

Chapter Three

The moon was bright in the night sky and friendly stars were winking at Saga. They probably want to give me a bit of encouragement, she thought. The night is clear. The moon is shining. That's good. It will light our way.

She opened the window and stepped out onto the balcony. She walked over to the flowers hanging from the balustrade and put her hand into the pot, reaching for a handful of soil. She squeezed it in her hand for a moment. Then, she reached for a watering can in the corner. There was still some water in the can, and she watered the flowers. Suddenly, she remembered something. Julian's dahlias! I left them in the garden and they're probably still there unless Grandma or Mum looked after them. Well, it doesn't matter now, I'll find out what happened tomorrow. Tomorrow...

Tomorrow seemed strangely distant. Saga put the watering can back in place and looked ahead. She pulled back her shoulders, feeling a light breeze on her face; an open expanse of fields and meadows stretched before her. The forest loomed in the distance. Saga loved open spaces. She liked to stand on the balcony at nights as beautiful as this one when the sky was not covered with a quilt of clouds and gaze into the abyss of the starry night sky. Its immensity attracted her. When she could feel part of the space shivers ran through her whole body. The awe she experienced in such a moment was a manifestation of the Creator and an appreciation for granting humans such a beautiful world. For Saga, God was an ideal Creator who perfectly formed each element of nature to make it fit with all others.

Thank You. She looked up at the sky.

Today, however, her gaze was stubbornly focused on the forest. Is this really happening? Or is it just my imagination? she wondered. Too vivid an imagination can make a person lose touch with reality and you may start seeing things that are not there. Imagination should be handled with care.

She returned to her room and went to the door. She wasn't sure if all the household members had already gone to bed. Saga lived together with her mother and her grandmother, her mother's mother. Saga's green hands for plants were certainly inherited from both of them. Saga's mother was a landscape designer. She was incredibly clever with gardens. She could brilliantly manage even the smallest corner of

greenery. Saga's grandmother ran a flower shop all her life which Saga inherited when she grew up, Grandma was now retired and Saga, together with Diana, took good care of her flower shop.

But now Saga was listening. It was quiet. She went to bed and covered herself with a blanket, in case her mother or grandmother wanted to look in on her. She decided to wait.

Suddenly, she woke up. At first, she did not know what had happened, but when she realized she was dressed and ready to go, she remembered everything. Startled, she jumped out of bed.

Oh no, I must have fallen asleep! I hope I haven't fallen asleep!

With a trembling hand, she reached for her watch and was relieved to see that she had slept for forty minutes straight. She still had ten minutes before her appointment at the edge of the forest.

"It's time," she said to herself.

She opened the door cautiously and realized that the house was quiet. She went out into the hallway. It was dark everywhere, so she walked stealthily down the stairs, avoiding the creaking planks. At the front door, she breathed a sigh of relief. She had made it. She wondered if Diana and Maurice had also managed to slip out. With a trembling heart, she shut the door. She didn't know yet that she wouldn't be coming back here soon...

She looked around. The street was empty. As she walked down the dirt track, Saga tried to figure out if Maurice and Diana were already there, but she saw nothing. Only after a while, she noticed her friend nodding at her. His eyes, already used to the darkness, found her faster than she found him. But before she reached him, she heard a muffled cry behind her:

"Saga! Saga, stop! Please, wait for me!"

She turned to see Diana running breathlessly towards her. Maybe she was afraid to go into the forest alone? That for sure was the case.

When they reached

"I was wondering what would be more appropriate in this situation: good evening or good morning!" Maurice said cheerfully when they found him.

Then he began to tease Diana.

"I came first and waited for you on my own. You couldn't have been quieter than Saga. You were the only one screaming like a possessed mad woman."

"I didn't scream, I was simply trying to tell Saga to wait for me," Diana replied. "It was not easy to sneak out of the house. My mother came to my room five times, even though I said I was going to bed. First, she came in to ask if I was hungry, then if I wanted something to drink, then she brought me milk even though I said I didn't want any, and finally she came in to ask if I was asleep. Would you believe it? I thought I'd go mad! I was afraid I wouldn't make it and would have to walk alone in the dark!"

