collaborate, though in this particular case it hadn't taken him much effort. Despite being serious and meticulous in technical matters, Norbert was rather relaxed about

life and career, and working in a startup with an uncertain future apparently didn't fill him with anxiety.

"You're late," Norbert said in a grave tone.

"You want your game or not?" Nika asked, opening her purse to get a colorful case with a console game. For some reason, it had only been available in one store in Gdansk, in the Old Town, and when Norbert had found out that she was going to the consulate to pick up her new passport, he'd asked her to stop there.

The man held out an open palm. When she ostentatiously placed the case on it, he grinned and gave her five.

Little interactions of this sort helped Nika keep her gloomy thoughts under control. Despite all the formality, she was surrounded by ordinary people who seemed to enjoy their work.

Determined not to fall into another thought loop, Nika plunged into something that didn't require emotional analysis—the code processing data obtained from bus operators. That was how the rest of her day went, with occasional breaks for brief conversations, programming jokes, and something to drink. Because she'd taken a longer lunch break, she left later than the others, but still earlier than Artur, who was talking to someone on the phone when she said goodbye to him.

It had been a nice, quiet day, and Nika didn't really know where that daring impulse she felt walking down the stairs came from. Maybe she had it precisely because it had been a nice, quiet day and she felt safe.

Or maybe the sight of Artur acting with professionalism pulled a delicate string in her.

*He will know what to do*, she thought.

He would know what to do so that there was no awkwardness between them regardless of his answer. He was mature and practical. Kind. He wouldn't laugh at her.

He wouldn't hurt her.

Since she was used to having doubts, she didn't turn back right away. She stubbornly kept walking, waiting for sabotaging thoughts to pop up in her head. When they didn't appear, she forced herself to recall the cons, but all of them without exception

didn't matter in the face of the desire that suddenly ignited in her heart.

*Try*, Lila would say.

Nika touched the car door. All she had to do was get in and drive away and her peaceful life wouldn't change.

*It's not so peaceful if you're assailed by doubts every day*, Philosopher remarked.

*If you want peace of mind, decide on something*, Pragmatist added.

Nika lowered her hand and took a step back.

*Impulsive decision*, Analyst warned.

*Like most decisions in the history of mankind*, Philosopher said.

*Like most decisions Lila makes*, Pragmatist chimed in. *And she's still alive.*

Nika turned and slowly started back, feeling her desire mix with excitement and fear. Subconsciously, she expected that when she reached the third floor, fear would win, and yet this strange determination didn't leave her even when it was time to open the door and cross the office threshold again.

She didn't expect quiet music coming from Artur's study. She'd thought the phone call was his last task for today and when he finished, he would be getting ready to leave.

She didn't expect to meet someone else in the office. She thought everyone had left before her. She didn't factor in that someone might have been in the kitchen or the restroom when she'd left the office.

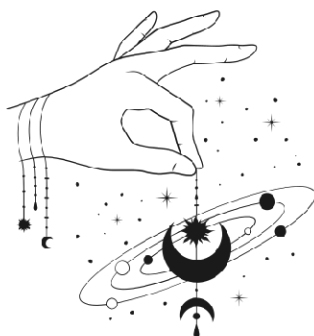
She hadn't expected to meet Blanka here. In general, but especially in that particular position—sitting on the desk with her pencil skirt pulled up.

She hadn't expected Artur to be having sex with her.

In general.

But especially here.





## CHAPTER 2

IT was like a scene from a romance book. A handsome young businessman fucking his secretary on his desk. Admittedly, in books, the businessman was usually a billionaire, and the whole thing took place on the top floor of a glass skyscraper, home to a company employing hundreds, if not thousands, around the world, but the basic narrative was correct.

*They apparently don't mind the basic narrative,* Cynic said.

*It's not relevant at the moment,* Philosopher remarked.

Pragmatist asked, *Are you planning to leave? Or are you just going to stand here and watch?*

*You were supposed to confess your feelings,* Cynic sneered. *Now is your chance. You won't have a better opportunity.*

Nika pursed her lips and retreated quietly, ignoring the rhythmic creak of the desk and the muffled voices that occasionally cut through the music.

*Why didn't they lock the door?* she wondered, leaving the

office. *They should have locked it.*

*Go back and tell them that,* Cynic offered, but Analyst approached her question as a problem to be discussed.

