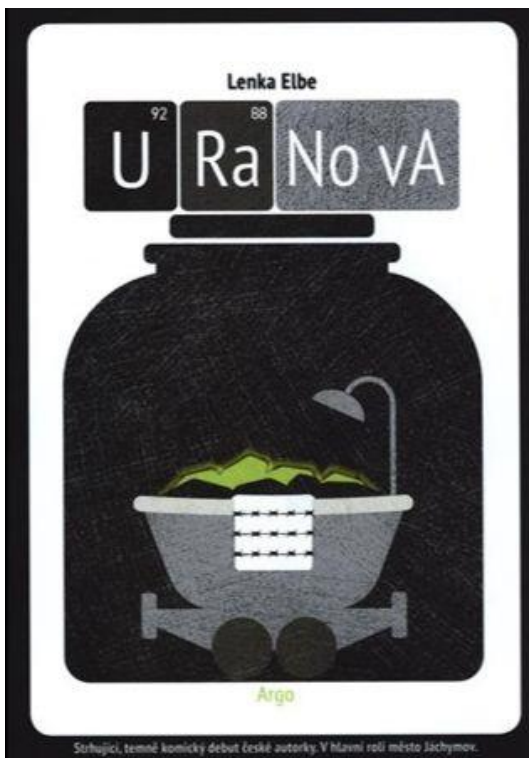




**THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS LITERARY AWARD IN CZECHIA –
BEST FICTION DEBUT**



Uranova

by **Lenka Elbe**

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As if it was a novel by an established British writer, intelligent and gifted with a distinguished sense of humour

Englishman Henry Robotham's girlfriend Angela disappeared in August 1968 – without a trace, as if swallowed by the Earth. She had been searching for her Czech ancestors in the ancient mining town of Jáchymov (Joachimsthal), known for its radon spa and brutal camps for political prisoners. Thirty years later, Henry heeds his therapist's advice and visits this city of uranium in order to confront the trauma that has been weighing on his soul. His neurotic partner Suzanne accompanies him to the post-Communist Czech Republic. After a few hiccups upon arrival, Henry and Suzanne find their accommodation at Hotel Skłodowska – an establishment named after Marie Skłodowska-Curie, and now owned by Estela Hans, a charismatic and peculiar local doctor. With the couple's arrival at the hotel, we enter a narrative experiment featuring

elements of fantasy, horror and the absurd. Along with Henry we start digging into the dark past and uncovering one of the many shapes of evil. Are you tempted by immortality, too?

“Uranova is immediately enthralling. (...) Original, genre-crossing and bubbling with ideas.”

– *H2O.cz*

MORE ABOUT THE BOOK

LENKA ELBE (b. 1979) was born in Louny, a historical town in the northwest of what was then Czechoslovakia. She studied Journalism and Mass Communication at Charles University. After a brief stint as a journalist, she started working as a copywriter and occasional screenwriter for television. Her fiction often combines the real and the fantastic; influenced by **Franz Kafka**, **Umberto Eco** and **Haruki Murakami**, Elbe explores the theme of freedom and the never-ending fight against dark currents attempting to destroy it. Besides writing, Elbe works in graphic design and photography. She lives in Prague.

English synopsis

summary

In August 1968, a young English girl, Angela, travels to the Czechoslovak town of Joachimsthal to visit the family of her father, whom she has never met, and her fiancé Henry lends her his Bulova watch for the journey. But upon arriving in the spa and mining town riddled with uranium mines, the ground suddenly caves in beneath Angela, and her body is never found. Her fiancé Henry takes it hard, and although he soon finds a lovely new girlfriend, he cannot come to terms with the loss of Angela even after thirty years. Becoming a burnt-out music teacher, he regularly visits not only Angela's empty grave in a London cemetery but also a psychotherapist.

To resolve his trauma once and for all, he sets off for Joachimsthal in 1999, accompanied by his caring and neurotic partner Suzanne. In the town of the world's oldest radon baths, he discovers that silver was mined there in the Middle Ages and hence the dollar (thaler) is named after it. That the pitchblende in which Marie Curie discovered radium and polonium was there, and it was the area where giant uranium mines supplying the Soviet Union were and where cruel camps for political prisoners were built in the 1950s.

