

JARILO

12 years old

Keep looking away from the scene, towards Veles. It's your only sign of nervousness.

Black band around your neck, like a scarf.



I've never kept a journal before. My brother was always the writer. He began as a little kid, but someone like him would never have settled on a common diary. Of course not. He wanted to write our story, for the both of us, in big type on the face of the Earth. I was twelve when it began. I don't know how many foster families we had gone through before that. I just remember that the one in the Maw of Dusk wasn't so bad. Perhaps it's my love for that place speaking, or it was one of the few where our foster father didn't beat us. Still, Veles disliked him. I think that was why he came up with our first con, to let us be caught and sent away. Again. Of course, if anyone dares ask, he just says he did it to make me talk to Ziva. Actually, I don't think I would have found the courage to do it, if he hadn't. Ever since I had first seen her, as I came home from school, behind the windows of her parents' big mansion, I had fallen in love. It sounds almost silly, written out like that, the first love of a young boy. But we were meant to be.

As always (or as it always would be from that day on), Veles put me in the part of the protagonist. No, of the hero. We painted a rock and I brought it to her, saying it was a fallen star, found during a trip to the Fingers of Dawn.

A token of love between Polabo and Vendeve. So silly.

Yet as I said it, I started to believe it. And with me all the others: Not just impish Tawals, but serious Kresnik as well (he was always a politician, even back then) and even Borevit the mad (who was already a musician). And Svetovit was there too. He cared about Ziva above everyone else, he protected her and helped her sneak out of her house.

In those days, her mother was positive her little girl was ill, and she never let her out. She had even hired guardians. We all went together to the bottomless well, the one that was said to come out at the other end of the world. To send the star back to the sky.

I knew it was all a ruse, that my brother would send a guardian there in exchange for a reward. But as it happened, my eyes were for Ziva and Ziva alone, and I really believed we would stay there forever. Together. I didn't expect Veles to come running to the well, screaming at us to run away down the hill. And when I don't have a part written by him, I just freeze. So she ran with the others... Straight into the mouth of the guardian, of course. I guess that was my brother's plan all along.

JARILO

19 years old

You are here for Ziva. You want to talk to her eye to eye, not to celebrate with the others.

Black band around an ankle, like a chain.

I didn't even have twenty years on my shoulders, and already I was wondering how many of them I had truly lived. After that first con seven years before, my brother had already found his path in life and the way to forever free us from foster families. We'd hopped on the first train and started wandering not from house to house, but from country to country. Me and him, alone against the world.

I never felt like I had a choice. Truth to be told, most of the time I avoided thinking about my own life entirely, since I wasn't even myself. I was the characters written for me by my brother, while the people surrounding me were but background roles in a story that would be over as soon as we got our hands on what we wanted.

Mind you, I felt no guilt towards the victims of our deception. I must acknowledge that he always tried to make everyone happy, faithful to the notion that you can't swindle an honest man and that a con is perfect only if all parties involved get what they want. He was full of rules and some kind of moral code. I only had his scripts to follow.

So one day I tried to run away from the puppetmaster, to go back alone to the last place he would ever want to see. The Maw of Dusk. The place that some small corner of my mind liked to call home. I just wanted to hide, to be on my own and try to discover something about myself. It should have been time to think. I used it to drown my sorrows. Without Veles, I had no plan.

Then one evening I met Ziva, on the street, as if that was perfectly normal. No longer confined to her house - in fact, she was about to set off. She wanted to study abroad. She asked me about my travels, about the world, about me. By then I had got it into my mind that the magic of our first encounter, as children, was just one of Veles's scripts. The first of many fictitious bonds he would write for me. But that talk opened a crack in my misery. Maybe there was something real to my life. A moment that was truly mine. Before saying goodbye, Ziva invited me to her farewell party in the Maw of Dusk. She told me to bring Veles, naturally, but I hoped he was still miles and miles away. More importantly, I didn't know what kind of welcome to expect from her friends. The roads were too littered with Dusk Dragon banners for my tastes. Tawals was Polabian, sure, but Svetovit wasn't and Kresnik had an older brother in the party. As for Borevit, Veles had once brought me to one of his concerts, I don't even remember in what country. «Us and him, we're the greatest artists of our nation» he told me.



JARILO

26 years old

You want to avoid conflict. Quench strong emotions. Feel nothing at all.

