

THE CHILDREN OF NIGHTFALL

The Knight

Chapter One

Martha, Niko and Almasa

Niko used to think that she was a hyena but actually, it was not quite so. It was rarely, indeed, that she was as incensed by something as to force a showdown and squabble. However, when she did so, she always explained away that she was the great granddaughter of an angel and a saint and that was the real truth.

“There is blood of great adventurers, enlighteners, devoted women and brave warriors in my veins, she used to say in a low voice so very deepened by her old, old habit of smoking. Notwithstanding its “depth”, the voice was perfectly placed and the perfection became especially tangible as she tried to speak louder. “You, little boy (or little girl, that depended upon the sex of her interlocutor and no matter how old he or she was), I’m Martha L., a philosopher, Doctor of Philosophy. Dear, I can be a good shag for seven like you.” Yes, Martha was a bit ill-mannered.

It was bad when she was vexed and the worst thing it was for Martha herself. However, it seldom happened. One had to be a true pain in her neck to make her angry. She was so very self-assured for some reason. That wasn’t her way to make a show of herself. “A defective upstart,” Martha said. “Велеть слугам, высечь, выкинуть (Tell people to flog and turn him out -in Rus), as my Princess Babulinka used to put it...” Among other things, Martha was a snob and her snobbism was rather groundless.

In addition, she was an alcoholic and had been suffering from addiction to kid stuff. However, she’d tell you that she hated drunkards and drug users. She also suffered from autumn depression and claustrophobia. She used to talk in her sleep. She talked a lot, always raving in a loud voice.

Her hairiness had bothered Martha to distraction. By God, she struggled against it with such zeal that even the most fastidious appraiser would never notice anything, but Martha was the one who knew the truth about her hairiness.

Her back was spread with dark patches because of the vice of lying in the sun. As for her very healthy and misshapen teeth, she thought they were so uneven because of some karmic misunderstanding. If mummy had noticed it in time, she wouldn’t have the problem, but mummy had failed to take it into account and Martha cursed her own mother every time she was brushing her china. Otherwise her swearing almost never had any specific addressees. “Damn it!” was the thing she mostly confined herself to saying.

On the other hand, Niko was always ready to use bad language. He wrangled and bickered industriously. He could argue about politics, children who’d died because of AIDS and religious minorities. Niko was a brawler. Sometimes he turned out to be the one who was bashed up himself, but sometimes it was him who overpowered the others. Martha tried to explain to him that a person feeling no fear of having destructed his intact body is a weak-minded one. He was a faultfinder. It turned out that he had great many adventures, not only in sunny Georgia but also in the quietest European cities.

Niko was no longer a citizen of Georgia. He sought safety in escape eight years ago. He left the country and Martha remained here. I don’t know whether he took the separation hard or not, but

Martha had already said that there was nothing to die for in his departure, though there were undoubtedly less things for her to laugh about.

He was on the make in Europe and she had many things in Georgia. They wrote lengthy letters to each other and with the course of time the letters more and more often ended with a plaintive exclamation: "What the hell, what's that, darling?!"

My dear reader, if you've already read a few pages of this book and you can't make up your mind whether it's worth reading or not, I'll tell you frankly and won't mince my words that it isn't a story about love between sexes. It's a story telling how two persons, Martha and Niko, loved each other.

I want to make clear that Martha used to threaten that she'd leave the big sex but that sex was the only thing that made her really happy and of course, she wasn't going to leave it for anything else. As to Niko, women like Martha catered to him by no standards.

So, a few months before this story began, Martha celebrated her fortieth birthday in a big way to spite all existing prejudices and allpenny pinchers. She was one of those who are mostly happy. She was happy with the weather, political system, rate of exchange, her lifestyle, men—everything but her own name. To cut a long story short, Martha was a whore.

"I know you're a good-for-nothing man but won't you be my godfather at least?" Martha asked Niko. "Give me some normal name. However, it'd be much better to have no name at all. I thought about the matter. Any name is idiotic somehow. There are names that may have been given to some unfortunate wretches, others are just stupid..."

The antipathy that she felt towards her name had already acquired some morbidtinge. The most unpleasant thing was that Martha could give you an almost logical explanation of that aversion against her name, but could it be logical, on the whole?