His biggest surprise, however, comes in the local cemetery, where he finds a grave engraved with Angela's name and her date of birth and death. But he is told that the body had never been found and so he doesn't understand who could have made the grave. Henry notices that a very old man is tending to the grave, and to make it worse, the man is wearing Henry's Bulova watch that he lent to Angela thirty years ago. When Henry discovers that the man is Franz Schmitt, a maintenance man at the small spa hotel Sklodowska, he checks in and his hunt for the truth about Angela's death begins. He soon realizes that not only are radon treatments being carried out at the hotel, but bizarre things are happening there. And not only Schmitt, the handyman, is suspicious, but also the owner of the hotel, the charismatic Dr Estela Hans, who has a collection of

uranium glass and historic radioactive products in the basement, a mysterious apartment in the tower with a laboratory for the production of more than just spa cosmetics, and a field of poppies in an enclosed garden, which is linked to her fondness for opiates. Adding to the atmosphere is the quirky young spa nurse Elbe, who is either drunk or hungover, and an international group of guests – slightly hilarious nuclear chemistry professors obsessed with their beeping dosimeters and cheap alcohol.

Everything changes with the arrival of a hotel regular, named Joe Sagrado Colorado Chuchin, an antagonist. Although this arrogant guest with a fake name goes there every year, no one still has any idea who he really is. It soon comes out that he's got a glass shop in town this year, making art uranium glass, and has two helpers – a fat man and a little boy. Dr Estela is terrified of him.

While Henry, in a comically clumsy way, tries to somehow explain Angela's disappearance and suspects old man Schmitt, Chuchin chases the doctor. We follow both Henry and Estela's story until, one day, they connect – Henry doesn't know Estela at all, but Estela knows him very well. In fact, Angela is hidden inside Dr Estela Hans. For when she fell into the uranium mine thirty years ago, her mutilated body fell into a gooey black mass formed from pitchblende dust and the remains of dead bodies from the sunken graves of tortured and killed political prisoners. This vile radioactive cocktail had the supernatural ability to give her soul immortality. But Angela's body was too broken by the fall, so she had to find another – the body of the dying Estelle Hans, who was killed in 1968. She also lost her Bulova watch in the plunge.

Henry doesn't believe Estela's crazy story, of course. After several of her absurd attempts to prove the truth in the uranium mine, where a lake of black matter lies and where only a secret door from her garden gazebo leads, he finally believes her.

It soon becomes clear that Chuchin is far more dangerous than Estela thought. He's not just an arrogant evil man; he's evil personified. Plus, he already knows she's immortal and wants to know how she did it so he can become immortal himself. Of course, she won't allow that. If only because she finds out that it was Chuchin who killed the real Estella Hans in 1868, whose body she is now using. In addition, because of a photograph, Franz Schmitt remembers an incident from the end of the war in 1945, when as a young man, he found the corpse of a man who looked exactly like Chuchin in a uranium mine and also found an abandoned newborn baby. The resemblance between the two men is uncanny. Chuchin admits that the child in the photograph is him and gives her a philosophical explanation for his resemblance to the dead man. The doctor understands that they are one and the same entity. One evil died after the war; the other was born.

Henry is in a difficult situation, balancing his spa stay between his lovely partner Suzanne and the rediscovered Angela in the body of Estela, while he is about to become a hero who will help the Doctor prevent the mad Chuchin from getting his hands on the black matter of immortality.

Chuchin, however, is playing hardball. He blackmails the doctor and threatens that if she doesn't give him the source of immortality willingly, he'll take it himself. He's not afraid to kill inconvenient people, such as two of the nuclear chemistry professors, he's not afraid to use polonium to poison his opponent, and he threatens to incapacitate Henry and young Nurse Elbe. Estela no longer knows what to do or how to escape from evil. Now, for the first time in his life, a determination to fight rises in the cowering Henry. He no longer refuses to cower and fear that the evil will one day incapacitate them; he finds it much more effective to go on the counterattack and eliminate the evil. They begin to plot a plan to eliminate Chuchin, only they've never done anything like this before, and it looks like it. Old Schmitt doesn't like their risky plan at all.

Meanwhile, Henry is still faced with the decision of whether or not to become immortal as well and thus join Angela, whom he still loves. He slowly forgets his dear partner Suzanne, but surprisingly she doesn't mind too much. Henry doubts the benefits of immortality, he is afraid, but after a long hesitation, he finally promises Estela that he will soon get into the bath with the black matter that she will prepare for him.

Unfortunately, Estela and Henry's amateur plan to disarm the enemy doesn't work. Like a bolt from the blue, therefore, comes the news that Chuchin's glass workshop has exploded; there has been a cave-in in the mine, and everyone is sure that Chuchin died in the cave-in, as did poor Schmitt, who obviously wanted to take the man's destruction into his own hands and thereby protect the doctor and the others. But...

But if Chuchin had actually died in the explosion, he wouldn't have ambushed Henry when he was just about to dive into the tub of black matter. While Henry didn't have enough time to become immortal, he did have the time to put up a brave fight. And even though his opponent was vastly outnumbered, he didn't give him the victory for free.