*Maybe it was their first time and in the burst of feelings they didn't think about it.*

*Maybe it wasn't their first time and in the burst of feelings they forgot.*

*Maybe it wasn't their first time and they intentionally left it open.*

*Or they don't care if it's open or not.*

*Because no one has caught them so far.*

*Or because they like the thrill of it.*

*Or maybe they want someone to see them.*

*Why would they want that?* Pragmatist asked.

*Does it matter?* Philosopher asked.

*Not at all,* Nika thought, numb. *Not at all.*

Like a robot, she went down to the underground parking lot and got into her car.

Only after a minute of staring at the keys did she remember what they were for.

Security Advisor suggested, *Maybe it would be better to walk?*

*Maybe it would,* she agreed but didn't make a move.

*Artur's car is parked nearby,* Pragmatist said. *If you stay here, he will see you.*

*And she will too,* Cynic added. *If she doesn't look at him at that very moment.*

That thought snapped her out of her numbness. Meeting Artur and Blanka just after they...

*Clutch, key, gas,* Security Advisor said. *And a remote control to open the garage door. Focus. It's only a few minutes' drive.*

For the next ten minutes, Nika concentrated on driving like a student taking a driving test, but as soon as she crossed the gates of the property, the images she was trying to block out showed in her mind with cruel clarity.

Artur leaning in to kiss Blanka.

The rolled-up sleeves of his white shirt revealing his forearms.

His hands on her bare thighs.

Nika gave up entering the underground parking lot and parked her car in front of the high-rise block in the first empty space she found. Then she threw the keys into her purse and started running toward the circuit in the back garden. Normally, she would have run to the nearby beach, but there were a lot of people there at this hour, and she needed the solitude.

Without slowing down, she threw her purse on the bench and ran onto the track. The joggers were moderately suitable for sport, and the claw clip she used to fasten her hair in a loose bun slid downward with every step, but the need to run was greater than physical discomfort.

*At least you know the answer*, Philosopher said.

*And you didn't have to experience a direct rejection*, Pragmatist added. *If you don't act weird around them, you'll also avoid the awkward atmosphere you were afraid of.*

*Nothing but pros*, Cynic mocked.

Tears pricked Nika's eyes, and she blinked to chase them away.

*So many years*, she thought. *I wasted so many years.*

She should have listened to Lila. She should have spoken to Artur a long time ago...

But would the result be different?

*It's too late for such thoughts*, Pragmatist said. *It is what it is. You wanted to know the answer and you got it.*

It was a wonderful example of reason and logic, but her heart, squeezed with sorrow, didn't give a damn.

*Sorrow?* Cynic asked. *Or envy?*

Nika quickened her pace. She ran until she felt that it was from lack of air that she was suffocating, and not from feelings tightening in her chest.

She didn't notice when a short-haired blond man with rough-hewn facial features and a prominent nose sat down on the bench next to her purse. Nor did she remember when she'd lost the claw clip he handed her when she finally slowed down and, after a relaxing lap, came closer.

"A bad day?" Aleks asked as she muttered a thank you.

When she carelessly pinned up her sweat-soaked hair,

he handed her a water bottle.

“Thanks.”

“So not a bad day?” he asked when she finished drinking and took the bottle cap from him without a word.

Nika gave him a weak smile. “So so.”

“Something I should know about?”

It was one of his standard questions and regarded her safety, but a new train of thought started in Nika’s head.

Aleks cooperated with the security of the building where her office was located.

He had access to the monitoring system.

There were no cameras in her office, but there were some in the corridors, parking lot, and front of the building. If Artur and Blanka had left together, the cameras had recorded it.

It was rare that something escaped Aleks’s notice.

Did he know that they...?

*So what if he knew?* she thought, abashed, picking up her purse from the bench. *It’s none of his business.*

Nika suspected that Aleks had guessed that she was in love with Artur, but feelings were not among the topics they discussed in each other’s company. Aleks was supposed to protect her from physical harm, not from a broken heart. He had no obligation to provide her with information about her business partner’s intimate life.

Aleks watched her with a careful gaze of cool blue. “What happened, Nika?”

“Nothing,” she said hastily. “I was just thinking. Nothing has happened that you should...”

She paused because she remembered Gabriel. Actually, she didn’t feel like bringing up that subject either, but she had promised Aleks honesty.

“I’ve met Gabriel Rainforth.”

If she’d expected him to take a moment to remember who Gabriel Rainforth was, she’d miscalculated.

Aleks leaped to his feet. “When and where?”

Nika was used to the muscular body of her bodyguard and the

fact that he towered over her in height and strength, but the sudden movement surprised her, and she stepped back reflexively. “Around two o’clock near the Consulate.”