It was a fine day in July. They were in Khada Gorge. Martha, sitting on a forbidding cliff, was developing her theory there. Niko listened to her and thought that the girl had completely got out of her trolley in his absence.

"The Gospel is a good book, right? It's wise. Martha is a maidservant there. Her sister does nothing but make declarations of love, but still she's more absolutely great, isn't she? Why, why did some nonentity name me Martha? I do want to tell someone that I love him but I can't tell lies, can I?"

That day, Niko and Martha were in the most beautiful place on earth, in the Gorge of Khada. It's the gorge that they both will see when the eleventh hour of their not very long lives will have come. They'll see the cascade over the village of Tskere and umbrellas of cow parsnips growing there. They'll feel the smell that can't be felt by those who haven't seen the best gorge on the planet. Khada.

There was still much time left before that hour wouldstrike. It was a scorching day and they went to the gorge. They were three of them: Martha, Niko and a German shepherd. First, they called him either Count or Lord, but Martha decided that Almasa was a better name, though the dog didn't move a muscle when they called him so.

Almasa was a huge dog and that's why he was rejected to be employed in the police. Almasa was a mannerly, delicate creature. It was calm and reserved. Martha thought the dog got a inferiority complex when he was dismissed. That's why she praised him whole days and nights, setting small tasks for him. Almasa dreamt of fantastic exploits and it seemed that it was impossible for him to be thankful for small mercies like keeping watch over Martha's twenty-square-meter yard and guarding worthless people like Niko. Something had made him sorrowful this time, too. Almasa was looking down at the cascade. Martha told him to take a stroll, but the dog didn't care an iota for her words.

“Man, what’s up with him?” Martha really worried about the dog. “Maybe he doesn’t like me and that’s the problem.”

Niko shrugged his shoulders. There’s nothing to be secretive about and I’ll tell you that notwithstanding the dog’s good temper, Niko was a bit afraid of him. When they were alone, Niko always tried to look aside and never touched the dog. When the Alsatian yawned, Niko shuddered at the sight of it for the dog had two big jaws. So Niko had no desire to perceive the inmost recesses of Almasa’s heart.

He had too many problems. “If my adrenaline level increases, the beast may bite off my head,” Niko thought.

“Maybe it offended him when we muzzled him, man?” Martha continued.

“But, man, they wouldn’t let us get on that stinking bus and we’d see neither the gorge nor anything else...”

“Yah, get off with you!” Almasa thought.

“Wait! You started to tell me,” Niko tried to remind her of something.

“Yes. It’s good that I’m telling about it here and it’s good that I’m telling it to you, but to tell you the truth, I was rather upset then.”

“Why? Come on! You’re a big girl, you know and you’ll have a hundred like him.”

“Yes and it’s infinitely distressing, Nikolaus. Сколько можно? (How many should they be? - in Rus.)?”

“It’s a different thing, but maybe it would be better for us to drink something?”

Niko couldn’t stand any hint of sorrow.

“It would be quite fair to find some zhipitauri² somewhere in the way of patriotism, wouldn’t it? Knickers! Let it be.”

“You’re a thankless skirt,” Niko said to her unworriedly. “I humped such a big bottle from Europe thinking you’d be glad. I hid the bottle under my bed not to let anyone drink it, and carried it put against my breast in that nasty coach for three hours. I lugged it around to this place and I almost broke my shoulder, but what of it? She says zhipitauri (Home-distilled low-alcohol vodka (Geo.).”

“Pardon,” Martha said. She was troubled.

“You don’t know shit about whisky, you, a country bumpkin,” Niko continued.

Redneck is redneck.

“Yah! It was your granddad who drowned in whisky in Glasgow.”

“No, it was in Pankov. He threw himself under a tank there.”

“God knows. What on earth was that Horatio from Zemokrachani doing in Berlin... Another son of unfortunate Georgia... Did you really buy this whisky in a shop? Why can’t I open it. Maybe it’s a fake, man!”

“Look for fakes among your holy fools. Yah! I just wanted to please her...”

“He had some good fake vodka at least”.

“Yes, and his Weltanschauung... You’re at a mature age, woman, and something has stupefied you to such an extent”.

