

## WALPURGIS NIGHT

“Thanks, Berlin! You've been absolutely smashing tonight! Stay safe, and keep on dancing.” Phoebe's resonant voice, amplified by dozens of speakers, echoed through the crowd of Walpurgisnachtfest festivalgoers. She turned off the mixer and turntables, disconnected the controller cable, and left the DJ booth.

She didn't feel the energy from her set anymore. For a long time now, she had been playing routinely and predictably. She successfully feigned enthusiasm during her performances. Despite being surrounded by people, she felt isolated and lonely on the DJ stage.

Now, all she wanted was to return to the hotel as quickly as possible, take a warm shower, wash off the energy of sweaty dubstep enthusiasts, and catch a few hours of sleep before her flight back to London. She just needed to find a ride.

The friend who drove her to the gig was sitting by one of the campfires on the hill adjacent to the festival grounds. It was already four in the morning, but the fire still burned with high flames, casting a red glow on the faces of the people around. Some were dancing, others just swayed from side to side. Phoebe hoped she wouldn't have to talk to anyone.

“How did your set go, Phoebe? Listen, can we hang out for a bit longer? Maybe it's better if I don't get behind the wheel just yet.” Her friend's darting pupils suggested that she shouldn't get behind the wheel for the next two days. Bloody hell, the last thing she wanted right now was to engage in meaningless chit-chats with festival stragglers. She let out an unwilling grunt and resignedly sat down on a free spot on the blanket.

Small talk was never her strong suit. Andrea was the life of the party. Her Italian temperament and innate enthusiasm saved them as a couple in many social situations. Oh, how Phoebe missed Andrea's stream of words, which she poured out upon returning home, telling Phoebe about her day. Phoebe would give

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anything to hear her loud laughter again. To see those sweet dimples in her cheeks. To wind one of her unruly curls around the finger. To bury her nose in Andrea's soft skin and inhale the musky scent. To wake up in the morning wrapped in her body and hear that familiar, slightly hoarse "*Hello, la dolce beat-a*."

On their second date Phoebe shared with Andrea that one of her favorite movies was Fellini's "La Dolce Vita", that the decadence and existential emptiness that it explored really resonated with her. "Hey Mrs DJ, I hope you know that you are a very delightful La Dolce Beat-a", retorted Andrea with a coquettish smile. A split second later they were rolling on their picnic blanket, kissing passionately. Since then, "*Hello, la dolce beat-a*" had become a prelude to the sonata of their quickened breathing, trembling bodies, primal pulse in the lower abdomen, and finally sweet fulfillment.

"Have you ever tried to summon spirits?" The question ripped Phoebe from her thoughts. She turned to the girl, who was wearing a white turban on her head, the flickering flames of the campfire reflecting in her brown eyes.

"No." Phoebe had no intention of getting into an explanation of what she thought about people who believed in spirits. A quick glance at the girl's hand only confirmed her opinion. There was a tattoo in the shape of an open palm with some scribbles on it, and a gaping blue eye in the middle. What was that eye looking for? Clues to life? Its owner was probably among the avid readers of books like "Breath of the cosmos: meditations on the vibrations of the universe" or "Learn To Read The Stars, Tarot, And The Earth In 21 days." A dewy-eyed person prone to leave her hard-earned euros in crystal shops or at Akashic Records readings or some other bollocks.

"Tonight, the spirits of the dead are particularly active." Phoebe's lack of enthusiasm didn't seem to discourage the girl. "Walpurgis Night, the thirtieth of April."

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April thirtieth. Was it possible? Had it been a year already? Memories of that day flooded Phoebe's mind. She tried to swat them away like persistent flies. Conceptually, she knew perfectly well that she couldn't go back to the past or change the course of events. "Accept what happened, forgive yourself, and let life move on," used to say her unconvincing psychotherapist. Money thrown down the drain. Forgiveness didn't come. Acceptance of the past was beyond her reach. Life didn't go on; it was stuck like a broken wagon wheel in deep mud.

Several times a month, she woke up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat, thrown back into that evening. Andrea's flushed cheeks when she returned home. From what, Phoebe wondered, frowning suspiciously, from those few innocent drinks after work? Or perhaps from an exciting flirtation with one of her coworkers? After all, every one of those primitives was drooling over her girlfriend.

"Did you have a good time?" she asked in a frosty tone.

"Pheeb, darling, what are you talking about?"

"Which one do you like the most? Andrew, right? I saw the way you look at him!" she chiseled the words, which, spoken through clenched teeth, sounded like a hiss. Andrea just looked at her with those sad doe eyes and slowly shook her head. "What the hell made me date a bicurious woman? In the end, each one's gonna fancy a bloke, sooner or later!"

Andrea froze. In the next moment, she snatched her bag, shouted "*Vaffanculo!*" and ran out of the apartment, slamming the door.