She didn’t have to say that it was the Consulate of Vineta. She didn’t visit other diplomatic posts.

“Right under my nose,” Aleks murmured then added louder, “Did he do anything...?”

Were it not for the tension in Aleks’s voice, Nika would have laughed at the thought of how Gabriel’s reputation preceded him. “No, nothing, we just talked.”

“What did he want?”

Nika raised her hands in a reassuring gesture. “It was just a chat. I think he took a vacation.”

Aleks surveyed her face. Gesturing at the circuit, he asked cautiously, “So that’s not why...?”

Nika felt warmth on her cheeks. “No.” Because he didn’t seem convinced, she added, “That is different... You don’t need to know about it.”

Aleks frowned slightly, but since he always respected the boundaries she set, he didn’t pursue the subject. Instead, he focused on Gabriel again. “Was anyone watching you?”

“The policemen.”

“Anyone else?”

“There were a lot of people passing by.” Nika smiled helplessly, then added without much confidence, “Gabriel wore sunglasses.”

It calmed Aleks down like a storm calmed down a dog—not at all. “Did you check in the mirrors if no one was following you?”

Nika blushed even more. “No.”

Aleks’s expression didn’t change, as if her carelessness was just another variable in his calculations, but Nika felt stupid.

“It would be better to use a company car tomorrow,” was all he said.

Nika didn’t like being treated as an object to be protected, but people who were interested in her for the wrong reasons she disliked even more, so she nodded and headed toward the apartment building. If her leg muscles hadn’t been protesting after an hour of

running, she would have done another lap, but she settled for a slow climb to the tenth floor.

Physical effort was the only way to silence her thoughts for longer, but when she stripped off her sweat-damp clothes in the bathroom, her own nakedness acted on her memory as an incentive. She hurried into the shower, trying to focus on the water running down her skin, but due to the nature of the memories plaguing her, immersing herself in the physical sensations only resulted in more sorrow and envy.

*It would be nice to be in Blanka's place, huh?* Cynic asked. *And not just in a figurative sense.*

Nika reached for the soap, determined to complete the ablution process at an accelerated pace. Her whimsical imagination tempted her with images of a man's hands on her skin and her touch-starved body almost gave in to those whims, but the memory of Artur kissing Blanka cooled its ardor.

*You wanted to know the answer,* Pragmatist repeated again. *You got it.*

*You wanted a change too,* Cynic said. *But what has actually changed?*

*Nothing,* Nika thought. *Nothing changed.*

\* \* \*

Nika wondered for a long time if it wouldn't be better to stay at home. It was Friday, one day until the weekend. She would have three days to get used to the situation.

But...

*If Artur rejected you directly, you would want to prove to him and to yourself that what you feel does not affect your work,* Philosopher remarked, giving a final argument that ended her inner debate.

Although it was a logical decision, the type she liked best, her enthusiasm was minus one. When she read the message from Aleks asking what time she would like to leave, it dropped to minus two.

And her fear shot up to plus a hundred.

*Aleks would have told you if he knew of any leak,* Security Advisor noted.

The iron hand that squeezed her heart loosened its grip a little but released it completely only when Nika entered Gabriel's name in the search engine and saw that the last news about him had been published two weeks ago.

*Gabriel was right*, she thought with a mixture of amusement and embarrassment, staring at the photo of the creator kissing passionately a red-haired woman sitting on his lap. *Our photo would be extremely boring.*

Ultimately, she went to the office. Or rather, she was driven there by Nina, one of the couriers hired by Aleks, who in turn escorted her to the door, so she had no time to reminisce about yesterday and panic.

"I'll talk to security," he said before leaving. "If you need anything, call."

His vigilance should reassure Nika, but instead, she felt uneasy, even though she knew that thinking about the possible course of events was a part of his job and his predictions wouldn't necessarily come true. It had the advantage, however, because when she turned the key and entered the office, her heart was so preoccupied with worrying that the sight of the corridor and the door at its end caused her less pain than she'd expected.

At least for the moment.

Trying to act normally, she entered the programmers' room and put her purse on the desk.

She cracked the windows to let fresh air in.

She did the same with the first two rooms, trying to think of Blanka's desk as an ordinary piece of furniture rather than the desk of a secretary who was having an affair with her boss, who happened to be Artur.

*An ordinary piece of furniture doesn't usually receive so much attention*, Cynic remarked.

She walked into the kitchen, carefully avoiding with her gaze the study opposite to it, and opened the windows there as well.

