

The Tide King



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Prologue—1976

Andrei thought they were strange as far as Americans went. He'd picked them up in his cab outside the Kaliningrad airport to drive them over the border to Reszel, Poland. They resembled the basic unit of family, one man and woman in their early twenties and an eight- or nine-year-old girl. But that was all. The woman seemed too young to be a mother, and the man seemed too old, somehow, to be a young man. The woman, an unattractive-looking rat with bulbous eyes, long nose, no chin, the color of jaundice, spent several minutes at the beginning of the trip explaining to the man, dark-haired, large and muscular, the top of his head pressed against the greasy roof of the cab, how to use traveler's cheques.

"You sign them like checks," she explained. "But they're really money—checks that have been already paid for."

Andrei turned his attention back to the road. The days and nights were separated by subtle gradation. Congested, industrial skies the color of bone and smoke bled into charcoal and faded into smoke and bone once again. One found different ways of staying awake, of keeping the lines between them sharp, understandable. Sometimes Andrei put horseradish in his coffee. Other times, he speculated about his passengers. The man, woman, and child

baffled him. They had no baggage, except for a camper's backpack. They appeared too soft, too clumsy, to be fleeing the mob. Perhaps they were drug mules. But to go to Reszel, a town with a few tourist attractions, more of a "this-to-that" place, seemed crazy. Only the young girl, perhaps adopted, spoke Polish, a bit of Russian, both with a strange dialect.

He studied their expressions from the rearview mirror. Tourists liked for him to talk, point out the sights, few that there were, the whole nine yards. But then, they were not tourists. He lit a cigarette and fumbled with the radio dial until a station with a strong signal wove into the stale tobacco of the cab. A woman's voice sang out before being swallowed by a wave of guitar chords. Drums machine-gunned into the space between the chorus and verse.

"Who is Katarzyna Sobczyk?" The little girl stood in the well of the back seat, repeating the name the disc jockey had spoken moments before. She hugged the front seat from behind, her chin propped up on the shoulder rest.

"How you say," Andrei answered, waving his hand away from his forehead. "*Pop singer*. Big star in Poland with her band, uh, Czerwono-Czarni. Like, uh, *Fleetwood Mac*?"

The little girl shook her head, her eyebrows close together in puzzlement.

"You from Reszel?" he asked.

"Why? Do you know your way around? You get to the old Bishop's Castle, I can show you where to go."

"No—I take you in from main road. Then you tell me, okay?"

"It's easy to find," she answered, staring at her little fingers. "There is not much in Reszel worth remembering."

He'd seen someone like her in the circus, once, he decided. Like a midget but not. An adult in a child's body.

"Ela." The man, singular in syllable and intention, spoke, and the little woman-girl slumped into the space between her two companions in the back seat.

"Pretty girl," Andrei said to the man, who studied him for a moment. "Visiting family?"

"Just visiting," the man answered. The lights of Reszel grew like low-hanging stars, etching a canopy of night that replaced the blackness and straws of light from the cab's headlights.

"The castle," the little girl said, pointing to an illuminated turret topped with orange tiles. Tears appeared in her eyes, big childish drops that her eyelids reflexively sought to stop. "Oh, Matka..."

Andrei looked to the woman next to Ela for her response, but she did not answer, did not comfort her.

"Who are these people?" Andrei addressed Ela in Polish. She shook her head, motioned for him to stop the cab. The young woman pulled out a wallet fat with zloty, paid the total on the meter, gave him a generous tip.

"Will you be safe?" he asked Ela again as the man opened the right-side door and slid out, the absence of his weight buoying the cab.

"What does he ask you?" The woman, looking at Andrei with fear, irritation, in her gold eyes, asked the little girl, nudging her toward the open door, where the man fumbled outside with the backpack.

"He asks us who we are," Ela said as she hopped into the darkness. "Should I tell him we are gods who live in hell?"

“We are tourists,” the woman laughed, fake, and nodded toward Andrei. “Thank you—goodnight.”

“Bezpieczniej podróży,” Andrei answered. He fingered the pile of zloty she had given him, crisp, and held them to the light, saw that they were real. He turned off the meter, flung the gearshift into reverse. And that is how he forgot about them.

1942

It was almost time to go. His mother, Safine Polensky, would see him out the door but not to the train station. She would not watch him leave on the train, his face framed in the window, his garrison cap covering his newly shorn head. She would see him to the door, where he could go to work, to school, to the store, and in the corresponding memory of her mind, he would return.

She opened the lock of the rose-carved jewelry box on the kitchen table with a butter knife, the key orphaned in Poland somewhere. He wondered whether she would produce a pocket watch, a folding knife, his father's or his uncle's, that he could fondle while trying to sleep on the hard earth, dirt full of blood and insides, exposed black tree roots cradling his head like witch fingers.

He opened his hand, waiting. She pulled out an envelope, old and brown, and the dark, furry object he regarded. A mouse carcass. A hard moldy bread.

“Burnette saxifrage.” She put the crumbly mound in his palm. “Most powerful herb. I save it until now.”

He glanced at the leaves and roots spread over his palm, dried like a fossilized bird. His lips tightened. His whole life to that point a stew of herbs—chalky and bitter and syrupy in his teas, his soups,

rubbed onto his knees and elbows after school. Safine had brought them from the homeland, Reszel, Poland—stories of baba yagas and herbs and the magic of her youth. He may have believed once, been scared, as a child. He put it back in the envelope, more fragile than the herb.

“You take this.” She grabbed his palm, her knuckles blue and bulbous. “Eternal life. You take it when you are about to die. You will live. This is the only one. You understand?”

He nodded, pushing it into the far pocket of his duffel bag, where he was certain to forget about it. Herbs had not saved his father from pains. They had not spared his mother’s hands, curled and broken, her lungs, factory black. How would they save his head from being half blown off, his guts from being hung like spaghetti on someone’s bayonet? He hugged her. She smelled like garlic and dust. Then he, Stanley Polensky, walked to the Baltimore station, got on the train, and went to war.