Niko never liked the holy fool steeped in mysticism. One can say that Niko wasn’t able to stomach him. Once Martha had told him that it was her to whom the man offered his hand and there was nothing that Niko could take hard. Niko kept silent, but he still despised the man. Now he couldn’t keep it to himself that he was happy because the romance between Martha and the holy fool or their friendship had already been finished, finished without any show of talent. Their last dialogue was almost in the style that Friederike would chose for it:

“I think...”

“Who cares...”

“But if you ask me...”

“Who cares...”

“OK, but still if you do...”

“Who cares...”

“Let’s assume that you’ve asked me...”

“Who cares...”

“Yes, but we can assume that you’re asking...”

“Who cares...”

“Just theoretically. Don’t I have a chance to be asked...”

“Who cares...”

“I am not about it! I’m about a possibility! I am not telling that you must ask me. Who’s on earth forcing you to ask anything? But can you ask me if you want to do so...”

“Who cares...”

“It’s all the same, it makes no difference what you think or what you do. You can’t deny the possibility that you can put a question to me. I am, I exist, that is, you can ask me a question!”

“Who cares...”

“My aunt! You’re so cool, the holy fool!” said Niko. The story amused him.

“Very cool, too cool! I’m crazy about male chauvinism! What the hell did you need that man for? Because of physics?”

The words gave Martha something to think about.

“No, there was something more. Go ahead, Almasa, you tell him!”

Niko looked at Almasa warily. Almasa told him not to listen to women.

“Almasa says, Martha is an idiot”.

“You’re sexist”, Martha said. She was drinking whisky like tea. “Aren’t you? Blast it! Even the dog that has fallen to my lot is a male”.

But she was so fond of men...

“He was a user, he was older than you”, Niko started. “Can you see, as what he makes the grade?”

“With a labile psyche. A superstitious person....” Martha raised her hand and started to count on her fingers.

“Yes, I remember, I scattered some salt and he was within an inch of crying”.

“Priceless. Shall I go on? And this charming creature, dear Nikolaus, had your sister so that... My gosh! What was that, Niko? I hobbled a bit, but words are needless, aren’t they? Did I put it across anyone? I just came across myself. Did I break a family? No, brother, show me that family. AIDS? It’s me who will catch it and no one else. Just a couple of years and someone from Mother Teresa’s Order will show it to me on a photograph. That man made such shows! Besides, he told me some totally great stories, gave gifts and told me that I was beautiful...”

“You know drugs bring on astigmatism and one gets somewhat blind,” Niko said.

He was a realist. “Speak to me in a normal manner, you moron! Everyone likes being at it and besides, everyone has a drawback. Me, for instance, I sometimes make mistakes. People like me are called creeps in Gurgistan, but don’t you love me? What on earth can I show you? Let him be the one to show it to you. Why not? There are no longer many things that he can be proud of and he prefers to give himself the semblance. What about you? You’ll appreciate it, you’ll cook some tasteless food for him and that’s all. He’ll be satisfied with the old shit. Is it clear?”

“Oh, dear Niko, it’s difficult for you to understand! The holy fool was the one who wanted, really wanted...”

"The holy fool what?" Niko asked, raising his glass.

"This, daddy!"

Almasa rose and slap-bang stretched out.

"What a big head he has." Niko said. He was obviously pondering over something.

"Listen, can it beat a wolf?"

"I don't know" Martha answered. "Almasa, can you beat a wolf?"

Almasa gnashed his teeth.

"He can do it".

Niko fixed his eyes on Almasa, Almasa stared at Martha and Martha stared at Niko.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Yah!" Martha candled the bottle. "It's really good, you know..."

"However, he'll be dead by then".

It harassed Martha.

"What? Who are you talking about, man?"

"About Almasa."

"What the hell! May you rot in hell! He's six years old, forty-two, by human standards. What do you think about? How old are you?"

"Wait a moment!"

Niko stopped speaking. Martha was waiting for him.

There's a bad thing about the gorge: it's impossible to understand what sort of day it is there. A strange bluish cloud hovered over them. Then a flurry of wind arose.

"Man, what's the Georgian word for that? Maybe it's strength?"

"What kind of strength?"

"In the story by Castaneda".

He did not reply anything to her. To his deepest convictions, those who belonged to the softer sex could be admitted to church schools only.

