

ARCANA



Trapped in a metal cabin traveling at unspeakable speed through a South Dakota snowstorm, bouncing gently as if the tires weren't touching pavement, wasn't even the weirdest thing that had happened to her in the past few days.

In retrospect, Nat could see all this was probably inevitable. What normal kid was greeted by talking cats, not to mention the birds, dogs, and even the high piping voices of rats intoning *good morning, little Drozdova*? What normal child found a circle of softly singing mushrooms under a tree's skirts in an overgrown bit of playground; what normal mother smelled like ozone when she was angry or had a front gate that opened on its own as she drew close? Of course everyone considered their own upbringing ho-hum and humdrum no matter how haunting or horrific, until they grew up a bit and could compare notes.

Of course Nat Drozdova would end up here. Of-fucking-course.

Dmitri looked very pleased, all things considered, and the cut on his cheek now just a thin, shrinking line. Nat was just busy thanking her stars she didn't get carsick. Of course, the sisters at school would have said she should thank God, the Virgin, and maybe some saints to top it all off—wouldn't want anyone to feel left out.

Why had Mom sent her to *Catholic* school? Did nuns keep the hungry shadows away?

Dmitri kept smoking, puffing like a steam engine; every time Nat's shoulders relaxed slightly and she closed her eyes, absorbing the heat blasting from the car's vents, the images from the Well returned and she jolted back into stinging alertness.

There was no possibility of direct answers. Leo had dirt in his mouth, Mom wasn't exactly honest by any stretch of the imagination, Baba de Winter had her own agenda, Ranger had put her on that murderous motorcycle-horse, and despite any short-term kindness he displayed the gangster in the driver's seat was going to kill her if he could get his hands on what Mom had stolen. She didn't know enough about other divinities to guess who would help her or who wanted to eat her, and none of her work friends . . . good God, she didn't even have a job now.

Wait—are there any good gods? There was Nurse Candy, but she was back in New York. And even she asked about the Heart first.

Casually, of course. But she'd still asked.

It all added up to Nat being confused, utterly alone, and not quite sure of her own sanity. As usual, and as always. She stared at the snowy road, headlights glaring through curtains of shifting snow. No lights in the oncoming lane, and no ruby brake-glow before them either.

Who would be stupid—or desperate—enough to drive tonight? Only a god of gangsters, apparently. The storm whirled on either side, white flakes vanishing into darkness. If she opened the door and tumbled out, would she survive the fall?

Was it worth the attempt? Were those mouthless black-paper cutouts draped with floating cheesecloth-veils lurking in the ditches, or out in the fields beyond the ubiquitous three strands of barbwire keeping the highway channeled like an obedient canal?

Stick on the straight and narrow, some of the sisters at school had said more than once. *Strait is the gate*.

Well, if this was the primrose path to hell, it was nowhere near as pleasant as advertised.

A gust of snow smacked the windshield. For a moment, the image of a face—burning dark eyes, a long sharp nose, thin-lipped mouth, and a pointed chin—stared at Nat before Dmitri hissed and the wiper on the passenger side scraped it away.

The sibilant out-breath resolved into words. “See?” The gangster took another deep pull off his glow-tipped cigarette. “Baba watching. Very, very interested in my little *devotchka*.”

Great. Nat wished she could pull her jean-clad knees up and hug them. Making herself as small as possible seemed like a wonderful idea at the moment. “Is that a good thing?”

“Could be.” Did he have to sound so blasted cheerful? “Tonight she keeps the hungry things away. Ranger probably out too, doing what he can. Drozdova has a few friends in the world.”

What a great piece of news. If I can trust you saying it.

That probably wasn’t fair. Dmitri was honest about wanting to kill her, and had even attempted, in his weird way, to give Nat a lesson in using a divinity’s . . . powers.

Next I’ll get a cape and spandex. It was exotic to think of having some kind of power, let alone freezing a street’s worth of cars in a weird time-bubble, or turning on a jukebox just by staring and wishing.

What else could she do? Why hadn’t Mom taught her *anything*?

“I want to know something,” Nat heard herself say. Asking a gangster with violently poor impulse control who had a vested interest in murdering her probably wasn’t a good move.

Still, what—and who—else did she have?

“Mh.” He stared at the road, his fingertips on the yoke, barely even pretending to steer. For all that, the car’s voice changed, its thrum settling a few notes deeper still. “Dima thinks you want to know a whole lot, *devotchka*. We got time.”

Maybe he even meant to sound comforting. Nat’s hands weren’t quite shaking, but they were cold even with the car’s heater doing its best.

At least it didn't smell like sand and spice. If she said *take me back to the Well*, would he know what she was talking about? Probably.

So she unzipped the top of her faithful schoolbag, dug in its interior—maybe she should have packed more than a change of clothes, a spiral-bound notebook, all her remaining cash, plus some toiletries—and extracted the unicorn mug.

It gleamed softly in the shadowed interior, its gilt taking on the mellow radiance of actual gold. It was probably a trick of the dimness, but it still looked realer-than-real. Like the Well itself, the tree, the big black horse—or like Dima, like Mom before she got sick, like Baba de Winter.

