

# SVETOVIT

## 16 years old

*You want to take control of the situation.  
You won't have it, but don't give up.*

*White band over the hips, like a cummerbund.*

The memories of a man are only good for gathering dust. The past is the past. These words were my father's, spoken in envy of some great man. He was never great and not just because he was born a gardener and died a gardener. I've always liked his profession. It's what brought me to Ziva, after all. I grew up in the groundskeeper's quarters, in her mother's mansion. Ziva's father died when I was little. If I'm here typing these words, it's for her. For the hope that she may read them sooner or later, though I cannot deliver them to her. I wouldn't know how. I was the best in my school, both in study and in sports, the dutiful son of a man who never seemed to care. All he ever did for my education was pouring in all the money he could, and that was that. But there were moments where I truly felt proud of myself: Whenever I helped Ziva elude the guardians her mother hired to keep her safe at home. I escaped from everything along with her. Though my father said she was ill, I knew there was nothing wrong with Ziva. I was her friend, her protector. The only one at her beck and call, every hour of the day, for everything she might ever need. She was a dream to me. It could have ended at any moment, but I knew I would always come back to find her. Yes, Borevit may have inspired her, with his bad temper and his gift for the violin; maybe Tawals made her laugh with his Polabian pranks; surely Kresnik's big words made for good conversation... But it was me who set her free, when her cage closed in too tightly around her. I was the oldest, and I cared for them all. But nothing could have prepared me for those two Polabian brothers. The first time I saw Jarilo he told us he'd found a fallen star. Ziva was delighted and we all went to a well, to throw the shiny stone down its shaft. I can't recall the reason. As usual, I wanted her to have what she wished for. But I was worried as well, because Ziva had never ventured that far and I didn't like that new boy at all. Something felt off, like he was acting out a part. And sure enough, his brother Veles showed up at the well, yelling at us to run because one of the mansion's guardians was coming. We ran straight into his arms, as if that had been the plan all along. A classic Polabian trick? My father used the belt, that time. He never understood that whipping the skin off my back was much easier than tearing my eyes off Ziva. Being at her service was my way to feel free, the treasure nobody could ever take away from me. My unlikely happiness.

# SVETOVIT

## 23 years old

*Bring conflict to the scene. Fight with yourself, with the others, let it all out if you can.*

*Black band in your hand, like a dishrag.*

You could seize the world in your hands, they said. But my hands were full of dirt. After my father's death, I had started taking care of everything in Ziva's mansion. From tending to the garden to handling maintenance. I had found my place on Earth. The others didn't understand. Kresnik kept pleading me to go see his brother, in the capital, to enlist in the Dusk Dragon. He said it for my sake, he had always admired me and he was positive that I was wasting my time, but I had never cared for politics. As if the only thing holding her back had been youth, Ziva was ready to put her plans for the future into action as soon as she came of age. Away from the Maw of Dusk. Intoxicated by the promise of freedom and the postcards of faraway countries, she didn't see how painful it was for me to listen to her. She didn't grasp that I had no plans, no prospects, because I had deluded myself into thinking I could spend my whole life watching over her. Nothing else seemed to be worth the effort. And now she was about to leave. Without looking back. Certainly not for my sake. After a drink too much, I talked about it to Borevit. He listened patiently, yet he was of little comfort, since he started to ramble about the courage it had taken him to go from the violin to the cello. I realised I had hit rock bottom, that I needed to stop whining and act like a man. So I set up a farewell party for Ziva, in the inn where Tawals worked. He was the only one who would never leave the Maw of Dusk, the only one besides me. I was perfectly aware that this would be the last happy moment of our gang, the last to see us together. But she invited Jarilo, who had just come back, out of the blue. I have never had anything against Polabians, but right in that moment, for the first time, I felt the strong wish to kill one. Ziva dangled from his lips and he wasn't even happy about it, lost as he was in his act, the world-weary fop resentful of his fortunes. I have never dared to want Ziva for myself. I know I am not worthy of her. I may struggle to imagine the right man for her, but it surely could not be that spineless baby who couldn't even pee straight without his brother's help. Yes, because Veles is more than the elder brother. He's the boss, the illusionist holding up his top hat and announcing the next trick in a sultry voice. Jarilo is just the rabbit, nothing more than a trick, a walking, talking lie. At the time I had no way to unmask him, however, not without running the risk of ruining the party for everyone. Not without the certainty that I would lose Ziva forever.

