I Will Deal with the Darkness

by Anna Mallamo

translated by Antonella Lettieri

Wicked Souls

It was a Saturday in March, the month of madness, when I first had the thought of kidnapping and killing him. I remember it clearly: a cold sirocco wind was blowing, an evil weather. Beatrice had forced me to tail him for the entire length of Corso Garibaldi as she endlessly whispered and sighed in my ear and held my arm so tightly she left a mark.

"Let's go back," I tried to say from time to time.

"Just to the next corner," she would plead, without letting go of me, her eyes fixed on him as he strolled in the middle of the road, hands in the pockets of his black coat.

As black as a wicked soul.

"He's ugly," I'd say just to annoy her. It's easy to upset Beatrice.

"He's an ugly prick," I'd repeat very softly, making my dialect hiss through my clenched teeth. If you want to protect someone, you have to scare them.

But she wasn't even listening: she kept clinging to me and tugging at me to make me slow down or speed up, to hide behind me or show off, to rub some of her amatory anxiety off on me, to stay afloat. All at the same time.

"That's enough." I was forced to pull at her and stop dead in my tracks. "You're ripping my sleeve."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." It's easy to make Beatrice feel guilty.

"I've had enough of this. I'm getting the bus," I said, smoothing my jacket. Though worn out and too red, it was precious to me: it was Zia Rosa's favourite, my youngest aunt, the baby of all the siblings, my stolen aunt. When I took it from her wardrobe, everyone had already stopped mentioning Zia Rosa's name, no one ever touched her things, and Mamma had given me the evil eye. Every time I wore that jacket, I could sense waves of disapproval emanating from my mother, who was yearning to tear it to shreds with her big scissors or, even better, with the very same scissors held by one of the three Parcae – the goddess who cuts the thread of life in disgust. The chapter about the Parcae in my mythology book was all underlined and covered in doodles. Zia Rosa used to say that you can find anything and everything in that book, and she was right.

"Okay, I'm sorry," Beatrice replied with prostration, her glasses sliding down her nose. I looked at her and, in that instant, a loud bang, a moment of silence, then a cacophony of screaming, and everyone running all over the place: he was lying right there, in the middle of the road, a red hole through his forehead, his face bewildered, his arms splayed open in a cross.

Amen, I was tempted to say, and maybe I even said it out loud. Beatrice's only reply was, "Eh?" Then she grabbed me by the arm and shook me: there had been no gunshot, and there was no one lying on the tarmac with blood spilling out of his head. I had been spellbound for a moment, staring at a scene of my own invention, one of my alternative endings. Things that only happen inside my head.

"Amen," I said to her. "We all know where he's going anyway – up there," I cut short as he disappeared through the crowd and the sirocco.

I had said “up there” in dialect out of a sense of disgust and overbearance. We weren’t allowed to speak in dialect; our parents didn’t want us to because, for them, it was the language of poor people from little villages, whilst we were brand new and lived in the city. But we liked speaking in dialect: for us, instead, it was the language of grown-ups, and we spied it on their lips, stole it in secret, and used it as the grown-ups do – to strike one another or hide things from one another, as they do.

“Yes,” Beatrice sighed. On that day, Rosario – Rocco Cristallo’s youngest son – was returning to his home on the Aspromonte massif, which was on a peak as fortified as a stronghold and as sombre as a shrine.

She was in love with him because he lived up there, he always wore a black coat, and he never spoke to anyone. They said that his father was a wicked man and that he ruled over the mountain. That was why I hated him.

Beatrice never fell in love with an actual person, only with anecdotes, mannerisms, clothes, words, and poses. But maybe a person is all that, or perhaps love is. And hatred, too.

We’d got out of school early, which is always a joy, even if we’d already had physics, chemistry, and two hours of Italian literature that had felt as long as death itself. Our fledgling teacher had a knack for making us loathe literature. Thank goodness for Zia Rosa’s books and Zia Paolina’s endless stock of novels in the art supplies cupboard. Those books smelled of paint and turpentine, and perhaps, for us, feelings too had come to have that smell of solvent and chemicals that grabbed you by the throat and made you tear up. We liked suffering, Beatrice and I.