Dr. Estela finds Henry dead in the bathroom, pierced by a shard of uranium glass. She's devastated, but unfortunately has no time to grieve. She has to act fast, because Chuchin's soul, transforming into an immortal one, is just tossing around in the bathtub. There's no stopping the process, but the doctor refuses to give up completely. She drugs Chuchin's weakened body with opiates and ties him up. She then transports the lifeless body to a secret passageway in the depths of the uranium mine, loads it into a rusted mine cart and covers it with shards of uranium glass. She realizes that she will have to guard him forever to make sure he never gets out. They're both destined to be here forever.

Henry's body is buried in Angela's still-empty grave, which he himself only discovered ten days ago in the Joachimsthal cemetery. So is Franz Schmitt's body. And so the circle is complete.

– The end

English sample translation

Translated by Sára Foitová

PROLOGUE

He was standing there, naked from the waist up, all stiff. When they told him to, he looked straight at the camera lens. The flash forced him to close his eyes.

Just an hour and a half earlier, Franz Schmitt was in the shaft alone. He walked through the long, narrow corridor, his shoes slipping on the wet rails. There was little air; as if the ventilation were not working at all. Thankfully, he was not here to do any mining today, only to clean up after a minor collapse in the ceiling. Nothing too bad, the upper frame was fixed quickly, and everything was fine. He would just have to clean up and make the shaft passable again. In just an hour, Franz loaded nine trolleys full of rubble, and that was it, done. If it were not for the dead body, he could have gone home earlier. But that guy was lying there under the debris and no one could pretend otherwise. He was about forty-five years old. Franz grabbed his limp body under the arms and lifted him, about to move him into the mining trolley.

Suddenly, there was a scream. A deafening scream. He dropped the corpse and stuck

his index fingers in his ears. It did not help a bit. Likely because there was no one actually screaming in the shaft. The newborn was lying there completely silent, did not make a peep. Those tiny fists pressed together would have been adorable under different circumstances, but now they were terrifying, covered in blood like that. In Schmitt's head, though, the baby was still screaming, the way babies usually scream when they need something: to be held, to be nursed, to be fed, to sleep; when they're cold, when they're hot, when they need mommy, need to feel the proximity of another person, to feel loved, to be stroked. A naked newborn, lying in a cold mining pit, must be screaming for help, obviously.

The baby was not actually screaming. But it was alive. And it seemed completely fine.

It was fine.

This baby was born strong, and it had a bright future ahead.

Franz wrapped the baby in his shirt and held it close to warm it up. The photographer turned back one last time to take one more snap, just in case. Franz, with the little bundle in his arms, looked at the camera lens and the flash blinded him again. And that was the end of it.

PART 1

SPRING

1. THE TWO OF THEM

There could be no doubt about it: Henry Robotham was in love with Angela Kurz. He

diagnosed himself based on the following symptoms: first of all, he could see nothing but Angela in the whole world, second, he always counted the seconds until her arrival on each of their dates, and third, he was too sentimental. Fourth, he could not focus on anything, and he also felt he had become a bit dumb. Which was symptom number... well, he was having trouble focusing, so it took a while for him to count them all again. It was symptom number five.

No matter how hard he tried, whenever he looked at Angela's face, whether she was speaking or silent, he just always saw the image of a nymph. To his mind, that was peak idealization: a nymph as the incarnation of pure physical and spiritual beauty. He knew this was embarrassing and she would probably find it ridiculous, but he still felt good about it. Even though he was only twenty-three, he was quite sure nothing better had ever happened to him and probably never would. And he told Angela, quite often. Maybe a little too often.

"You're the best thing to ever happen to me," he said quietly and kissed her hand. Usually in the evening. Three times. Or four.

He had been making a living as a certified music teacher for a whole year now, basically by playing piano and guitar. He was still very young, so he lacked the patience for working with children; on the other hand, precisely because he was so young, he was not a nervous wreck yet, like all the other teachers, so even though the students irritated him within five minutes of starting the lesson, he never let his anger show. He put it away nicely and preserved it inside. He was actually great at that in general. He never let anything show.

Angela was also a teacher. Fresh out of school, so she had not taught a single lesson yet; she was enjoying her last holiday before starting work. Henry's Miss Perfect, the jackpot, neither boring nor eccentric, she was just right. And he liked that. He was a bit

worried about being too boring for her, but she might have been with him for that very reason. She found him cute, and he was funny – in that way that only showed sporadically, and only to mask Henry’s fear of the unknown, but that made it always surprising.