She pulled out a mug with the text "Turning coffee into code" and set the coffee machine on.

Pragmatist suggested, *Better to do it now while you're alone.*



Nika took a deep breath and walked out of the kitchen, stopping in front of the wide-open door of Artur's study.

*It's also yours,* Analyst reminded.

*I don't want it,* she thought automatically.

Cynic snorted. *So much for your feelings not affecting your work.*

Nika bit her lip. A long moment passed before she lifted her gaze.

Two filing cabinets. Two computer chairs. Two chairs for guests.

And one long desk.

Nika felt as though her heart was about to shrink to the size of a coffee bean, but she didn't look away until the worst moment had passed.

Then she went to the kitchen to get a mug and returned to the programmers' room. Artur could air out his study himself.

The first employee who showed up was Blanka.

*Commendable punctuality,* Cynic commented. *Especially since the poor girl had to stay after hours.*

"Hi," Blanka said, stopping by on her way to the kitchen.

"Hello," Nika replied cheerfully.

She waited for Blanka to pass the room a second time, then she closed the door. She wanted to slam it but restrained herself.

Barely.

But still.

*You're spitting venom,* Philosopher remarked.

*You'd better figure out a way to inform Artur that you don't want sex in the office,* Cynic suggested.

*Amend the code of conduct,* Analyst prompted. *Or put "No Sex" stickers on doors.*

Nika giggled.

Then she put her headphones on and dove into the code again. After all, the work wouldn't do itself.

The anger that walled in her heart like a hard shell turned out to be quite useful. It not only cut off useless thoughts and helped her distance herself from the whole situation, but also revealed a whole new layer of determination that she hadn't noticed before,



engrossed in her own feelings for Artur. She hadn't come here for him. It was her project. She wanted it to be good. She still wanted to work on it.

Filip, Natalia, Igor, and Zuza were a bit confused by her enthusiasm when she asked them the standard questions about the progress of their assignments, but since it wasn't her first such merry outburst, they quickly recovered.

Norbert raised his eyebrow. "Do you stalk my code too?"

Nika grinned. "Of course."

"I find it disturbing."

"And I find it funny."

The sight of Artur was like being whacked with a club, but the angry shield around her heart endured, and Nika was able to greet him as if nothing had ever happened.

When he walked into the room for the second time, she only noticed him when he stood next to her.

"Can we talk?" he asked as she removed her headphones.

His attention and closeness felt like another emotional blow, and it took her a moment to realize that he meant talking in private.

In his study.

*Yours*, Analyst corrected her.

In the study where he'd had sex with his secretary.

Security Advisor hurried to help. *Think about the company.*

"Sure," she said, trying very hard not to sound aggressive. "I'll finish one thing and come in a moment."

Artur nodded and left.

Nika stared at one of the two monitors in front of her, trying to remember what she was supposed to do, but the only thing her memory suggested was the serious look on Artur's face.

*Something is bothering him*, Philosopher said.

Pragmatist wondered, *What might he want to talk about? You have the current affairs of the company covered.*

*Not if you include an affair with an employee among them*, Analyst noted.

Nika's heart lurched. Not because she suspected Artur of wanting to talk about this particular topic, but because she realized that

she wasn't the only person for whom business affairs mixed with private ones.

*What if he wants to leave?* she thought suddenly.

*Maybe he got a job offer elsewhere.*

*Maybe Blanka wants to leave and he will go with her.*

*Maybe...*

*You don't have enough data to make such statements,* Analyst remarked.

Pragmatist agreed, *You're wasting time.*

Nika had been reluctant to have this conversation, but now she was starting to dread it. In one of the many thought loops she'd fallen into, there was a thread about Artur leaving the company, but she'd always imagined his decision as a consequence of her own actions. She hadn't considered that she might not be a factor in his important decisions, just as it hadn't occurred to her that the company might not mean as much to him as it did to her.

*A common way of thinking among self-oriented people,* Cynic commented.

The shield of anger surrounding her heart dropped, leaving it vulnerable and exposed to blows.

*Expect that it will hurt,* Pragmatist said. *You'll cry at home.*

It hurt but not where she expected.

Or at least, not only there.

With her heart in her mouth, she entered the study and closed the door behind her. Artur, who was standing by the window, took his hands out of his pockets and walked over to his chair, but because Nika stopped a few steps from the desk, instead of sitting down, he put his hand on the backrest.