At that time, I was in love with a dark-haired fascist with Egyptian eyes, the skinniest of the gang. When we walked by their corner on Corso Garibaldi, near the bar with the French name, it was very hard for me not to look at him and walk straight past, my face ablaze and my mouth dry. They were always there, people-watching and chain-smoking, looking like a bunch of thugs and lookouts. The city was their thing. They were slightly ridiculous, but they looked like majestic men to us.

Beatrice used to like their boss, Hawk, a boy with a long beak, hair combed backwards, and black glasses, American style, that hid his deep-set, too-close eyes. He wore leather trousers, the likes of which had never been seen before in our city, and a shirt – always black, always well ironed. “Behind every man who prances around, there’s a woman ironing his shirts,” Nonna used to say. Hawk was always prancing around with his gang, and whenever they moved from their corner to the City Theatre, it was as if a murder of crows were migrating in a wave, churning in on itself. The city was a forest and a sea, and Corso Garibaldi a narrow bridge for Beatrice and me, who believed we could cross it without being noticed.

I liked skinny boys or those who were a little crooked, with narrow shoulders and something unstable about them. Sinuhe, as we used to call him, was just like that. He must have been smart, too, given that Hawk always listened to him, despite him being as slender as a girl and not wearing black. Sinuhe was the least scary of them all.

Beatrice was prone to falling in love suddenly, and fatefully: as soon as Rosario had come onto the scene, Hawk was gone. She was always shaking, her skin was too pale, her face was too oily, and her large glasses kept sliding down her nose, forcing her to push them back up constantly. Nothing found purchase on Beatrice and everything kept sliding off her: her

glasses, a clip on her thin hair, light itself. This was especially true for the interest of boys, whose gazes skipped over us as if we didn't exist: I, too, fell into Beatrice's sphere and was as invisible as she was, despite wearing red all the time. It was also because of this that we were such good friends. Because no one could see us.

Rosario went to our school: he was in his last year and looked like a grown-up to us. He, too, always wore black, but his was the black of bereavement, the kind of black that devours all light. He'd lost plenty of relatives, including his older brother, the heir to the empire. His father, Rocco – son of Gaetano, son of Rocco – was on the run, which is kind of like being everywhere around here: people on the run are not missing at all; they are ubiquitous. He had been sighted all over the place: near his house, the fort on the burnt-down hill; on Corso Garibaldi; in church; in Switzerland; at the procession of the town's saint; in Busto Arsizio, near Milan, where many people from Aspromonte have moved to. There was a rumour that he lived in an underground lair, with a thin shaft of light and a squat toilet. But also that he held his meetings in the mayor's office of his little town. But also that he roamed the woods at night together with the fairies. But also that he would make an appearance at his window and slightly nod his head in acknowledgement when the procession for the Assumption of Mary went by his house in August.

As Rosario walked along Corso Garibaldi, Beatrice kept hanging on to me, her heart pounding and her eyes fixed on his coat, hoping that Rosario would turn around, scared that Rosario might turn around, praying for Rosario to turn around. I, instead, was walking around rigidly, without moving a muscle, the bright stain of Sinuhe's shirt singing my eyes and giving me the feeling of being sunburnt all over, but under my skin. My only desire was to stop and look at him and say something, something thunderous, something earth-shaking. My only desire was to run away, run as far as Nonna's house, let myself fall onto the stone and the marble of the doorstep, and remain there, leaning against the wall, becoming wall, stone, marble, house.

What a pair of fools we are, I kept thinking, and maybe I even said it out loud. At any rate, Beatrice never listened to me. But I was grateful that she was hanging on to me and, to prop her up, I was also hanging on to her, like two fools, adrift and drunk.

Santa Lucia

"I never knew your aunt. I've never even heard of her."

"It doesn't matter."

I bite my thumb as I look at him. He doesn't look good. The blood on his temple has congealed, turning his greasy hair into a matted crust. I've fixed his glasses: they're almost straight now, and I can see his small, short-sighted eyes inside the teardrops of his lenses. I'd never noticed before that his eyes were so blue, and Beatrice never mentioned it: maybe it was one of the things we didn't know about Rosario.

"I know nothing. I have nothing to do with anything. What do you want from me," he says without a question mark, more like a moan.

"It doesn't matter. You have something to do with everything."

He's in chains on the small chair bolted to the middle of the floor, his head in his hands, breathing hard. I feel no pity for him.