They had been dating for a year and a month by then. They were even living together for a quarter of a year. If everything had gone the way it should, they would be living in a house on Samuel Street in Woolwich, which Henry would have inherited from his grandparents. That house had been destroyed by the Luftwaffe twenty-eight years earlier, though, so they spent those three months living together in an apartment that had belonged to Angela’s mother, on Whitbread Street in Brockley, in a house that had also been hit by bombs but was consequently repaired. The couple was able to move into the one-bed just after Christmas last year, after Angela’s mother died as a

result of long-term overconsumption of alcohol. The fondness showed by Angela’s mother towards the gin bottle had something to do, no doubt, with Angela’s father, who was originally Czech and Angela never met him, since after he fathered her – as a Czechoslovak soldier in England – he had to return to his homeland when the war ended. He had allegedly promised her mother that he would come back, but he never did. He reportedly ended up staying in his hometown. This was no touching story of a soldier’s return home after surviving the horrors of war, however; he never again set foot in his childhood home, where his Czech family still lived. His hometown had coincidentally become home to political prisoner camps, and he became one of them. He was forced to work in the uranium mines. As he attempted to escape he was shot dead.

“He was twenty-seven then, that’s all I know,” said Angela and threw a piece of Cadbury Duncan chocolate in her mouth.

“But what did they lock him up for?” Henry demanded.

“For having fought on England’s side, apparently,” she shrugged.

“Look, that doesn’t make any sense,” Henry shook his head. “Who knows what really happened.”

She did not know.

They were both so young, and Angela’s mother’s apartment was 42 square meters, which made them very happy.

Angela felt no strong emotions around her father’s tragic fate – she never knew him, after all – but even after her mother’s death she still felt the need to keep at least minimal contact with her Czech relatives. Christmas cards, that is. They did not venture into longer letters, both because of the language barrier and because of the police interrogations Czechoslovaks graced with foreign correspondence from the west were subjected to. Angela was really an orphan. She had no one other than her correspondence-relatives and Henry. In a way, Henry liked how dependent she was on him. Which is why he took it quite badly when the Czechoslovak regime relaxed a bit in the spring of that year. Prague Spring is what they called it. The government loosened the chains of communism, and Angela decided to visit her relatives. She longed to finally meet her family, but fortunately, she broke her leg while moving that spring. Fortunately for Henry, since this forced her to postpone her trip by three months. And those were the three months that they spent living together, every day together, almost like Siamese twins. And Henry liked that.

(...)

She went out through the front door and onto the outside staircase. They were there already: Schmitt and Elbe, the nurse. Their eyes were attracted by the disappearing shadows on the pavement tiles, but even more by those clouds, hanging motionlessly over the hotel.

“Are they yours, Elbe?” the doctor asked the young spa nurse. Elbe lifted her eyes to the sky and shook her head: no.

“No. I... no,” she protested somewhat distractedly, sounding like a nine-year-old trying to prove she did not knock that vase over with her jump-rope.

“They’re not mine,” was her final answer, after which she gave a jolt and turned around, as if she felt someone watching her.

“Mhhmm,” the doctor puffed incredulously and turned her gaze back to the sky.

“They’re coming from the direction of Ostrov, they should have been brought by an eastern wind, but there was no wind at all,” said Schmitt, sounding surprised.

The doctor was taking the sky situation much more seriously than one would expect. This character trait evidently got left out of her bio on the first page of Hotel Sklodowska’s brochure. It merely stated: “Dr. Estela Hans Jr., owner and manager. The hotel, built in 1899-1901 and originally called Hotel Hans, was confiscated under the 1950s nationalization program. Estela Hans’s mother, also a doctor, eventually reclaimed the hotel – but not until 1990, after the fall of the Communist regime. Sadly, Estela Hans Sr. died that same year; her daughter then assumed full control over the hotel. The two women, mother and daughter, both doctors fully dedicated to radon spa

therapy, had been persecuted by the state police. After renovating the hotel, Estela Hans Jr. decided to name it Hotel Sklodowska, in order to separate the two eras of spa life in the town of Jáchymov, which were interrupted by the totalitarian period of devastating uranium extraction for the needs of the USSR.” The brochure was printed in several versions in different languages and placed on the small desk in each room, and also in a pile at the reception. The last page featured a photograph, perfectly capturing the beauty of the hotel garden and gazebo. It was hard to believe, but the garden was even more charming in reality. Not right now, though. All the flowers and bushes lining the garden paths looked quite dead. Their stems were not bending under the weight of blossoms; their whole length was lying down, as if they wanted to hide underground.

“Franz, for heaven’s sake, what have you done to them?” the doctor lashed out at Schmitt.