"Calm down and look around you. There are no ghosts, vampires, or aliens here, so there's no reason for you to make such a fuss. Take our example. Me and Saga are not afraid of anything!"

"I've already looked around and indeed I don't see anyone. Because it is the middle of the night. And that's why you can't see what's hiding in the darkness! In fact, if you are so brave, why are you following us and not leading the way?" You're just as scared as I am, you only pretend to be such a tough cookie."

"I'm walking behind you because I twisted my ankle and it hurts a bit. If it wasn't for that, I'd be in front of you because I'm not afraid of anything."

"You think I'm going to believe that! You're scared and that's it! If you weren't, you wouldn't be standing here like a fool. You would have gone into the forest a long time ago to check if anything suspicious was going on there and then waited for us with the news. You coward!"

Saga, who was walking ahead of them, turned to face her friends so abruptly that they almost bumped into her.

"You know what I? You're both shaking with fear, so stop arguing because I can't stand it anymore! You're both cowards, it's just that you, Diana, can't hide it and you, my dear, are trying, even though the truth is that you're just as scared as she is!"

Maurice fell silent, offended. He didn't think he was a coward at all. Saga and Diana are going to regret calling him that. In the meantime, let them go first.

They don't deserve to be defended. He is not going to pave their way!

"Saga! I can't believe you think there is nothing to be afraid of!", exclaimed Diana.

"Of course, I am afraid, but so what?" If I give in to my fears now and shut myself up in a shell and do not take action, I will never solve this mystery. And it will always haunt me. Besides, I want to face my fears."

"Easier said than done..."

"I can understand you. Fear is a terrible feeling. I know because I have experienced it myself not once. When you are afraid of something, your natural reaction is to run away as fast as possible, so you will rarely face it. Or maybe we just exaggerate our fears? Sometimes the devil turns out not to be so terrifying. Maybe this time it will be different? So, have I managed to warm you up before the fight?"

"Yeah, sure," Diana replied, though weakly.

"If you're scared, ask your Guardian angel to look after you," Saga suggested with a smile.

"Yes, yes!" Diana said. "My dear Guardian Angel," Diana said offhand, "be always at my side! And if nothing happens?"

"Something is definitely going to happen. Sooner or later but it will. I feel it, I am convinced of it. It wasn't an ordinary dream, it wasn't an ordinary summon, and this is no ordinary forest. And the event we witnessed today was not ordinary, either."

"I think that someone has hypnotized you... that they are manipulating your mind," cut in Maurice, who could not stay angry for long. His anger passed as quickly as a summer storm. "In any case, I won't let him hurt you. You don't need to be afraid of anything, ladies, because I'm here with you!"

For the moment, Saga was glad to have the cowardly Diana and the clownish Maurice at her side. All in all, she felt more comfortable in their presence. Especially now, as they were walking along a forest path sunk in darkness.

The moon must have taken pity on them for it peered out from behind the clouds, watching them with interest and concern, trying to light their way. Moon rays squeezed between the trees that dotted the path with shadows.

"At least the moon is shining," Diana said in a joyful voice.

The forest was sinister and menacing. Huge, overpowering trees and something unknown lurking in the darkness. Maybe someone was watching them right now? Maybe someone's greedy eyes were staring hungrily at them? Was someone hiding among the trees, under the cover of darkness, waiting for the right moment, when her fear was at its peak, to jump on her and... no, enough! Saga reprimanded herself for these thoughts. It was known that an overactive imagination increased fear and she had to stay calm. Otherwise, Diana and Maurice would surely run away when they saw her fear.

So, she walked calmly and confidently until she realized that they had already passed the fork in the road. They had entered the part of the forest Saga had always tried to avoid. Involuntarily, her senses sharpened. She began to cast cautious glances to the left and right, listening. Her muscles tensed, and her breathing accelerated. Saga was surprised to find that, for the moment, she was not picking up any stimuli that might indicate the extraordinary nature of this place. Strange, a situation like this had never happened before. Could it be that someone is trying to manipulate her, to calm her alertness? Or is she too tense to feel anything?