"Do you realise what you're doing to me?" He suddenly lifts his head and almost screams.

"Yes, I do."

On 4 May, I chained him up in the hidden room at Nonna's house, where no one ever goes anymore. It's an underground lair, far from everything, and only I know how to get to it because Nonna showed me, only me, and gave me the key. "Lucia, only you." I'd dipped my head before saying, "Yes, Nonna." It was a secret like the recipes for rosemary juice and maraschino cherries, the 10,000-lire notes folded inside the holy-water bottle from Lourdes, the red pocket knife with engraved initials that I always carry, the trick to thread the needle on the old sewing machine, the garnet ring, and the grave we used to visit whenever we went to the cemetery.

Ever since she died, I've been the only one who has set foot in the house. I dust, open the taps, flush the toilet, and speak to the walls and the pictures. "The house needs talking to," she used to say as she widened her eyes to impress on me how important that lesson was and that I should always keep it in mind. Nonna used to make things happen with her eyes.

And she wasn't wrong either: without words, everything can die. After Papà moved out, my aunts followed suit, leaving behind romance novels, boxes of paint, and wardrobes full of blouses. Once Nonna had been left in the house alone, she started obsessing about the idea that things might die. For this reason, she never threw anything away and hung up every picture, even those that were not of Nonno or Zio Michele – who were actually dead, had always been dead, and hung by the door to protect the living. The door was a shield and, on it, Nonna had also hung up a red horn; a little dress, blessed and complete with I don't know whose hair, maybe her own, which had been black and curly; and an icon of Santa Lucia, our patron saint and namesake – Nonna Lucia and little Lucia – staring straight at you with her golden dish in her hand from which two more eyes stare at you, terrifying, blessed, and mighty. Finally, the olive branch and the palm-leaf braid that Nonna used to replace every year on Palm Sunday, and other objects that only I know about: Nonno's card with the bullet hole through it, the medal my father won in a Latin competition, a yellowed ribbon, a dinged bell.

I talk to them all, greet them, and sometimes even recite a chant in dialect against the evil eye, though I can't quite remember it all. I can only recall the verse that goes, "I have many blessings, and much oil in my lamp," which I like very much. I've never seen any blessing – nor an oil lamp, for that matter – but it is undoubtedly true. Then I add some ancient Greek to it, beautiful words with wonderful meanings such as "weaver of tricks" and "crimson" and "white-armed" – and some Latin too, but only a tiny bit, since that language gives me no pleasure whatsoever.

Instead, nothing hangs from the secret door to the hidden room at the bottom of the cellar, because it's all made of iron and weighs a ton. I often asked Nonna who had built that narrow tunnel and why it had such a heavy door, but she never told me. She used to look straight at me instead, narrowing her eyes a little, and then she would dip her head suddenly, cutting off her gaze as if it were a thread. Nonna could cut with her eyes.

Every day, I go down to the cellar, move the shelf to one side, walk down the narrow passage, open the iron door, turn on the light, and there is Rosario. He's part of my daily chores in this house.

"Now I have to go. Here's some food."

"Let me out." It's like a scream, but whispered.

I throw him some sandwiches, a brioche, an apple. As I walk out, I hear the chain slide and then another noise, as if of bad luck and sighs.

[…]

Darkness Darker than Dark

Now Rosario comes with me everywhere.

This is no good. It must be the evil power of the room: when I'm down there with him, the only thing I can think of is running away; when I'm outside, in the world above, the only thing I can think of is him sitting on his little straw-bottom chair, bewildered and angry, holding his head in his hands, and he certainly is thinking that he wants to kill me, as I think of him, and maybe our thoughts face each other, in all that darkness.

Nonna warned me when she gave me the key. "Lucia, only you. It's darker than dark down there."

We never mention darkness per se: we either motion to invisible things or hand them to one another using only our eyes. And then there is this thing with names, which are animals – maybe birds or fish. Or plants, even. Nonna used to say, "If you want to curse someone, never call them by their name, as if they didn't have a right to it. Call them names, but don't call them by their name." But how, I would ask her: we all have nicknames here – or rather family nicknames. There are people whose real names I don't actually know, just their family nickname: our neighbourhood is a village, and even the entire city is a village, a collection of villages separated, or perhaps held together, by streams, bridges, and streets. And they too – the cities, the villages, the streets – have names and nicknames, and sometimes their names disappear like water buried under the tarmac: you can't hear it flow, and you even forget all about it, thinking that the city is whole, with solid foundations, but that is only because you forgot the names, the water, the broken things that lie underneath.