“I don’t get it, they were fine yesterday,” he said defensively and lifted one flower with his finger.

“You told me you could handle the job.”

“Estela, I watered them, I’m telling you! This is not normal!” he protested. This was the first time the doctor attacked him for his old age. It was not mentioned explicitly, of course, but it was clear that this was what it was about. She counted on him knowing her well and realizing she did not mean any harm. Just a second later, however, it did not seem as if she hadn’t meant it: Dr. Estela Hans was looking at him with real, deep disgust, as if she were repulsed by him, as if she did not recognize him. Yes, Schmitt was eighty-nine, but the grooves lining his face had never been as deep and dark before. They looked like they could hold a coin. A reddish welt cut across the vertical wrinkles on his neck, wrapped all around, perpendicular to them.

He touched his cheek and kept staring at Estela's terrified face.

"Goddammit, why is he biting me?!" Elbe squealed and caught the doctor's attention. "He's biting me! I need to get him off of me!" she screamed again and ran for the hotel entrance.

"Where are you going? Get back here!" the doctor called after her.

Elbe shot through the lobby, slipped on the tiled floor and nearly fell, ran across the squeaky wood flooring of the restaurant and burst through the swing double door with round windows and into the kitchen. The doctor followed. Her heels were clicking. She threw open the kitchen door and saw Elbe opening a bottle of schnaps.

"Elbe, what's going on with you? This cannot go on, I've been tolerating that flask and that dog of yours, but this behavior... it's too much!"

"Didn't you see? He bit me!" Elbe defended herself. "The dog, was it?" the doctor said sarcastically. "Yeah!" the nurse snapped and took a swig.

Estela Hans wanted to grab the girl by the neck and shake her until the bottle fell out of her hands. She grabbed the bottle neck near Elbe's mouth, so forcefully that she spilled some on her, and squeezed her face angrily with her other hand. Only now did she notice that Elbe's hand really bore a visible bite mark. But before she managed to get any words out, her thoughts were interrupted by loud noises: chairs being pushed, wooden floors squeaking, along with other, quieter sounds, quickly identified as the sobbing of Mira and Mila, the twin sisters in checkered scarves. The doctor loosened her grip and peeked through the round window into the restaurant. The pensioners were spitting the poppy seed cake back onto their plates, grimacing.

She moved out of the way just in time. The door swung open; behind it stood the chef,

and behind him, the sobbing twins.

“They’re right, this shit’s disgusting!” he yelled. “What is this? What’d you do with it? What’d you put in that?!” he continued yelling, and then he spat a piece of the hitherto lauded cake on the floor. Looking disgusted, he threw his apron in the swollen faces of the twins, who instantly started to cry even harder and fled. Their heels were hitting the wooden flooring, creating an unusual harmony with its creaking. The banging of the shoes caused tremors which made the whole floor vibrate. And everything kept trembling, even when the girls sat down on the velvet sofa in the lobby. The green glass chandeliers in the restaurant rustled, there was a pattering of drinking glasses. The girls’ steps had no part in it. Estela was trying to stop the hanging stainless steel pots from banging against each other, when she saw the reddish line around her neck reflected in one of the polished pans. She felt it with her hand. A bloodstain appeared on the sleeve of her white coat.

“Help!” she shouted and collapsed to the ground.

“Calm down, it’s nothing. It’s OK, sit up,” Elbe reassured her. The doctor kept waving her hand in front of the girl’s face.

“Elbe, please, close the wound!”

But no one did anything. Elbe gently stroked her hair, nothing more. “Somebody do something! Why won’t anyone help me?!” she wheezed.

But no one was worried about the ugly scratch on her neck, the blood-stained sleeve, or her choking, because no one saw any of it. The tremor stopped. Suddenly, it was quiet. Estela’s sleeve was clean, she could breathe normally, her neck was smooth and flawless, there was no sign of the bite mark on Elbe’s hand, and Schmitt’s face – he just came in, too – was just your average eighty-nine-year-old’s.

The doctor got up from the ground, ran out of the restaurant and back into the lobby, and stared at the entrance for a moment. Then she ran up the staircase and onto the gallery, and hid behind the decorative railings.

She felt the open door let in a whiff of fresh morning air. The breeze lightly lifted the strand of hair that was falling over her eyes. She carefully peeked between the columns and ornaments.

The door closed.

He was standing there. A new guest.
An old guest.

A regular.

Joe Sagrado Colorado Chuchin.

Clearly, that was not his real name.

But he chose it well. If anyone in the whole wide world looked exactly like a Joe Sagrado Colorado Chuchin, it was him.

(...)