Anyway, this thought gave her courage and Saga felt more confident, so she quickened her pace. She looked at her companions. They seemed calmer too.

"How about turning on the torch?"

"No, Diana. We cannot be seen. A torch is a last resort, the moonlight is enough," Maurice disagreed.

"Maurice is right," Saga said. "If someone is lurking in the distance, it's better that he doesn't see us."

"What are you suggesting?", Diana swallowed hard.

"Everything and nothing. That should be enough for now."

When they reached the area where the forest had frightened Saga and Diana, Saga stopped.

"We'll stay here," she decided. "We'll hide there, on the hill behind the trees, and wait because there's really nothing else for us to do."

"I'd rather look for clues," Maurice said.

Diana pointed to the spot where a falling branch had almost trampled Saga. Maurice started rummaging in his backpack and pulled out a huge magnifying glass, much to Diana's amusement.

"What do you need that for?", She asked.

"As an amateur detective, I need to find some clues. And right now, the only real and tangible piece of evidence is this branch." He picked up a huge branch that threatened Saga's life today.

"All in all, you were just lucky. Maybe the branch was just rotten. It needs to be examined more closely." He reached for the torch.

"Don't turn it on! I think we can take a closer look in the light of day instead of moonlight or torchlight," Saga suggested. "I'm sure you can miss a lot of important details under such circumstances."

"But before morning, many important details could be erased," Maurice insisted.

"Don't worry, no one will destroy the clues. After all, who would be as crazy as us to wander through the forest at night?", Diana remarked.

"Something tells me not to turn on the torches for now. It's better not to be seen," Saga said.

Maurice finally allowed himself to be lulled into waiting until the morning light to examine the evidence. But he insisted on taking the branch with him to their hiding place on the hill, arguing that he could not let such an important piece of evidence perish

"Nightmarish," said Diana gloomily. "This forest is nightmarish..."

It was well after midnight and nothing had happened. One o'clock passed and still nothing. They began to lose hope of any developments. They fell asleep, exhausted. It wasn't until two o'clock that Saga woke up.

"Diana? What's wrong? Did you call me?"

She got up.

"Diana, where are you?" I can't see you...

At that moment, Diana opened her eyes as well.

"What are you doing? Where are you going?"
Maurice, wake up!

"Coming Diana!"

"Saga! I'm here."

"What happened?" Maurice jumped to his feet.

"She's having that horrible dream again! Hurry, we have to wake her up before she rolls down the hill!"

"Was it you who called me, Diana? Wait, I'll be right there," Saga said. "I can't see anything, I'm blinded by a strong light. Where is it coming from? Diana, are you standing in that light?"

"Maurice, she's babbling! Watch out, she's going to fall!"

Saga fell right into Maurice's arms. He was standing right behind her and saved her from falling down the slope and from a violent return to consciousness.

"Do you have to shine the torch in my eyes? Am I going blind or what? Turn off the bloody torch!" she hissed at her friend, who was now shining the torch straight in her face.

"OK, Maurice, you can turn off the torch. She's already awake."

Saga sat up and looked at her in astonishment.

"You were sleepwalking and you had that dream again," Diana said before Saga could ask anything.

"Oh. Thanks for the clarification," she smiled bitterly and tried to remember everything.

"You were walking around looking for me. And I was standing right next to you. You said I was calling you, and then you shouted something about the light. And then I hate to think what would have happened if Maurice hadn't saved you from falling."

"Thank you, Maurice." Saga touched his shoulder gently.

"Always at your service!"

"Yes, I heard the call again," she nodded. "I had a feeling it was you. You were calling me, but I didn't see you. And then I was blinded by the light," she said, looking at her companions.

"The light from my torch," Maurice smiled.

"Before I woke up with your torch under my nose, I was blinded by another light. The light from my dream!"

"But I didn't call for you. I mean, I did, but only after I realized you were sleepwalking. I didn't say anything at first because I was asleep too."

"I know it wasn't you. No need to dwell on it. Which way was I walking?"