Rosario is a broken thing that lies underneath now, and I put him there. If I think about it, I almost want to laugh. I want to shake. When I arrive, and he knows right away that I'm there because the door creaks and the bulb above his head flickers on, I greet him with his full name and family nickname. "Good evening, Rosario Cristallo – Rosario The Crooked," I say pretty loud, but the walls down here dampen and absorb everything: the room devours it all. He knows it because I find him more consumed by it every day.

"Why do you call me that? What do you want from me?" He says right away, breathing hard. Not even he can recognise his own name, in there.

I sit cross-legged where he can't reach: the chain is relatively short. I count the tiles on the floor: white, black, white. A chessboard: the white queen, the black pawn, the white bishop, the rook of black death. "I want you to tell me everything. Who killed my aunt?"

"I don't know anything. I don't even know who your aunt is."

"She wasn't far from yours," I say with a grimace, knowing full well that now her neighbours are the foxes and the dead in the cemetery.

"I never set foot outside the house."

White moves forward. "Even better. If you are always in, then you hear everything your father's soldiers say." I say "soldiers" and feel disgust in my mouth. He senses it.

Black stands still. "What soldiers? Who the fuck has been feeding you this bullshit?"

"Yeah, as if all the guys with guns who drive you to school every day are just your uncles, cousins, and godfathers..."

“I go to school on my own.” Liar. Black is a liar, so White has to get creative.

“You’re a liar like everyone else in your family.”

Black charges forward, his head low. “Don’t you dare talk about my family. Who the fuck are you? Who are you with?”

White smiles: there, he said it. “See, that’s all that matters to you and your family: who are you with?” And this is how you lot split the world, and those on the other side, you just kill them, White then adds in her head. She stares at Black without speaking, but he hears her regardless and says back, “We don’t kill nobody.” But he lowers his head, and the bulb above only casts its light onto his blood-caked hair. Black’s shadow lengthens, crooked, over the floor tiles.

“Why do you lot live like this? Why are you here?” I ask him, as I might ask the fault of an earthquake, the sinkholes on the mountain, the streams, the peaks, the wolves.

“And where the fuck else should we be? This is our home,” he says gloomily. I don’t know what he’s thinking about when he says “home:” in the room, words change their meaning, direction, sound. The room touches me, too, from the inside. I wouldn’t know what to say if he were to ask me, “What is home?”

“Home is the place you no longer have to flee from,” is written in Zia Rosa’s notebook, which I always have on me and tells me everything I don’t know in her voice.

Again, he hears my thoughts and asks, “And where the fuck is your home?” Black challenges; White thinks.

Now I lower my eyes and look at the tiles separating us: white, black, white, shadow, blood, white, black. And I feel everything above us, the foundations of the building, the entrance hall where it’s always night, the stairs, the doors, the corridors, the kitchens, the rooms, and further up, as high up as the terraces where bedsheets billow, and then further up than the clotheslines, the antennas, and the sycamores, and further up still, in the air that is so blue it’s almost black; and I hear everyone’s steps going in every direction, above, below, by my side, they hustle and bustle, they talk, they change place, they move, they never stop, and I could enter every house and eat at every table. “Home is where no one ever stops and where they make room for you,” I say before noticing that I’m also talking about his home because they, too, hustle and never stop.

He moves his head. Okay, we’re back to square one. White against Black: it’s a draw.

He must have tried screaming before realising that nothing makes it out of here, that the city below is all drains and blocked holes and dead water and broken things, and it’s silent. While we walked under the trees along the broad road and the world looked so easy, Nonna used to say, “Always look underneath, Lucia: broken things lie underneath, in silence.”

“Speak,” I say to Rosario.

“What do you want from me? What do you want me to say?” Black is at his wit’s end; he’s moving randomly, shaking his little chair, and his chains make a noise of iron and prison.

White wins. “What you lot do, what you did. You’re evil.”

“You’re evil for doing this to me.” Black moves, and Black wins. “Who do you think you are? The angel of justice?”