Was Nat looking that vital, that alive, that *real* too? Would she just have to stay the maximum distance from Mom so she didn't drain off the power, the divinity?

Put that way, it didn't sound so bad.

"You gonna ask what that is?" Dmitri blew twin jets of smoke through his nose; the vapor curled dragonlike before slithering towards the window and vanishing out into howling snowstorm. "Man oh man, your mama really told you nothing. Makes you wonder, don't it."

No, I don't wonder. There was knowing other people lied like it was breathing, which Nat had always figured was just the way the world worked. Then there was keeping quiet about talking cats, singing mushrooms, and all the other crazy stuff she'd seen since childhood, which was self-defense. There was lying to other people, which was what the sisters at school called a sin but if it was the only way to survive, why would any reasonable person refrain?

Then there was lying to yourself. Another thing people did with apparent ease, but did *she* want to?

"You're probably going to try to steal it, huh." Nat weighed the mug, wondering at its glow, its pleasing heft, its sense of utter and unassailable rightness. Its weight sent deep happy warmth

up her arms, and golden coruscations trembled just under her skin, breaking free with pleasant tingles.

Was she going to turn into a holy nightlight, like a plastic Mary with a bulb behind? Her mother didn't glow at random moments, even when her quick, volcanic temper was triggered.

"Maybe." Dmitri didn't glance at what she was holding, but maybe he didn't need to. "That's a grail."

Get the fuck out. "Like the Holy Grail?" A deep swimming sense of unreality poured through Nat. The mug cast dappled reflections on the roof, and if it bothered the gangster to have a bright light in the car while driving at night, he made no sign. "But that's . . . I mean, Jesus . . ." *Oh boy. Oh holy what the fuck.*

"That cross-hanging mama's boy love to get his hands on it, I bet. Little drink from that give even a rube something nice. But I tell you this, *devotchka*, nobody but me allowed to steal from you." He nodded, the corners of his mouth turning down and his eyes sparking like the motorcycle-horse's for a moment. A bright point of crimson, visible and just as quickly extinguished, leaving a faint tracer in its wake. "Nobody but Konets, and you can take that to bank."

Gee, that's awful nice. "It was my mother's, right?"

"Smells like you. Yours now." He sucked on the cigarette again, then tossed its pinched, spent end through the slightly open window. How he could smell anything with the amount of smoking he did was beyond her. The orange-glowing dot vanished into the night, and another soft load of snow smacked across the windshield a moment later. His grin widened, teeth glinting. "Your mama buried it somewhere rubes and even most of *us* can't get to, just to keep it away from you. Every one of us got our arcana, *zaika moya*, like my sharp shiny friends. The Drozdova got a Cup, a Knife, and something she keep secret."

The Knife was in Nat's backpack too, in a wooden box with almost-invisible joins. *Something she keep secret*—well, Maria

Drozdova kept all *kinds* of secrets, and so did her daughter. In that one small way, they were alike. “Is your car an arcana?”

“No, this beast my chariot, see?” Dmitri dug in his breast pocket, pulling out yet another crumpled cigarette pack. This one was white with red lettering she couldn’t quite make out. He shook up a coffin-nail with his left hand and paused, frowning at the road before them. “Your mama had a nice one. Old days, the cats used to pull it. Now, though . . . Got to admit, I wondered why you weren’t drivin’.”

Mom’s old black car, faithfully nursed along by Leo, would fly apart at freeway speeds. Even with the snow coming down in sheets the highway in front of them was relatively clear, feathery dry white whipping across it like the broom behind her mother’s kitchen door, kept for clearing the back porch. Maria insisted all sweeping be done a certain way, hard and fast until Nat’s arms ached.

She stared at the mug’s glow, running a fingertip along its rim. “Her car’s pretty old.”

The first unicorn mug—bought with scrupulously saved chore money from the pittance Leo argued Mom into granting her daughter—had broken while being washed, or so Maria said. Dishes broke, it was no big deal.

Nat had still cried. The loss was still sharp, in the way only old childhood hurts could be. Now she wondered.

About all sorts of things.

“But *you* not old.” The gangster lifted the pack to his mouth, pulled out the cigarette standing to attention, and stuffed the white-and-red box back into his jacket without looking. “Getting stronger all the time.”

I hope so. Was he actually trying to be helpful? It sounded like it, but of course, that was probably a trap. “Thank you. For telling me.”

“*Pozhaluysta.* Now put thing away, *vesna moya.* I’m driving.”

She plunged the mug back into her bag, rewrapping it by touch—the last thing she needed was Dmitri seeing her single pair of clean panties. She hugged her bag close while they drove, and the silence between them was new. It wasn't exactly pleasant, but it wasn't combative or charged, either. It was just . . . quiet.

Which was great, because she had thinking to do, even if she'd rather not. Still, her hands were finally warming up and she sagged in the seat, staring at the brushed-clean pavement under the headlights, anemic yellow dashes in the middle of the highway melting into a single line because they were traveling faster than anyone normal—any *mortal*—could on a night like this.