"I think someone is following you," he said. "A few minutes ago, a foreigner came here claiming to be a journalist writing an article about the startups in Gdansk. I agreed to the interview, but after a few questions I realized that it wasn't the history of the company he was interested in but yours."

Trying to avoid looking at the desk, Nika was so flustered by her feelings and thoughts that for a moment she had the impression that Artur was speaking in a language she didn't know, but one

word pierced through her mind.

Journalist.

Nika paled. If before her heart had been attacked with a club, now it was run over by a tank. "What did he ask about?"

"At first, about the usual stuff like where we got the idea and how we grew the company. Then he made a joke... and the questions became more personal."

The fact that Artur seemed uncomfortable told her what she hadn't heard from him yesterday.

He didn't see her in a romantic way. He didn't fantasize about her as she fantasized about him.

He didn't want her.

Nika forced herself to ask another question. "What did you do?"

"I told him outright that the conversation had taken a strange turn for an article about startups. He left shortly after." Artur hesitated. "I thought you'd want to know as soon as possible."

Before Nika could reply, there was a knock on the door. Artur gave her a questioning look, at which she crossed her arms and stepped aside, as usual letting him take the reins.

"Come in."

Blanka entered the room.

*I need fresh air*, Nika thought, numb, as the scent of the woman's perfume enveloped her.

Blanka turned to Artur. "There is a journalist here who would like to interview you."

Since it was the second time that day she'd shared similar information, a note of uncertainty in her voice might indicate that she found this coincidence exactly as strange as it was, and a quick glance at Nika that she started to suspect something. But what was that nervous gesture of clasping her hands when her gaze dropped to the desk for a moment?

*She feels uncomfortable?* Pragmatist suggested.

Cynic snickered. *What a surprise.*

*This might be the first time they did it here. Maybe they actually got carried away.*

*Artur doesn't seem embarrassed.*

*Maybe it was his idea. Blanka agreed but didn't anticipate how it would affect her work.*

*Who would have thought your golden boy had such shameless fantasies.*

*Does that mean he likes to dominate in the bedroom?*

*Ask Blanka. She will be happy to share the details with you.*

*How long have they been having an affair?* Analyst pondered.

Safety Advisor yelled, *A journalist is here!*

Nika tightened her fingers on her arms.

"What would this interview be about?" Artur asked his lover.

"She's writing an article about startups."

Artur looked over Blanka's shoulder at a short-haired woman dressed in a green business suit who had appeared at the doorway. "I'm sorry, but my schedule is tight today. Please make an appointment by phone."

The women quickly passed the secretary. "Just a few questions."

"About startups or gossip?" Artur asked when the stranger's attention shifted to Nika.

A good few years had passed since the photo of Nika had appeared in the press, but the journalist recognized her almost immediately. "Miss Dominika Serafin? Nice to meet you! Could I ask you a few questions?"

The answer was "no," and it must have been clearly visible on Nika's face as the journalist abandoned civility.

"What is your relationship with Gabriel Rainforth?" she asked, not waiting for permission. "Have you known each other for a long time?"

Being in the same room with Artur and that damn desk he had fucked Blanka on was hard, but being in the same room with Artur, that damn desk, Blanka and the gossip-seeking journalist resembled a grotesque nightmare. The strong scents of both women's perfumes were suffocating Nika as much as the knowledge that she'd become a media subject. Helplessness was the worst, though. There wasn't much she could do about something beyond her

control, was there?

Nika felt she was on the verge of an outburst, she just wasn't sure what kind. Would she scream? Would she weep? From a strategic point of view, stressing out on a journalist wasn't the best idea, but crying in front of her, in the presence of Artur and his lover, didn't sound like a solution that could bring her relief either.

"Please leave."

Hearing a male voice behind them, the women turned back. Even though sleek black pants and a white shirt said nothing specific about Aleks's position, his robust physique clearly suggested that he was closer to a security guard than a businessman, and the journalist didn't even try to question his right to ask people to leave.

"We're just talking," she said, smiling at him.

Aleks's cool gaze didn't warm a degree. "You lied to the security guard by pretending to be a client, and now you are disrupting the work of this company and violating the privacy of its owners. For this reason, you are asked to leave this building. Will you do it of your own free will, or should I follow a procedure that may not be very pleasant for you but that I am authorized to apply in this situation?"

The woman must have realized that if she wanted to learn something, she needed to hurry because she suddenly turned back to Nika and said with a serious expression, "Just a few questions. And you will have the right to review before publication, I promise."

Reassured by Aleks's presence, Nika replied in a neutral tone, "Please leave."