“Don’t you dare utter that word,” White screams, then stands up, and her shadow lengthens, disappearing towards the bottom of the room. The room devours it.

The word draws an arc in the air, and we both look in the same direction: the room can make things appear just as easily as it makes them disappear. “Justice” lands ever so slowly, like the lightest of things, like the very heaviest of things. We stare at this arc, this emptiness, this vortex, but we don’t see the same things.

I see uniforms, the maresciallo knocking at Nonna’s door to give her the news, and the courthouse in the lopsided street, almost as if floating to keep up: the city is always rolling downwards or climbing upwards, and nothing is ever still enough; the city takes effort, even for the courthouse. I don’t know what Rosario sees: I seem to hear gunshots around the corner, things breaking, things binding, be they chains or pacts I don’t know, I’m not good at hearing the things that are not said, not as good as my grandmother or aunts.

“She’s blindfolded,” Rosario says.

“Who is?”

“That one, Justice.” A grimace seems to cross his face. “She can’t see fuck all.” It is a grimace.

“Because we’re all the same to her, she doesn’t care one bit who we are with,” I say.

“No, it’s because the law can’t see for shit. And we are not all the same: can’t you see it’s wrong?” Black wins, Black captures White, White doesn’t want to admit it.

“You’re wrong; you lot are wrong,” White screams, and she’s right.

“You’re wrong for keeping me here,” Black screams, and he’s right. White flees.

I’ll leave the light on for him this time.

[…]

Black on Black is Just Black

Getting him down there wasn't so hard. Boys will follow you anywhere as long as you tell them a story and make them believe they already know the ending. Boys will follow you anywhere as long as you show them a docile body that would follow them anywhere. I didn't know that I knew it: I don't know any men who are not my father, my little brother Gedo, and my uncles. But, after all, it applies to them too. I come from a family where women rule backwards by letting themselves be ruled and lead their men by giving them the illusion of doing all the leading.

But I knew nothing about all this in May, the month that rouses roses and snakes, when I decided to take Rosario to the room below. When the room below decided to take Rosario through me. I didn't know how to look at a boy with a direct, immodest gaze. Bea and I train to become invisible, fade into white light, and roll away through the sloped city. Bea and I rarely have a body. It scares us, yet we wish for one.

So I had to go and look for a body, starting from where it's supposed to start – the gaze. For two days, I walked near Rosario by chance after school, and there I invented a body, the body of a woman, with pointy tits (I could feel them almost pierce through my shirt), round thighs, parted lips, and eyes – nothing is more important than the eyes. I looked at him with the eyes of a woman. I didn't know that that was what they were beforehand, but they couldn't have been anything else: quick, direct, immediately lowered. Brazen but subdued, just like when Nonna knelt on the ground to wash Nonno's feet, in silence, and the quiet splashing of stirred water, the sponge scrubbing, and the metallic note from the washbasin filled the house, the city, the night, as large as destiny itself.

My body spoke to him the third time, and my eyes captured him. I smiled before lowering them. They said, "Now you can ask what I want you to ask me." The body was large and soft, and it enveloped my terrified heart, deadening the shivering of the little girl inside, the idiot who flees and would like to be air, light, nothing at all.

"Hi," he said. The body rejoiced. "Hi," it said back, soft, suitably yielding, the head slightly lowered (the sponge scrubbing, the splashes of water, the metal). We said meaningless things: sometimes, words are the least important part of the body. My body had grown and was now as tall as the school's first floor and surrounded Rosario, enveloping him. He seemed smaller, huddled in the blackness of his black clothes, hiding behind the trench of his glasses.

We spoke about the book, and I told him I'd found some more in my grandmother's empty house, in a strange room. Which isn't even a lie: the room is there, full of strange things happening in the dark. The room was inside my expanded body, which was made of a light so white it blinded and confounded. The room rules all on its own: it even rules over me. As if I were a boy, who can be taken anywhere as long as you make him think he wants to go. Maybe we're all boys, and only the room is a woman, like with bees and their queen. Perhaps the house is a beehive, and we simply drone around carrying out a plan we're unaware of.

