

LUCIE
ORTEGA

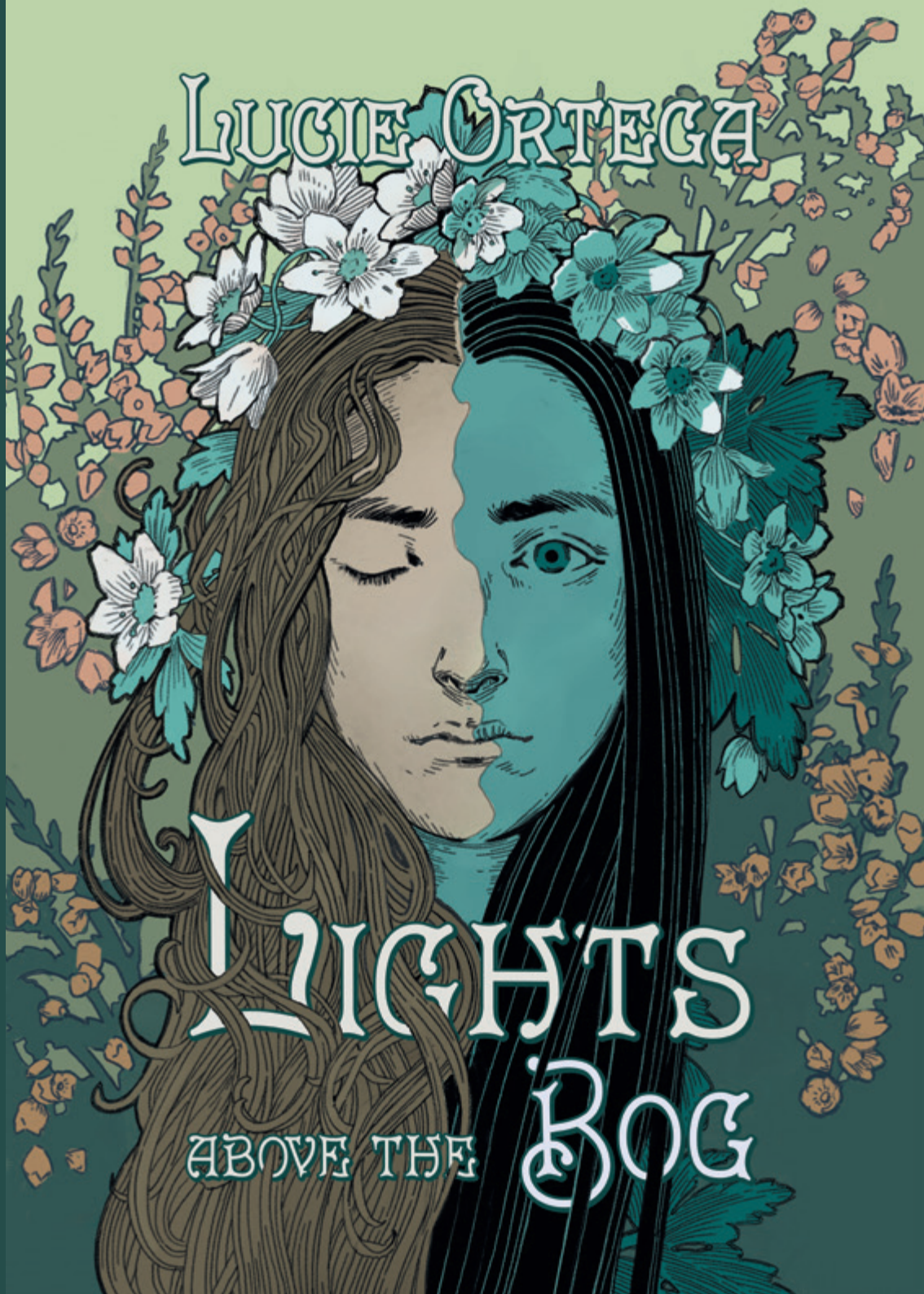
LIGHTS

ABOVE THE

BOG

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I flew over a few peat pools and remained hovering over a root arching a few centimeters above the ground like a tentacle of a giant octopus. Panting and splashing announced the arrival of the anchutka. The tiny creature stopped a short distance away and scratched its bare head with long, knotted fingers.

“You hurry too much,” he said unmelodiously. “Too much indeed. If I were human, I probably would have lost you long ago. Or I would have broken my leg on some pothole.”

I’ve changed into human form.

“If you broke your leg, I could still tickle you to death,” I shrugged, my face serious. This superstition always fascinated Kora and me. I strategically ignored his first remark. I thought I was flying slower this time, but it was hard to tell without the rhythm of my breathing or the movement of my legs to restrict me.

The anchutka considered it briefly, scratching his head again and twitching one wing.

“I don’t know if it would work. A broken leg supposedly hurts a lot. People whimper in pain rather than laugh. I don’t think even tickling would beat it.”

I bit my lip to avoid bursting into laughter.

“Okay, Lychee, I’ll fly slower next time.”