Nika had to admit: the woman knew when to back off.

"Can I at least leave a phone number in case you change your mind?" she asked, disappointed.

"No, thank you."

Compared to her earlier behavior, her farewell was quite polite. "I see. Have a nice day then."

"You too," Artur replied.

Aleks withdrew from the room, making way for the journalist. "My colleague will accompany you to the door," he informed her

as she passed him.

Cocking her head to meet his eyes, the woman protested, "I'm leaving of my own free will, aren't I?"

Aleks's lips curved up in a polite smile. "Thank you for your cooperation."

The journalist huffed softly but started toward the exit.

Aleks watched her for a moment, then entered the study and turned to Blanka and Artur. "Could I ask you to leave the room for a moment?"

Usually, he didn't address Artur, who was ten years younger than him, in such an official manner, but Blanka's presence had apparently triggered some diplomatic protocol.

"There was another one," Artur said, going around the desk. "About twenty minutes ago."

Aleks nodded and moved aside, making way for him and Blanka. When they left, he closed the door, then focused all his attention on Nika.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he said softly, coming closer. "I went out to check the monitoring system, but I should have sent someone to replace me. The photos had just been published, so these journalists apparently knew about them beforehand. Maybe even one of them took them."

Nika hugged herself tighter. "So you were here all the time?"

"I had a bad feeling."

She gave him a weak smile. "Nice intuition."

Aleks didn't stay with her in the office anymore, just as he didn't follow her every step like he'd done at the beginning of their acquaintance. Her life here had been peaceful enough that over time she'd given him more and more days off until eventually her parents began assigning him new responsibilities. Over the years, he had been promoted from her personal bodyguard to the head of security for all the local properties owned by her family, including the Consulate building, the dock shed, and the high-rise block where she lived. However, his primary task didn't change, and when needed, he accompanied her in his former role. He usually did that at her request, but there were times when he acted on his own.

Sometimes it annoyed her, but today she was grateful to him.

“Do you intend to continue working?” he asked when she averted her gaze. He hesitated, then added, “I’ll make sure no one bothers you anymore, but I can call a driver if you want.”

Nika had a lot of doubts, but one thing she knew for sure: she was fed up with the sight of Artur, Blanka, and that desk. She’d wanted to prove to herself that her feelings didn’t affect her work, and basically, she had succeeded, right? So what if it had lasted four hours. Rome wasn’t built in a day.

“I want to go home.”



## CHAPTER 3

BECAUSE Aleks had shifted into high alert, he began enforcing security procedures with an almost despotic meticulousness, and a drive that usually took no more than fifteen minutes turned into a logistical operation that lasted almost an hour. Admittedly, that also included waiting for a driver, but by the time they got into the unobtrusive company car, Aleks had checked the CCTV, sent the security guards on patrol, escorted Nika out of the building using the back exit, and led her a block away to where Nina had discreetly parked. At that point, Nika had still believed in the possibility of getting home quickly, but her hope was shattered the moment Aleks fastened his seatbelt and started giving the courier directions regarding the route they were to take, which turned out to be a two-city loop. She didn't protest, however, even though she was getting hungry and riding in the back seat made her sick. The headache and nausea were a thousand times better than the journalists snooping around her house. Motion sickness also had an advantage—it effec-



tively discouraged her from thinking about anything. Considering the difficulty she sometimes had trying to quiet her mind, this ride was almost like a meditation.

She managed to climb the stairs and cook dinner for two days before the intrusive thoughts returned.

*Check what they've written*, Pragmatist suggested. *Better to know how the situation is developing.*

*Certainly nothing you couldn't guess*, Security Advisor said. *There is no need for you to agonize over this. People will talk and eventually get bored. Also, nothing will happen if you work remotely for a while.*

*Excellent excuse not to see Artur and Blanka*, Cynic remarked.

Pragmatist insisted, *Just take a look. You can stop reading at any time.*

If Nika hadn't known what to look for and how, she would have believed that her meeting with Gabriel would go unnoticed. When she typed her name into the search engine, the results showed social media profiles of her namesakes, and when she added the word "Vineta", old articles announced that not she but her sister Laura would be the next Protector of the dominion. However, that had been a test search. After the journalists' visits, Nika knew she couldn't hope for much, and after a long moment in which she tried to breathe steadily, she started looking for news containing Gabriel's name. It didn't take long.