“Well then, doctor, fine, I shall wait for you,” he said drily and smiled an oddly slanted smile. Estela did not catch his sneer, though; her eyes turned in a different direction. Suzanne gave a split-second twitch in the corners of her mouth to reciprocate his smile and be done with the whole thing. But he kept standing and staring.

“Could you please close the door now?” Estela asked him without looking at him. He could not stop looking at her.

“I could.”

A moment later, Estela really heard the door shut, and she dared to lift her eyes. She heard his hand sliding off the door handle on the other side, but could not shake the feeling that he would press it again and step back inside. A strange, herbal smell wafted through the bathroom. Suzanne breathed it in, looked around and waited for instructions. The doctor, however, was focusing on something else altogether. What was it? The door handle. He might not be holding it anymore. I’ll lock the door. I’ll lock it immediately. She stepped towards the door, but there was a knock; she stopped. She heard a rustle on the doorhandle again, and saw it move downwards. The door opened, slowly, only enough for a head to get through. There was a man behind it, but it was not Chuchin. He would not have greeted her. The man timidly opened the door a bit more, and the doctor immediately caught sight of the deep red sofa behind him. She could see no more than one of Chuchin’s legs, one shoulder and a part of his head, but he was there, sitting and waiting. The inner trembling started again.

She knew he would do it – and he did: he stretched his neck and pryingly peeked inside the doctor’s office. A hit, straight in the eyes. A part of her died. She averted her eyes and focused instead on the man standing in the door. Suzanne, her client, said hi to the man and started explaining that this was her husband, and apologizing for him. Estela nodded – not so much in agreement, it had more to do with the inner tremor and her

resulting paralysis – and vacuously stared at the man as he tried to explain something to his wife.

“It’s just that I was going to go for a walk around town, so I wanted you to know where I’d be,” he called in Suzanne’s direction. The doctor and Suzanne both gave a slight, confused nod. The man then proceeded to put out a question regarding the precise whereabouts of the Yorkshire tea in their luggage, which was evidently too much for his wife, so she tried to wave him off. In vain. The man demanded to know where he could find that tea, and only when he got his answer did he finish his performance with a prolonged apology for disturbing them. Estela felt the man in the door could not be real, that it was just Chuchin, who was sitting behind him, making him move like a ventriloquist’s dummy. She was getting paranoid. The man was indeed alive: she had just met the new guest, Mr. Henry Robotham, her future stalker. She did not know that at the time. When he left and shut the door, she jumped forward and finally turned the key in the hole. The bathtub had filled up in the meantime, the water was flowing through the drain hole already. Estela was still standing by the door, holding the key in her hand.

“Can I ask about the calming procedure I’m getting today? Do you make that one out of poppies, too?” Suzanne Accord asked. Her question brought the doctor around; she had to start working.

“Yes, yes, definitely,” she looked around, confused, and nodded. “Ah... yes, you can start undressing, I’ll... I’ll set everything up.”

She looked around the room, unsure whether to go left or right. When she finally got her bearings, she opened the large medical cabinet, moved a few jars and boxes

back and forth, she did not look like she knew what she was doing. Her mind was still

occupied by him. Is he still sitting there? She moved the jars again but did not take out a single one. She closed the cabinet. As if hypnotized, she walked over to the Golden Bathroom and tried to open another medical cabinet, much larger than the one in the office, which was standing in the corner. It was locked, so she pulled the key ring with a silver chain from her pocket and, with trembling fingers, tried to find the right key. The whole bunch fell on the floor with a clank. She picked it up. Finally she opened the lower lock with one of the keys. She could not force anything into the upper lock, though. She struggled with it for a while, nearly breaking the key, then realized she had been trying to stick the same key into both locks. She dropped the bundle again.

“How did you come up with the poppy seed idea?” From behind the divider, Suzanne tried to break the silence with questions. “Do you grow it yourself? Does it do well in this region?”

“Ah, yes, quite, you can grow it here or in Afghanistan – it’s more about the specific ways of treating it,” the doctor answered at length so that the insistent client would be satisfied and leave her to her thoughts.

She looked across the office. In the direction of the door. He’s still sitting there. She breathed out. She breathed in. She tried to focus on her breath to calm herself down. She turned the key twice clockwise, but the cabinet still did not open; inhale again, exhale, she pulled the door sharply towards her and tried once more. The lock finally gave in. No wonder this cabinet was secured with two locks. The shelves were overflowing with psychiatric drugs and jars full of handmade tablets and strangely dark-hued creams. Estela took one small jar full of pills. Everything would be much simpler if she took something now and lay down in her own bathtub, which she was hiding up there, behind the stained-glass door, in her little tower, forbidden to anyone except her. She could stay there for a few days. She put the jar back on the shelf and grabbed one of the large ones instead, turning towards the tub. She took off the lid and,

quite violently, started to throw the promised poppy mixture in the water using a spatula, without noticing her client was already in. The dark, slimy chunks startled Suzanne, though; she moved her hand abruptly, thus also jerking the doctor's attention.