Black band on your arm, as if in mourning.

Veles, wanting to go back to the Maw. Absurd. There had to be something more to it. But it was fine with me and I went with the flow. After all, that's what I always did, even when I didn't agree with him, so...

The war had been raging for two years. The Dusk Dragon had seized power, making troublesome Polabians disappear. And terrorising the rest. There should have been no worse place on Earth for the infamous Polabian Brothers, honoured swindlers and con men, yet my brother could not pass up the chance to show just how smarter he was compared to everyone else. The script he wrote for me was that of a foreign chief of industry with Vendevian roots, ready to take up the cause of his blood heritage. Not very charming, perhaps, but it worked and it kept my mind away from thoughts of Ziva.

It was like going to work and losing myself in the routine, no more, no less.

I'd sent her a letter, months before our return. I'd heard she had never departed after all, that a worsening of her mother's condition had forced her to stay, so I'd tried writing to her. I'd wanted to comfort her, but I had ended up speaking about my own problems instead.

In those days more than ever I felt like a puppet in the hands of Veles. I still wanted something of my own, something real amidst all the fiction. But I didn't know where to begin looking for it. Even Ziva was a story written by him. I knew I would have never found the courage to speak to her, had it not been for that first con. The affection I felt for her was something out of a novel, a nuance to give the protagonist a melancholy side. Those were my thoughts back then, and when I heard that the funeral for Ziva's mother was set to happen during our stay in the Maw, I decided to bury my feelings together with her casket. My brother was against it: Word went around that the Polabian cemetery (I never knew her mother was Polabian, incidentally...) was often subject to airstrikes from the Dragon, but it was too strange a coincidence, too suggestive a chapter of my story for him to deny me. There weren't many people attending- in fact, it was just the seven of us.

Borevit was playing, now that nobody cared for music anymore; Tawals tried to keep up everyone's spirits; Kresnik wore the trappings of a Dragon official and the most worried expression I'd ever seen on him, and then there was Svetovit. I think he's always hated me. And in that moment, seeing the scars his life as a frontline soldier had left in him, I thought that Ziva truly needed a protector like him. What an asshole I was. Thinking of her like a caged bird. The worst insult of all.

JARILO

33 years old

*You want to take centre stage.
To decide how things will go.
White band around your right arm.
Black around your left.*

Tomorrow we'll leave the Maw of Dusk. Perhaps forever. Perhaps not alone. At the other end of the country, the foreign invasion advances too slowly to hope it can free us from the Dragon, from the war, from the terror no longer restricted to Polabians. Moreover, Veles would loathe to see our story end like that. The Polabian Brothers must ride alone towards the sunset. I just hope he has a good plan. Not that he's spared his efforts in the last few years, making me change more faces than socks to fool government and military officials alike. After all, it's easy to swindle the corrupt, but getting away with it is another story entirely. It's make or break.

Veles only said that we're going with Borevit. I only asked whether Ziva would come as well. I knew he would say yes, otherwise I wouldn't have bothered with the question. I wouldn't have been by his side. I wouldn't even have considered the idea of leaving. I've decided I won't go without her. Even if we've had no time to talk about it, even if she were to reject me once I return her to the world, away from the walls of her home. It is my sacred duty to free her. Maybe then I will be able to say I've done something, something truly mine, something truly real... I've written about it so many times.

I don't know whether to be more worried about Veles or the frontier police. He looks aloof and tense, an artist pondering his masterpiece. We don't need a great exit or a book's twist ending - it should be the new beginning of our lives. I wonder where the others are. Actually, I dare not imagine what has become of Tawals, deported to the other side of the country too long ago. Svetovit must be on the frontlines still; I can only imagine how many of Ziva's prayers go out to him. And Kresnik... Well, it's difficult to worry too much about an official of the Dragon. It's easier to wish for them to get what they deserve.

I've written this journal to remember most of all what we were like as children. Who the first people to ever star in my brother's stories really were. They're perhaps the only people I've ever felt to be real, not made up by him. My family? I want to survive this war. Whether it takes fake blood or real money, we'll cross the border and begin anew. I've wasted too many years fearing I'd be left alone as I played the part of the loyal brother, the lovesick man, the nostalgic Polabian. Maybe there is no real difference, after all. Maybe there's nothing more to life than this.