Phoebe remembered little of what happened next. A phone call from St. Leonard's Hospital. Words she didn't understand, words her mind refused to accept. As if rejecting them could change the reality they described. *Rain. Turn. Too fast. A skid. Still in the ambulance. They did their best. They were so sorry.*

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She didn't cry that night, nor any other night. She couldn't look Marco in the eye at the funeral. It was her fault that his beloved younger sister would never throw her arms around his neck again. That they wouldn't visit their grandmother together in her stone house in Castello di Brianza. Wouldn't devour, shouting over each other, the grandma's *orecchiette* with fried eggplant. That Marco would no longer hear Andrea squeal when he splashed her with cold sea water on the beach in Tellaro. And all this only because Phoebe was a weak, pathetic person whose ungrounded fears and dumb jealousy got the better of her. She hadn't called Marco once since the funeral.

When Phoebe was still doing her therapy – mainly to appease her mother, “who really cared about her, and maybe it's time to seek professional help, how long can this go on, after all, people learn to cope with worse things“ – it annoyed her when the therapist persistently tried to find the cause of her *ambivalent attachment style* in relationships. “Were your parents authoritative? Did you feel neglected as a child?“ Searching for the source of her emotions which led to that tragic night seemed to Phoebe like a futile escape, a cheap deception, an attempt to shrug off responsibility.

She distanced herself from her already small group of friends. Threw herself into work, mostly at night, and slept off during the day. She took every gig, even international ones. Traveling exhausted her to the point where there was little time left for thinking. She successfully suppressed her grief and despair. Phoebe didn't deserve these feelings. Sadness was for someone who was not at fault, who had experienced something unfair. She was only entitled to a burning, gut-wrenching shame and a leaden sense of guilt.

“So, are we summoning those spirits or what?“ The high-pitched voice of the girl in the turban brought Phoebe back to the campfire on the hill. “I brought a Ouija board with me.“ She pointed to the wooden plate with letters, numbers and some strange symbols printed on it. Phoebe rolled her eyes.

“Do whatever the hell you want, just leave me out of it.“

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She curled up in a ball on the edge of the blanket and pulled the hood of her gray hoodie tightly over her head. A nap was her only sensible option. After a while, she smelled a pleasant, incense-like citrusy scent. From beneath half-closed eyelids, she saw the crazy girl lighting a square stick, and then spreading the thick gray smoke with wavy movements. The warmth of the fire was pleasantly lulling. Phoebe could hear the crackling of the flames and the monotonous drone of the girl's low voice. "Ommmm. Ommmm. Ommmm. We are open to spiritual communication. We call on the spirits of the dead to come to us here and now. We show up with respect and an open heart. Please share your wisdom with us. We will accept it with humility."

"Hello, *la dolce beat-a*," a hoarse whisper reached Phoebe's ear, tickling it with a warm breath. She sat up and looked around. No one new had joined the campfire; the lunatic girl still sat there with her eyes closed, rocking rhythmically back and forth. Phoebe must have misheard. She lay back down.

"Pheeb, darling! Stop torturing yourself."

She sat up again. Looked around once more. Still no one.

She felt hands on her shoulders, gently helping her body to settle back down on the ground.

"Pheeb, it was an accident. *La vita è così*, that's life. You know me, I've always been absent-minded. It could have happened any other day. Our argument had nothing to do with it."

A mist of moist breath grazed her nape. Warmth of a soft body enveloped her back and buttocks. Between her shoulder blades, she felt the familiar rhythm of a beating heart. And in that moment, Phoebe made her choice. Her feet lifted off of the cliff of her own limitations and beliefs, and she plummeted downward into the abyss of the unknown and terrifying. A violent wind tore through the air. A torrent of boiling tears breached the barrier of her eyelids. Rushing streams flowed down her cheeks. Cascades of a downpour swept everything in their path. Her initial weep turned into a higher pitch, resembling the whine of a hurt

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dog. She wailed and sobbed. The wind whipped and lashed her body convulsed with spasms. The frenzied gale tore at the trees and snapped branches. The granite that had surrounded her heart for a year was cracking, crumbling, and falling off in pieces. The heavy ball below her navel left her with bursting bubbles. Her body became lighter and lighter, and lighter...

Finally, the storm subsided. Phoebe's breath calmed, her chest was rising and falling steadily. She stretched slowly, feeling space within her chest. She rubbed her swollen eyes. The brown film from under her temples had disappeared. She could see clearly now, with vivid colors and sharp shapes.

Phoebe looked around. The campfire had already burned out. Dawn was breaking. Radiant, apricot light outlined the remnants of graphite clouds, piercing through them with shooting rays. Phoebe took a deep breath and smelled the fresh scent of damp earth. She looked up. Above her, a majestic rainbow arc stretched across the sky. Its delicate, pastel colors blended into the translucent sapphire sky.

*“Oggi è un nuovo giorno. Today is a new day.”* She turned towards where the voice came from. The girl in the turban sat with her eyes still closed.

Phoebe smiled and stood up. She reached into her pocket for her phone. She opened the contacts list, scrolled down to 'M' and selected Marco's number. Then she pressed the green call button.