"Ah! You're here already?" the doctor jumped.

"Wasn't I supposed to? I'm sorry," Suzanne said guiltily.

The doctor realized straight away that her "You're here already?" came out extremely unprofessional. She was harsh with herself.

"No, no, nothing to worry about at all, it's fine. Stay there, easy."

Estela never made such silly mistakes, she was always alert; but today, she simply could not get her own actions under control.

As the dark bathing mix sank to the bottom of the tub and started turning the water a dark gray color, which still struck Suzanne as quite terrifying, the doctor went to place the jar back in her medicine cabinet. Come on, get a grip! Stop thinking about him!

Now! All she managed was one step forward. Then heat spread all over her back. The warm water soaked her white coat, her dress, got on her skin, and wet drops trickled from the loose strands of hair that fell out of her bun.

She turned around sharply.

The floor was full of gray puddles. Suzanne Accord was clenching the edge of the bathtub, terrified, her face twisted in a tortured grimace. A strange liquid reminiscent of melted asphalt was trickling from her mouth in dark streams. She looked like she

wanted to shout something, scream, even, but the huge amount of that black gunk made it impossible. All she could mumble were a few weak sounds. It occurred to the doctor that Suzanne would probably appreciate her saying something, offering an explanation, or at least sharing her terror. But she did not afford her client any of those things. On the contrary: it looked like she could not see what was happening at all. Suzanne suddenly moved, so sharply it made the water splash out from the bathtub again. Only she knew that this was a reaction to the horror of her face, which she saw reflected in the brass faucets. Estela dropped the jar. The keys swung on their chain and hit the side of the bathtub with a crash. Susanne's eyes were now filled with not only fear but also black tears, which started forming around her tear ducts; the strange mass had started pouring from her eyes.

"It'll be OK," the doctor whispered.

It could be assumed that her client, in the condition she was in, would demand a bit more information than this, but what could she do? She was paralyzed, and her body was slowly sinking. The doctor reached out, grabbed the poor woman under the arms and tried to pull her out. It was a struggle. The limp body did not cooperate. She did succeed in the end, though; Suzanne's feet smacked onto the goldish tiles. The skinny body, covered in a thin, dark, slimy layer, started to come to life and flop around the cold floor – probably as a result of the temperature shock.

"It'll be OK," Estela repeated. This might be hard to believe, but because of the earlier commotion caused by Chuchin, she was still having trouble focusing on what was happening right there in the bathroom. She was standing above her client, stolid, thinking about what to do next. Then she was startled, and staggered: her client's motionlessness had been deceptive. She suddenly clutched the doctor's ankle, tugged strongly, and made her stumble. Estela caught onto the edge of the bathtub and kicked her leg, trying to free her ankle and regain her balance; then she slipped on the wet

bathroom floor and fell completely. As she reached for the wall, in an attempt to stop her fall, she caught the mirror and sent it smashing to the ground. Her other hand grabbed the sink, ripping it from the wall. Water started spraying all around from the broken pipes.

“I’ll help you, just stop fighting me,” Estela wheezed as she tried to pull Suzanne’s dirty hands away from her throat. Luckily, she managed to avoid getting choked, and tamed the naked attacker’s hands enough to pull her to one of the corners of the room. She dropped her client, exhausted by the assault, onto the tiles in a sort of deep niche decorated with a floral mosaic, and turned back. She twisted open the knobs at the Scotch hose stand and pointed the jets at the woman, who was still squirming on the floor. The water streams breaking on her body made her efforts to get up even more difficult. The doctor set the water pressure to maximum. Suzanne

was thrown back and forth between two powerful streams, until they finally threw her off and glued her to the wall. Estela turned the water guns to the side to survey the scene. Water was flowing away through the drainage holes. Suzanne’s skin appeared to be completely clean. Just to be sure, Estela pointed the pistols back in the middle and gave the pitiful woman another dose. After a few moments, she turned the water down again and pointed the jets away. She could not see Suzanne’s face, which was turned to the mosaic on the wall. She closed the taps and the streams died down almost immediately. All that could be heard now was a quiet rasping sound, and before she got to Suzanne, even that was gone. She lifted her arm and dropped it again; the lifeless limb fell to the floor. Then Suzanne suddenly twitched and screamed. And again, and again. She kept going. Estela stuck her fist between her jaws. The woman bit down, though, and a red stream burst from Estela’s hand; she needed to find another way to silence her client. Those luxurious little spa towels would be perfect, but unfortunately, the carefully folded columns were stacked on the table by the entrance – too far away. Estela left her hand between Suzanne’s teeth and used the other to grab