*Gabriel Rainforth's new friend—the beginning of a new affair?*

*Gabriel sets out to conquer women's hearts—who has the creator of the Tower of Babel charmed this time?*

*The Heart Eater doesn't rest on holidays!*

*It's not the hearts that interest him*, Nika thought blankly, staring at the photos of her and Gabriel.

The photographer must have been following the creator for some time because it was from behind his back that the shot was taken.

*From behind his back and diagonally*, Analyst specified. *You can see his profile.*

*You should have seen them*, Pragmatist noted.

*But you preferred having fun*, Cynic put in her two cents.

There were several shots, but two were used most often: the one with Gabriel without his sunglasses when she had a confused look on her face, and the one when she laughed at his joke. A perfect illustration of how easily the man had found his way to her heart.

*I should've at least taken the glasses,* she thought, resigned.

The area was full of tourists with cameras, and it wasn't that hard to hit someone's family album. Why hadn't she taken the glasses with her? She'd put them down only for a moment...

*You were deep in thought,* Philosopher said.

Cynic sneered, *You were literally immersed in thoughts about Artur.*

*At least it's an ordinary photo,* Security Advisor noted. *You have nothing to be ashamed of.*

Nika's fingers tightened on the mouse. She didn't want to remember that damn video that once had appeared on the internet, but in this situation the association was inevitable.

*They don't disclose your name,* Pragmatist said. *They don't know who you are.*

Yet, Cynic added.

Analyst chimed in, *These journalists knew. Probably someone recognized you, but they wanted to make sure.*

Nika flinched when the phone on the desk vibrated, but the word "Mom" on the display didn't surprise her. She had expected this conversation.

"Hi, Mom."

She tried to speak in a calm tone, unlike her mother, who didn't hide her concern.

"Hi, precious." A moment of hesitation. "Are you feeling well?"

Nika let go of the mouse and clutched the edge of the desk. So many years and her mother was still afraid her daughter would break down.

"Yes."

Her mother was probably expecting a longer statement, but Nika didn't know what else she could say, so there was silence for a moment.

Eventually, Alicia said in a gentle tone, "I've heard about Gabriel."

Of course she'd heard. That was the reason she had hired Aleks. So he would inform her of the trouble her daughter was getting into.

"I barely know him." Nika looked at the photo displayed on the laptop monitor. "It was a chance meeting."

"That's not what I'm worried about."

Nika rested her head against the headrest of the swivel chair. "I'm fine."

"People will get bored quickly. He has such a pace that soon no one will remember it."

"I know."

Another pause.

"Why don't you come home for the weekend?"

"I was home a few days ago. You sang 'Happy Birthday' even though I told you a thousand times that I don't celebrate birthdays, remember?"

Nika had gone there with Lila, who was supposed to fly to At'alan on Monday as a representative of Vineta, and her family had treated it as an excuse to celebrate, ignoring both Nika's objections and the fact that her birthday hadn't been until Wednesday.

"You can come more than once a month," Alicia said, making a dig and ignoring the one directed at her at the same time.

"I'm there every third week," Nika remarked. "That's twice a month every other month."

"You really don't want to talk about this, do you?"

Nika smiled at the familiar note of amusement in her mother's voice. "No."

Alicia sighed. "But you will call me if you change your mind, right?"

"Right."

"For sure?"

"Yes."

Pause.

"Promise?"

“Mom!”

Alicia laughed, not feeling guilty one bit. “I’m taking your word for it.”

“Bye,” Nika said with emphasis. “And tell dad he doesn’t have to call me.”

“Tell him yourself. Bye, precious. If necessary, ask Aleks for help.”

“I know that!”

“I love you.”

“Yes, I love you too.”

“Bye then.”

“Bye!”

Not a minute passed, and the phone vibrated again. Seeing the word “Dad,” Nika put a hand to her forehead.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Hi, precious. Are you feeling well?”

Nika raised her eyes to the ceiling. “Yes.”

Pause.

“I’ve heard about Gabriel.”

“It was a chance meeting.”

“That’s what he told me, but I wanted to make sure.”

That caught Nika’s attention.

“You talked with him?” she asked, confused.

“He called me to apologize.”

The news floored Nika, and all she could say was, “I see.”

“He wanted your phone number to apologize to you personally.”

“I see.”

“I refused,” her father said in a firm tone.

Nika bit her lip to keep from laughing. “Good.”

A pause.

“You’re not angry?” Viktor asked, less certain.

“No. Besides, Gabriel has nothing to apologize for. It’s not his fault.”

“He might have chosen not to engage you in conversation.”

“Just like I could have stayed out of the conversation.”