"You were actually walking in a circle," Maurice laughed. "But then suddenly it wasn't safe and I had to intervene."

"What are we going to do now?", Diana asked.

"I suggest we split up and look for some clues or something suspicious," Maurice suggested, who had the advantage over Diana because when it came to solving a mystery or embarking on an adventure, he just forgot about the fear. It usually returned later.

"Now you're talking. Like a real Fred!" Saga exclaimed.

"Split up?" Diana was shocked. "You can't be serious?"

"Quite serious, you coward. It's best if we split up and look around. It's better than sitting here waiting for who knows what. With a bit of luck, we might come across something interesting."

"Or someone else will come across us in the dark..." Diana was trembling.

"I think Maurice is right. It's better to look around. Maybe the person who, um, hypnotizes me has a hiding place here and is close..."

"Stop it! I refuse to imagine that someone is lurking in the dark, whoever or whatever they are: a ghost, a phantom, an alien, a werewolf, or some crazy psychiatrist who likes to experiment with hypnotizing people! And even if there is a mad scientist lurking around, it's better if we stick together, isn't it? Because if he grabs one of us, then... then he won't let go!"

Diana's steps were hesitant and uncertain, as if she was just learning to walk. Her protests were useless. Like the others, she should look around on her own, because maybe someone really was here, watching her. That's what Saga said.

"What a mess I got myself into!" she whined, shaking with fear. "This is pure madness! I'm walking through the forest in complete darkness because I'm not allowed to use my torch, Saga and Maurice are nowhere to be found, the trees look as if they want to eat me alive, and the worst of all is that there could be a madman hiding in the darkness who could jump on me at any moment and use me for his experiments!"

She shuddered. "Perhaps this is my last walk, alas! the last night of my life! And to think I could sleep under a blanket in my bed! If only I were as brave as Saga... But I'm a coward like Maurice, who only pretends to be fearless!"

She looked around carefully.

"I don't see anyone here... Perhaps there is no one here at all?"

"Come out, all you ghost, phantoms, and mad doctors! I will confront you! I want you to stop torturing Saga right now, do you hear me? I'm not afraid of anything, so come out of your holes, you cowards! Come out and fight like men," Maurice shouted. He tried to sound brave in his monologue, but his voice faltered. Who knows what would have happened if an apparition had actually come out of hiding at his command?

Suddenly he stopped.

"This person has no intention of revealing himself. Either there is no one here at all, or if there is, he is acting stealthily... and is now following me, for example..."

He looked around, but saw little; if it hadn't been for the moon, he probably wouldn't have seen anything.

"Something tells me I'll do best if I dodge to the side and make my way between the trees."

He moved on in silence, not wanting to draw the attention of a possible opponent. If they didn't know of his presence, they'd better not find out. Or at least not before Maurice found out about them. And that was when it happened...

There was someone between the trees. The indistinct figure emerged directly opposite Maurice. The boy immediately ducked between the acacia bushes. "I'll surprise him," he decided. But then, another thought crossed his mind: "Wouldn't it be better to run away? If it's a madman, what if he catches me? You can expect anything from madmen. He froze, confused. "No, I have to do it. For Saga. Yes, I'll surprise him!"

He crawled as quietly as he could, and although he was trying to be brave his whole body was shaking.

The figure was moving too, getting closer and closer to the boy. In the moonlight, Maurice tried to get a closer look but the trees were so dense that he couldn't see clearly. He didn't want to reveal himself too soon, either. He decided to wait until the figure was right next to his hiding place.

Meanwhile, the mysterious creature was closer with every step. As his heart raced with fear, Maurice took a deep breath to pluck up his courage. "You only live once," he thought to himself as he jumped out from behind the bushes and threw himself at the mysterious creature.

"Gotcha!" Maurice's voice boomed around the forest.

Diana was close to tears. The worst part for her was that she did not know where her friends were, and they should have been close by. She wanted to call out to them but then she gave up. If she gave in to panic and started screaming, Maurice would not leave her alone. He would laugh and accuse her of cowardice at every opportunity. Besides, the stranger out there might hear her, and that was the last thing she wanted.