Hiding it all from Bea, instead, had been harder: she's slippery and distracted but can sense thoughts in the air thanks to that exaggerated heart of hers, which is all skin. So, I took advantage of the days she was out of school, indisposed. It happens to us occasionally, and we

call it “the shy-nìng,” butchering the pronunciation in our made-up English. *The Shining*, like the film we watched over Christmas, holding each other tightly as we sat on the hard chairs of Cinema Orchidea while blood flooded everywhere: the walls, the lift, the stairs. Cramps make us double over, pads are never enough, and we feel super weak. Maybe being a woman is like a horror film, with gushes of blood and the body that becomes like the woman in the tub from the film, all mushy and rotten and evil. Maybe being a woman is a human sacrifice.

Bea needs to lie in bed for at least four days, and her mum brings her chamomile tea and chases Bea’s father and brothers away. My brother Gedo, instead, pesters me because he doesn’t understand what is wrong with me and wants my illness for himself, like he wants everything else. Mamma leaves me alone, but only out of resentment. She buys me a pack of pads – always the most uncomfortable ones, proper bricks of gauze that scratch my thighs – and drops them rudely on my bedside table. She’s upset at me because I’m growing up. Because I’m a woman, and because I am not a woman yet. Her love is so overbrimming with annoyance that I can’t tell one from the other. And so I copy it all.

“I’m on my shining,” Bea had moaned on the phone. I had promised to call in on her, but I was thinking about Rosario and the room smacking its lips in the meantime.

I brought the book to school for him that morning. My body and I brought him the book. I, my body, my eyes, and the room brought him the book.

“You wanted it, didn’t you?” I looked at him so directly and innocently that he trusted me. He took the book, flicked through it, and checked all the passages underlined in pencil. In my family, we’re not allowed to underline books, dog-ear their pages, or inscribe them in any way, so I do it all the time.

“That room at my grandmother’s house is full of books and other stuff. I can show you, if you want,” I said to him using the voice of a woman. Maybe the room was speaking from inside me, and I was the trail of breadcrumbs and sugar, like Hansel and Gretel, but in reverse.

Rosario looked at the book, then at me. My body was looking at him, surrounding him, absorbing him. The diffidence intrinsic to his species and his family melted away. We spoke very little: he’s the type who needs to ruminate. I can tell because speaking costs him effort, as if he were fishing the words out of his chest, out of his throat. Then, when he finally finds them, he widens his eyes a little and flaps his head and his small hands, almost as if he can’t catch his breath. Maybe he never speaks; maybe he never speaks to women. To the bodies of women. I told him where he needed to go – almost to the very end of the road with the sycamores – and that I’d wait for him inside by the door. I didn’t want to be seen with him. Not by his family, or by his family’s army, but by my sycamores, my road, my doorstep, my windows, and my walls. I would take him straight to the room, which is a belly, a black sack, a city below, an upside-down house.

He was excited and wary. I could feel his breath behind me, behind the trail of my body, on the stairs, in the cellar that had welcomed us in its mouldy half-darkness. I waited a moment before opening the secret door. Rosario was looking around, and I could see his reflection cut in half in the crooked mirror. Sometimes, I think the room even rules over mirrors, which are the most insidious among all the creatures we share space with.

“Be careful of mirrors, Lucia,” Nonna used to say, and she knew what she was talking about. Zia Paolina was convinced that Nonna disapproved of all the time her daughter wasted straightening her hair and trying on lipstick, but Nonna was afraid that the mirror might steal

something instead. Which was why she always kept the one by the front door covered, despite it being tiny and only big enough to see your face.

Rosario was studying the pictures of my great-grandparents and Zio Michele in his costume. “What was he, a little carabiniere?” The word “carabiniere” sounded utterly unknown and difficult to pronounce in his mouth.

“Yes, he loved that costume, especially the sword. He was only little,” I said in the voice of a woman, a voice which is always ready to find excuses and brush the dust under the carpet. I put on a sad face, both at Zio Michele’s untimely death and at the deaths of my great-grandparents: as women, we are expected to mourn everyone all the time. Then I shifted the stack of papers and hesitated for a moment with my hand on the latch for the hidden door. I told Rosario that I needed to run, that we could come back another time, that I had remembered that I needed to pick up my brother from school and Rosario was perhaps relieved as I pushed him towards the stairs and then out of the door and said goodbye to him, knowing that I’d never talk to him again; then, as he walked away under the sycamores watched over from afar by Jolanda’s yellow eyes, I leaned against the wall and no longer had that huge body that I don’t know how to control, and I felt like a survivor.