her shoulder, dragging her on the floor until she could grab a towel and use it to plug her client's mouth. It was powder pink terrycloth. She tied up Suzanne's hands with a bathrobe belt. When the client finally seemed stabilized, Estela deemed it safe to leave her for a moment and go into the office. She took a box of phials out of the medical cabinet. She shook one and pulled its contents into a large syringe. Then she repeated the action. When the drug was in Suzanne's veins, the client was... even more stabilized, so to speak.

Estela Hans wiped her brow and breathed deeply. She noticed some pieces of the black mass, which she had put in the water to provide an exclusive relaxing bath, were stuck on the drainage sieve by the Scotch hose.

“Shit.”

She got some energy and a large shard from the broken mirror, which she then used to carefully pick up the bits and return them to the jar. Upon surveying the bathtub, she realized that the cleanup was nowhere near done. The bathwater was full of more pieces of that black gunk, but also fragments of teeth and bones, one might mistake them for some hard, light-colored crumbs, but Estela knew very well what they were. She fished them out with a bath salt spoon and threw them into the jar, too. When there was nothing more to be picked out, she drained the gray bathwater. With a few circular motions she pulled out the last remaining pieces. She knew a bit of the slime must have fallen through, though, so she unscrewed the drain and used her finger to pick out whatever was left in the trap. She wiped the bathtub clean with one of those powder pink towels, which she then wrapped in some paper and a plastic bag on top of that, and only then she washed the tub with clean water. She locked the jar, which contained the bits of mass she had picked up, together with the plastic bag, in the medicine cabinet.

There was a knock on the door.

The doctor jumped, startled. She turned the key in the cabinet lock one more time and stepped over Suzanne's naked body, which was lying in the doorframe. She could not leave it like this. She hooked her elbows under Suzanne's arms and moved her quietly through the door... no... she was stuck... ah, the leg. Her foot was blocking the door from closing completely. The doctor kicked it aside very gently, and finally

closed the door.

Another knock on the door.

She looked around. The office, fortunately, was not in that bad a shape, except perhaps for the puddles of water and dirty footprints on the floor. She smoothed her hair back, lifted her chin and prepared to pretend there was no dark, wet stain on her back and no nude client in an unspecified state lying just behind the bathroom door. She turned the key and opened the door just enough to stick her head through it.

It was him again. Not Joe Sagrado Colorado Chuchin, though. It was that Henry Robotham again, except this time his face was full of bloody smudges and his clothes torn and dirty. He was sitting on the divan exactly like Chuchin earlier, and Elbe was standing next to him.

"I tried calling, Dr. Hans, but there was no answer," the girl blurted out and stepped towards the door.

"Ah, right. Eh... I have a client here, receiving a somewhat complicated procedure," the doctor apologized and slightly increased the distance between the door and its frame.

"Right," Elbe said, a little doubtfully, and tried to look inside the office. "Mr.

Robotham here got hurt on his walk, Grandpa found him by the Castle... He claimed he was fine at first, but now he's passed out in the bathroom, he slashed his head, and he's been tottering," she explained.

The doctor nodded, as she was trying to wrap her head around what Elbe was saying to her and simultaneously block the view into the wrecked office.

"What kind of procedure is it, anyway?" Elbe said in a voice now quite full of suspicion.

"I'm trying out something new here, it takes a bit longer than what people are used to," Estela swallowed and panted a bit.

"That's great, my wife needs that, I'm happy for her," Henry Robotham chimed in in a mumbling voice and dropped his head.

"So how much longer do you need? I don't know what to do with him," the young nurse insisted.

Estela nodded again.

"Okay. My client's relaxing right now, so she's fine on her own for a bit. I'll drive Mr. Robotham to the hospital in Karlovy Vary. Give me a minute."

She shut the door in Elbe's face.

Some water droplets were still trickling down on the gold mosaic, but only the last of them, the slowest ones. The stream of water flowing from Suzanne's hair was getting thinner.

Na ja, and what now?

Of course she knew what had gone wrong. Sometimes one just makes a stupid mistake, swapping one jar for another, and next thing you know, there's a shattered mirror, broken sink and cracked tiles. Oh well. The damage is done – isn't it? It is.

And even if everyone around had black crap flowing out of their noses, this wouldn't be the greatest of Estela's worries today.

She locked up and left to bring the injured guest to the Karlovy Vary hospital.

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