She walked aimlessly, she had seen nothing suspicious so far. "It's no use, there's no one there," she thought.

But wait... Isn't there someone on the path before her?" Something flashed between the trees... She strained her eyes but saw nothing more. The figure moved in the distance and vanished.

Was it the madman who tormented Saga? Could it be that he saw Diana and hid behind the trees? No, she has to stop fantasizing. She can't let her imagination play tricks on her like that. There is no one there. It was a hallucination, stop freaking out, Diana! If you keep telling yourself you saw something, your mind will eventually produce its own images, visions, and murmurs. And she went on to suggest that there was a madman on the loose.

This is ridiculous! She acts like a little girl afraid that a witch is going to fly in on a broomstick and take her away. There are only trees there, and she is about

to find out that it was nothing but trees that frightened her so much.

She walked slowly, trying to tread carefully so as not to make any noise. She didn't hear any murmuring or rustling that would give away the presence of someone behind her.

"I wonder if Saga and Maurice have found something suspicious," she swallowed hard, "or someone."

No sooner had she thought that than she saw a shadow above her.

"No!" she screamed.

Saga became more and more resigned and felt tormented by a lack of purpose. Each of her friends took a different direction. She decided to go straight up the hill. First, she walked the whole length of the hill and crossed it, probably three times. Then she continued down the hill into the woods. She also walked around the part where the stranger had fled in fright yesterday when he had noticed her. But she did not want to go too far. Besides, she found nothing special, so she returned to the place where they had parted.

She sat down under a tree on top of a hill, where she had a better view of the surroundings. She did not lose her vigilance, looking around carefully all the time. There was an overwhelming silence all around.

Saga stood up instinctively and descended to the exact spot where she had almost been crushed by a falling branch. She looked in the direction she had seen the fleeing figure. Her gaze was alert, expectant...

Still nothing happened, but Saga was sure that the solution to the mystery lay here. She had long sensed that this part of the forest was different. The vibrations she felt here were not a figment of her imagination. They came from the forest. At some point, Saga simply had the feeling that she was entering another dimension. It wasn't a special transition, just an impression, but strong enough for her to feel it with all her senses. That's why she rarely came here. She didn't feel safe.

And now, since they'd arrived, nothing had happened there. All sensations had simply vanished, as if they'd vanished into space. Now it was a perfectly ordinary place, like any other. Saga couldn't understand it. Why was it that all this happened to her so suddenly, and then, when she decided to solve this mystery, nothing seemed to happen? "If nothing happens tonight, I'll go to the doctor," she decided. "I'm increasingly convinced that this is the best solution. Maybe there's something wrong with me, not this place. And on top of that, my delusions had infected Diana and Maurice."

Filled with bitterness, she lifted her head, looked at the hill, and... froze. Someone was there! Standing, staring at her! She had no doubt he saw her. She was now standing in the middle of a wide path, so the moon overhead illuminated her entire figure brightly. Saga

was defenseless and had no chance of escape. So if the stranger had intended to attack her, she was easy prey, practically handed to her on a silver platter. They were only a dozen or so meters apart.

She felt a chill run down her spine. The stranger was still standing, watching. He knew she had seen him too, but he was in the comfortable position of being shrouded in darkness—and the moon had no chance of revealing him. Therefore, Saga only saw a shape, the outline of a silhouette. It wasn't Diana or Maurice. They would never have played such a prank on her. Diana would have come running, screaming about how scared she was, searching alone, and Maurice would have boasted from afar about how bravely he'd tried to find clues. Besides, neither Diana nor Maurice stood like that. The figure was definitely taller than Diana. Maurice, on the other hand, stood relaxed, slightly hunched, with his hands in his pockets. The stranger, on the other hand, stood erect, his arms hanging at his sides.

Saga knew it was the same man who had fled from them the previous day. She recognized the silhouette immediately. Again, the strange feeling struck her, that she knew him from somewhere, that she had seen him before... But she couldn't remember where or when. Well, maybe it was just an illusion? More important was knowing the newcomer's identity. Who was he, and what did he want from her?