"You'd be taught how to read the Lord's Prayer, how to affix your signature and that's all... You'd embroider something, say, handkerchiefs, a tablecloth. Then I'd come and pour some borscht cooked by you on that cloth. You'll teach yourself to do it, too. I'd have a chance to avoid "kokosha supa" and you'd say nothing. You wouldn't say anything about rooks and spitting in your face, either. You'd know your place..."

The cloud behaved outrageously. It didn't want to go. Martha curled up. She first thought it would be better to move a little, but the whisky had already done its work - she was lazy. Niko was thinking about something.

"Do you know what Niko is thinking about?" Martha once asked a stupefied Australian tourist on the same cliff in the same gorge.

"About what?"

"About nothing." Martha answered and she was right then.

"How did you guess it?" It made Niko curious.

"It happened long ago. You of all people, dear Martha! You though then that a blue 'sunshine' was a guarantee for success and you had the ace in the pocket of your slightly frayed jeans. You though it would be always there but where is it now?"

Niko began to speak.

"Do you know what I'm thinking about?"

"No."

“Wait. How much time is there left for us? Ten years for each at the outside. Ten years of life, not of existence, and then the twilight will come.”

“Wow, Kuki,” Martha livened up, “You’ve learnt such words.”

“Wait.” Niko said. It didn’t make him angry. “I’m about business. I’ll tell you: I’ve got good chances only for a nursing home. Wait! A Surinamese nurse, some oatmeal porridge in the mornings and classical music in the evenings performed by some anthroposophist kids. Yes, I’d have a hundred lives there but I don’t want it. And you...”

“I’ll collect bottles.”

“Wait.”

“Yes, I know it for sure. I’ll live in Gldani district, in the seventh arse, and I’ll collect bottles.”

“I am not about it. If there had been anyone who could have fallen in love with you, he’d have already done it. You were not a bad girl and your disposition wasn’t so vile. It was the same thing about me, too. Now there’s no bloody thing. Yah! We are a couple, Kuki, no matter whether you like it or not.”

The cloud moved aside and Martha lay down on the grass.

“What’s next?”

“Next. I’m on it. I tell you: let’s sell your house...”

“Like hell I will.”

“Wait! Let’s sell it and buy one here in Tskere. Let’s fettle it, look after it, let’s put a small engine into the river. We’ll have some light and wolves won’t come as long as he’s alive... Niko just shook his head without mentioning Almasa.

“Where does a wolf come in?”

“Martha!!! I’m about business! You dummy! I’ll have a good pension! I was naturalized. I had a Nigerian speaker: ‘Sisters and brothers!’ I swore in a loud voice that I wouldn’t set off bombs in subways...”

“Yes, I remember. Then you went out and boozed it. You’d already become a European guy. Damn your passport... And you got acquainted with some Judy...”

“Ha-ha!” Niko brightened up. “Yes, I liked Judy! In front of their KGB... At a bus station...”

“Yes,” Martha raised a little again and grasped the bottle, “You’d have sex in front of the parliament building, and the Big Ben bells went nuts, and the Thames overflowed its banks! The CCTV cameras burnt out! Dullard! What Tskere! That’s not the half of it, man! I’ll put up an ad,” Martha was turned on, “I’m looking for a job. I take and serve positive energy, mostly by means of physical contact with men. Forty years of experience.’ Don’t you like it? It’s still early, daddy, early for bottles and for Surinamese refugees, too. Let’s make it in this gorge first of all *copok лет спустя*¹. What are you smirking at? We’ve already got *двадцать лет*², haven’t we? A dead lion is better than a living dog.”

“Yes,” agreed Niko, “Better than Almasa, for instance. It at least doesn’t have such a big stupid tongue hanging out “.

“You learn how to fuck first!”

“You’ve blown up twice and you think you’re a woman?!”

There was such a quarrel that even Almasa had a good time there. Two adults were emitting striking sounds, throwing dry grass into each other’s faces, biting each other on the ankles and rolling on the slope...

“Whisky, whisky, woman!”

“Ha-ha-ha!”

The bottle rolled off, Niko rolled after it. Almasa was barking. Martha had tossed back her head and was laughing. Somewhere near Bursachiri the foul weather was grumbling at something but the sun was shining above them and they both thought that it was happiness.

Almasa's thoughts were about something pleasant, too. He was fawning and smiling to his mistress.

I think it was because of some strong affection.