# SVETOVIT

## 30 years old

*Mend your past attritions. Overlook all wrongs. This moment deserves respect.*

*White band around one leg, like a bandage.*

I thought they couldn't force me to fight.

But then they attacked our western border, within a stone's throw from the Maw of Dusk... Foreigners, so interested in bringing us peace that they'd come to us with bared weapons. Bullshit, neither better nor worse than those spewing out of the Dusk Dragon's mouth, but still enough to make me set off for the front. Away from Ziva.

After the farewell party, her mother had been diagnosed with a serious illness, and so she had to stay. When it became clear to everyone that the lady of the mansion had little left to live, the war began. I was so sorry for Ziva, but not even I could sneak her out of such a situation.

The Dragon had seized power, and started hunting prominent Polabians right away. Lists of names, with criminals like Veles and Jarilo (too far away to truly be in danger), but too many good people as well. Rotten things like registries and family trees suddenly became of great importance.

One day Kresnik came to Ziva in a hurry, to confess that her mother's Polabian roots had come to light. As if it made any difference to an ill woman. But Kresnik has always been a loyal friend. Too soft to really make his way up the Dragon's ladder.

Tawals has always been a true friend as well. I was on the frontlines when Ziva's mother died, so he arranged for the funeral. In the Polabian cemetery, the favoured spot of the Dusk Dragon bombers for target practice. Always by mistake, of course. Erroneous reports of the enemy's location, you understand. I remember Borevit had even gained some fame as the "cellist in the debris", "the musician under the bombs"... They should have said "the reckless madman" instead, but in these days the world itself seems to have lost its mind. Polabians have made a legend out of it, but after all they have also found heroes in Veles and Jarilo, the infamous Polabian Brothers. Chivalrous swindlers. What bullshit. Ever since the war began I have lived in fear of losing one of the five of us.

Worrying for those back home is a way like any other to get past the hardest nights on the frontlines, of course, but there is more to it than that. In the first year after the hostilities began, when I still tended to Ziva's mansion, the war felt anything but real. A bad dream, a headline in the papers, a pile of dead leaves to rake away from sight. Yet, when it separated us, it became horribly real. And if it ends up dividing us with no hope of reuniting again... I must not think about it. My victory will be saving us all.

# SVETOVIT

## 37 years old

*You want to hear everyone's words.  
No shouting. To choose, you must understand.*

*White band on your arm, like a true soldier.*

On the western front, we fight and win. Meanwhile the East has fallen and the country has been invaded. What use were all these years of pain and sacrifice?

I was recalled from the front by order of senior official Vidovin, Kresnik's brother.

He will take charge of the frontier patrol, to stem the wave of expatriation from the Maw of Dusk. My city, the last stronghold of the Dragon. Who would have thought.

I won't like stopping the flight of desperate people. I will never like this Vidovin, no matter how many times Kresnik tells me that I have his esteem and that he wanted me specifically. The truth is it only took one talk with this man to feel threatened.

He asked about Ziva, about her mother, about her relationship to the Polabian Brothers. Naturally I defended her. And Vidovin guaranteed that he will oppose the expropriation of her mansion, that he will protect her from the accusations of complicity. Because he trusts me, certainly, but mostly because he expects me to help him win his prize.

He may be a senior official, but he is just like many soldiers I've met, far too obsessed with medals. The best you can wish for that kind of man is that they never win one, because then they would notice it's nothing more than a piece of metal. It's never worth it. Vidovin's medals are the Polabian Brothers. They scammed our government, stole money from the army of their own country. When the new recruits are assigned dirt-encrusted boots scavenged from a common grave, I think of them. They took whatever they wanted, every day of their lives. Vidovin would get Jarilo out of the way and save Ziva...

It seems like an answer to my prayers.

All my life I have strived to be called loyal. To my family, to my friends, to my country. But I feel so weary now, weary of being loyal to everyone but myself.

I feel no hatred for Jarilo, nor for Veles. I've run out of it, together with the bullets. But this time they won't get away, not with Kresnik there ready to betray them to his brother. Vidovin already has suspicions: He thinks they're in league with Borevit, who holds an expatriation permit. Should I desert? Help them? My position is Ziva's only shield now. If I abandon it, the Dragon will just seize her mansion to execute us in its garden. All I want is to go back to the inn with Kresnik and drink with Tawals, though nobody knows what became of him. I want to hear Borevit's music and most of all I want to dance with Ziva. As if she was mine, as if for once in his life a gardener could pick a rose and keep it for his own. Just so.