She didn't move. She knew she was in a worse situation than he was. Even if she tried to run, he would catch her immediately. She stood in the middle

of the path, staring at him. Waiting for him to make a move. And despite having the opportunity, he didn't attack her at all, just watched. It wasn't pleasant. She wondered if it wouldn't be better if he attacked her.

She decided to break the awkward silence, as the stranger seemed reluctant to do so. She was about to ask him the simplest question, "Who are you?", when she noticed he was gone. How could that be? She'd only lowered her eyes for a moment. She looked again; perhaps he was still standing there. It was useless; no figure stood out against the darkness. Without hesitation, Saga ran up the hill and looked around, but there was no sign of the mysterious creature.

"Did I really see someone?" she wondered. "Or maybe the trees and bushes were playing a trick on me? No... not at all. I'm sure I saw someone."

She was starting to worry about Diana and Maurice. They hadn't been back for a long time. They should have been here long ago. She couldn't go looking for them, because if they came back, they'd be looking for her, and in the end, they'd all be looking for each other. She had to wait. They were definitely okay. Maybe they found something? Yes, they'd be back soon and tell her everything.

"I just hope that mystery man hasn't followed them," she said, her heart trembling. "It's better they return empty-handed than to stumble upon him..."

Diana struggled with all her might, trying to defend herself against the stranger who suddenly jumped out from behind the bushes and lunged at her. All she

heard were "I've got you" and "I'm about to expose you." The attacker's voice sounded familiar, but since she was preoccupied with fighting for her life, she didn't have time to wonder who it belonged to. Only when the attacker shone a flashlight directly in her face and then cursed violently did she know for sure who she was dealing with. In an instant, she was on her feet.

"Maurice, you ass! What are you doing? You almost killed me!"

Maurice blushed with embarrassment but decided not to let go to hide his confusion.

"You're the one getting in the way and spoiling everything!" he snapped. "Just when I thought I had finally caught the madman and was close to solving the mystery, it turns out... it's... it's just you!"

"How could you think I was the madman?" Me?!"

"After all, it's dark, how could I have known? Perhaps you'd like to explain why you're scurrying around under my feet?"

"No, this is too much... Isn't it enough that you make me walk through the woods in the middle of the night looking for God knows what, then attack me out of the blue, thinking I'm some kind of monster, scare me to death, and drag me to the ground, and then demand an explanation? I should probably demand an explanation from you, don't you think?" she said, annoyed.

"I already told you I was wrong. I'm sorry."

"And you think a meagre 'sorry' is enough? It will be a long time before you delete it from your account."

"So, what, I'm supposed to throw myself at your feet and beg for forgiveness?"

"You could at least show some real remorse and understanding and not blame me for your mistakes. You almost killed me. My heart is still pounding like crazy."

"I have apologized. The remorse is real."

Diana turned her back on him, walked over to the tree, nibbled at the bark and began her monologue.

"I don't understand how you can think I'm a madman. It's ridiculous! Do I look like him? You came at me like a wild animal and I nearly died of fright. Can you put yourself in my shoes for a minute? Have you no pity for me? Because I do pity you. After all this, your reputation as an amateur detective has suffered greatly. I feel sorry for you. Instead of making sure I'm all right, you blame me for getting in your way. I know you are doing all this for Saga, so I will forgive you. Your concern for her has finally softened my heart. And mine because I like you. Because I really like you, Maurice, even though you're a lousy detective. But don't worry, I won't tell anyone about this lapse. We'd better get back now, to Sa... Sa... Maurice, where are you?"

She turned around. But he was gone. She had been talking to herself all the time! He'd just left and she didn't even know where he'd gone. How could he do that to her?

Meanwhile, Maurice ploughed on, feeling like an idiot. He was an ass, Diana was right. He shouldn't have left her alone. But he was furious. He knew he had shot himself in the knee. Now Diana would remind him of that at every opportunity. Why in the hell did he want to be so eager about it? But if Diana is so smart, then let her take care of things on her own from now on!