But it was only an alternative ending. Something called me from beyond the door, the vision disappeared, and I slowly opened the passage between worlds.

I turned around towards Rosario and smiled at him with complicity. “Come,” I whispered with the voice of a woman, but it might have been the room itself speaking. I made him step in front of me, closed the door, and watched him make his way through the narrow passage and come out onto the chequered floor. The black king had arrived.

“Look,” I whispered. I pointed at the little chair in the middle, the chains, and the corner with the hole that smelled of rotten sea and old piss. The light from the ceiling was not strong enough, or maybe it was the heaviness of the air that absorbed everything. He looked at the walls and the half-empty shelves. His glasses had slid slightly down his nose, sheltering his confused gaze, and he pushed them back up with his finger. The room was already making him fainter.

“Come on, let’s play a game,” my body said to him. “I’m the lady of the castle, and you are my prisoner.”

He let me lead him to the little chair, and it felt like when I lead Gedo to the table to give him his dinner, even though he’s too big for that.

I knelt on the ground like Nonna and smiled like she used to do when taking off Nonno’s shoes and socks, slowly. My body grabbed Rosario’s girlish hands and adjusted them on his knees. As I kept looking at him – his eyes, I could see now, were blue of an almost black blue, and his breathing was shallow and quick, whether out of fear or arousal – I got hold of the chains, tightened them around his wrists and ankles, turned the tiny key in the lock, and put it in my pocket. I’d never been so close to him. I’d never been so close to a man who was not a relative. I could pick up the strong smells of his sweat, greasy hair, town, burned wood, sulphur, and boiled wool, and another smell I could not name, like rancid broth and almond milk. It repulsed and maybe attracted me.

“My prisoner!” I said with a smile, without standing up.

We remained like that for a few seconds: he sitting on the throne, in chains, and I at his feet, the key in my pocket.

Then I stood up all of a sudden: I no longer had the face of a woman, and my body had gone back to being my own, small, dense, fast. I kicked his bag away. “Now, you’ll stay here for a little while so we can talk.”

“What are you talking about?” He tried to stand up. “Enough with this nonsense. I’m not kidding,” he said. “Let me go right now.” I kept looking at him from a distance, my face perfectly empty.

“Let me go. Stop it!” He was screaming as he shook his chains. The room devoured every sound. I didn’t talk; I simply kept looking at him. I felt calm, just, strong,

I was thinking about Zia Rosa. I was wondering whether she’d shaken her chains, pleaded, screamed. I was thinking about silly Beatrice, who was bleeding as women do. I was thinking about our bodies when they grow and become huge and cover the sun and are capable of anything but then break down in blood, kneel on the ground to wash feet, efface themselves. I was thinking about the bodies in the ditches that slowly turn into the mountain, about names fading away, about blood turning pale on the pavement at times of war.

He was screaming wildly and banging on his chains, but the darkness absorbed, sucked up, and devoured everything. The room was paying no heed to me and my small body, which was as hard as stone. Rosario’s body was swelling with screams that came out dull, dampened. Fear was pouring out of him in colossal waves that crashed against me and moved past my slim body, ending in the bottomless bottom of the room.

There was a stick leaning against the wall. Maybe it was an axe handle or a rib from some old piece of furniture. Perhaps the room had placed it there for me, having been hungry and thirsty for way too long. It must have been the room’s – that wild, intermittent joy mixed in with Rosario’s screams.

One blow only, from the side. His glasses went flying, Rosario collapsed, and blood splattered on the white tile and then dripped onto the black and disappeared. Black on black is just black.

Blood bothers me: the blood of Giosuè, the pig we raise every year, dripping and collecting and then becoming delicious black pudding; a woman’s blood, the blood from my shining, which I’ve been bleeding out since I was twelve; Gedo’s blood, who’s always hurting himself, banging against every corner, and finding every nail, thorn, and glass shard around. But not Rosario’s blood. It felt right, for Zia Rosa, Beatrice, and all the people in the ditches. It’s not beating up someone that makes you ruthless; what makes you ruthless is wanting to protect someone.

I left him there and went back up. The room locked the darkness behind me and remained alone with him.