Silence fell, and Nika almost saw the vertical wrinkle on her father's forehead that made him look angry but indicated deep reflection. "Soon no one will remember it."

Nika ran a palm over her face. "I know..."

After she refused to come home for the weekend, assured that she would ask Aleks for help if she needed it, and promised to call, her father hung up.

For a moment, Nika just sat and stared at the ceiling, thinking of her overprotective parents and Gabriel wanting to apologize to her for something beyond his control. Despite the events of the past twenty-four hours, she felt lighter. She wasn't alone with all of this.

*For now*, Cynic whispered. She knew well where and how to strike to make it hurt.

Security Advisor suggested, *Why don't you keep working?*

Nika closed the browser window, connected her laptop to her large monitor, and got back to work. She found comfort in knowing that there were problems she could solve.

However, as in the case of running, she could only work for a limited time. In theory, she could fight fatigue, but neither would the result be satisfactory nor her mood improve, so when she felt that it was getting harder and harder to focus, she gave up and went to make supper. It was then that she felt an impulse telling her to check the gossip sites again.

*You will only check how the situation is developing*, Pragmatist pleaded. *Better to find out now than to face people without knowing what's going on.*

*You don't have to face anything*, Safety Advisor said. *Ignore it and live your life.*

Since Nika had long adhered to the "better to know than not" principle, she listened to the former.

*Gabriel Rainforth is courting a daughter of the Protector of Vineta—infatuation or calculation?*

*(Un)Certain Future of Vineta—can we expect the birth of a new Heir?*

*The hope of the Baltic dominion—Dominika Serafin is looking for a husband?*

Not a single one of the catchy headlines came as a surprise to Nika, and the articles and commentaries were almost boring in their repetitiveness, but that in no way prevented a heavy, grim feeling from spilling into her chest like tar.

That was the moment she decided to get drunk.

\* \* \*

The sea blended into the darkness of the sky. To the left, the lights of the Sopot Pier glittered in the distance. Somewhere below, between the stronger gusts of wind that occasionally visited her terrace, Nika could hear cars passing and music playing, probably at a nearby campsite. It wasn't the coolest evening of summer, but it wasn't the warmest either, and at some point, Nika began to consider returning to the apartment. Finally, she got up from her chair and went inside but only for a moment—to put on a hoodie and turn on music. She was going to listen to something cheery and energetic despite the fact it contrasted with her mood. The majestic-sad notes of film scores would be more fitting but would act as an incentive to continue her doleful musings, and Nika had had enough of those. She was tired. She wanted to forget about all problems. If she had been certain that nobody would recognize her, she would have gone to a disco, but since she didn't have such a guarantee, relaxing on the terrace had to suffice.

Not that she minded. She wasn't the party type anyway.

Nika got a laptop from her study and put it on the coffee table in the living room, then opened an internet radio site and scanned the list of available stations. She didn't have to search long—it was Friday evening and programs playing dance music were recommended at the top of the page. She selected a playlist and cranked up the speakers, then dimmed the light a little and returned to the terrace, closing the door behind her. Doing this muffled the sound but also effectively blocked out the insects.

And reduced the likelihood of neighbors getting pissed off.

Her capricious mind took the cheerful music as an excuse to recall good memories, those related to Artur, of course, but she didn't try to fight it. She'd planned to cry from the beginning, after

all. The fact that it hadn't happened until now bothered her a little. She didn't consider herself a crybaby, but she got emotional easily. Given the events of the previous night, she should have shed liters of tears by now. It would have been better if she had. Healthy. She could have achieved catharsis and moved on.

That is, she could have tried to move on.

But she didn't cry. More images came to her mind—the day Artur had sat beside her, curious about what she was coding; their old office and Artur focused on work; bowling he had proposed when she and Norbert had argued; his joy when he'd found their first customers... Tears still didn't come. Somewhere deep lurked sadness, but those memories were fun.

Gradually, her thoughts quieted. Maybe they reached the limit of the loops they could loop, or maybe fatigue took over, but eventually, she reached a state where only a few things mattered—a comfortable position, the taste of wine, fresh air, and music. She just wanted to rest.

The sound of war drums came from the speakers. It was one of those numbers that started out like a prelude to a folk song but turned out to be a regular mainstream piece to play at a party. The melody was catchy, and Nika found herself beating a rhythm with her fingers.

At one point, she opened her eyes, intending to pour herself more wine, and froze.

In front of her stood a strange man.

And in his hand, there was a sword.