When Diana realized that Maurice was not at home, she was in a state of panic. How could he have left her on her own!? Terror overcame common sense and Diana began to run in circles, calling for Maurice as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Maurice, I'm sorry!" she sobbed. "Do not leave me here alone! Please come back!"

She knew there was no point in talking to herself. She didn't have the strength to scream, the sobs were shaking her so badly. She looked around her. There were only bushes, huge trees that wanted to crush her in their giant paws, and darkness that wanted to swallow her up. Diana fell to her knees. She felt like she was going to suffocate for lack of air. Then she fell silent.

"Saga!"

She pricked up her ears. Someone was calling Saga. It must be Maurice because it wasn't her. Yes, it was Maurice calling Saga.

So she had found him! He couldn't be far.

"The voice came from that direction. I'll go there and find Maurice, and then we'll go to Saga together," she decided.

She took a few steps. They heard the call again and Diana hesitated.

"I don't understand... A minute ago that voice was coming from a different direction... But now? I have to think about it..."

Diana was confused. Something was beginning to make sense. But she was not yet ready to accept that it might be true. Suddenly she heard the call again. It was clearer than before.

"Saga! Saga!" it sounded through the forest.

"That's not Maurice's voice!" She cried out in fright. "It's a woman's voice! It's... it's... No! It can't be!"

Realizing that the voice belonged to the same person she and Saga had heard in the forest the day before and that it was the voice from Saga's dream, Diana began to scream and run like mad. Her only wish was to get out of this cursed forest as quickly as possible. If she succeeded, she would never set foot here again!

From crying and the fight with Maurice, she was dirty and disheveled. She didn't know where she was going. She just kept running, screaming, and feeling the branches rubbing against her cheeks.

The voice was still calling for Saga. It was not clear where it was coming from. It seemed to be everywhere. It bounced off the trees like an echo, penetrating every corner of the forest. It was a nightmare. As she ran, she covered her ears so as not to hear it.

As she ran up the path, she saw a figure out of the corner of her eye and ran straight into it. It was Maurice, white as a sheet. Diana sobbed uncontrollably.

"It's OK, I'm here, right next to you," he whispered in a trembling voice. He hugged her to calm her, even though his whole body was shaking. But after a moment, despite his nervousness, a new energy came over him.

"We have to run to Saga as soon as possible. I'm afraid something bad is going to happen!" He took Diana's hand and they ran.

"It's all my fault!" Saga blamed herself. She paced up and down the path nervously. "I shouldn't have brought her here. It's too dangerous, running around in the dark in a forest where a man is prowling around. He may not have done anything to me, but what about Diana and Maurice? What would happen if they were to fall into his grubby hands? I should have dealt with the matter myself and left them out of it. Why aren't they here yet?"

She stood by the path at the foot of the hill, fearing for her friends pushing everything else into the

background. Saga looked around desperately, repeating to herself that if this man had not harmed her, then surely her friends were in no danger either. Expecting to see Diana and Maurice running towards her at any moment, her heart pounded in her chest.

Then her eyes stopped at the top of a hill. Some kind of light was flickering in the distance. It must have been Diana and Maurice returning, lighting their way with a torch.

"You're here at last!" She shouted in the direction of the flash. "You don't know how I've worried about you! I'm on my way! I was going to turn on the torch too, but I left it in the grass and now I can't find it."

Suddenly someone called her name. As she climbed up the hill and raised her eyes, she froze. It was not torchlight and the voice was neither Diana's nor Maurice's. Everything had become clear. She didn't run away because she knew this was her destiny. And it had to be fulfilled.

It was her dream, a dream she was now living. The light grew wider and wider as she stood and watched. Saga's thoughts floated away and she surrendered to their whirl, like a log thrown into the current of a river. The call filled her head. She was like a rock. Only two stimuli reached her: the blinding light beyond which she could see nothing, and the sound of an incessant voice: "Saga!"

There were other cries in the distance. But they were only shouts, nothing of substance, and they barely reached her. When there was only the light in

front of Saga's eyes and the voice in her ears, she became dizzy and fell. She felt a strong tug on her arm, but just before she fell someone shouted something directly into her ear. Darkness followed...