His name was Lichikhar, but I called him Lychee. He didn’t think it was funny, probably because all anchutky lacked the sense of humor, but maybe also because he didn’t know what lychee was and that he somewhat resembled it – coarse and unsightly on the outside but sweet on the inside. I always found it sad when I was the only one able to appreciate the brilliance of my jokes.

The anchutka arched his already hunched back even more, which was his version of a bow, and neatly folded his stunted bat-like wings together.

Another light emerged from the mist. A bluish flame flew toward us and transformed into a tall woman with a soft, oval face and indigo-black hair that everyone in my new family shared. She was Svetlana, my mentor, whose patient guidance made it so much easier for me to adapt to all the changes I was going through in the last few weeks.

“You almost crossed the boundary stones at one point there,” she said in a velvety voice, pointing toward where I had made my mistake. She didn’t even have to, I’d noticed it myself. “And Lichikhar is right. You fly too hastily.”

“I know, I know,” I said, hanging my head. Being too hasty was a theme in my life, and unfortunately, I didn’t seem to have gotten rid of it even in death.

“It’s all right, you’ll do better next time,” she smiled kindly.

“I hope so. I’m kinda starting to shake in my boots.” Just kidding. Bludichky don’t wear boots – or any kind of footwear, for that matter. I don’t think anyone has yet invented a shoe shape that would fit our feet.

Lychee didn’t move a hair on his protruding chin, but Svetlana chuckled.

“Let’s take a walk,” she suggested.

We sent the anchutka away and continued on foot. After a while, we sat down on high grassy cushions, not far from the boundary stones. Svetlana took my hand.

“You’ve been distracted during training. Do you want to tell me what’s on your mind?”

I appreciated the way she asked, allowing me to confide in her or keep my worries to myself. For someone like me, who had an ingrained belief that one should deal with one’s own problems alone and, for heaven’s sake, not burden others with them, it was initially

“One of your sisters wore it when she came to us,” he said.

The package turned out to be a black dress. It was floor-length, quite loose, and had a boat neckline, so I wouldn’t have to worry about my boobs popping out whenever I move too fast. I liked the lace sleeves, too. This dress was made for me.

“It’s torn.” He showed me the flaw in the skirt. “But Lichikhar can take care of it. The anchutky can fix anything. And he’ll adjust it to fit you.”

I stared at him and felt like Cinderella when she cracked the first nut. My sisters would never have put something like that on. But for me, it was exactly right.

“I’d hug you if I didn’t think it would be weird,” I said cheerfully, and we both paused in surprise.

Oh, Lena, could you stop blabbing?

“I’ll try to forget you said that,” he replied, and I just wished for the ground to open up and swallow me.

After Lichikhar made his adjustments, the dress looked like new, and it fit me perfectly. I didn’t know how he managed to do it since he didn’t have any extra fabric. But when I asked him, he just stared at me, seemingly unable to understand why that should be a problem.

On the night of the party, I put on my dress and the jewels that Kora gave me. With gritted teeth, I combed my overgrown shoulder bob and fixated it with hair pins at the sides. Taking a quick glance in the mirror, I concluded that the result was actually quite pleasing, and for the first time, I began to genuinely look forward to Morana’s party.

Bludichky, like other full-fledged inhabitants of the Threshold, can only enter the Nav by invitation. So, an hour before midnight,

our entire family gathered in the entrance hall. Everyone was in festive clothes and warm outerwear, which surprised me greatly, as I hadn’t minded the cold since I died.

“Different rules apply down there,” Svetlana explained as she fastened the decorative buckle on my coat. “Dark Nav is a terrifying place full of cruelty. As guests of Kostej, we are guaranteed protection, but it can still be very dangerous for our kind. So be careful and stick with the others so you don’t get lost.”

“What would happen if a bludichka gets killed in Nav?” Kora wondered, but Svetlana just frowned at her.

“Don’t even ask that question, and try not to do anything unwise until we’re back,” she said, but then she smiled and stroked Kora’s cheek in a motherly way.

The portal, which appeared without warning directly above the well, resembled a slowly rotating vertical cloud vortex.

“I’m dizzy just looking at it,” Kora muttered in my ear, and I poked her in the ribs with a smile.

The bludnik went through first, followed by the rest of us. As I stepped among the clouds, I could feel their cold touch for a moment. Then, the next thing I knew, I was standing in a circular room with walls, floor, and ceiling covered in black stone as shiny as a mirror.



DOMOVNIK

Deciding to commit suicide was considerably easier than determining how to do it. I had a romantic notion that I would simply take some sleeping pills and be done with it. But even if I had some, I read it wasn't easy to estimate the correct dose, and I didn't want to end up in the emergency room with a tube in my stomach. And since I've never been one for self-harm, rope or slit veins didn't sound very appealing either. Cyanide seemed like an attractive option, if only because it's one of the fastest-acting poisons, and it supposedly smells like almonds. But how to get it? I'd come across a few people on the internet offering to sell some, but natural suspicion warned me off. How could I be sure they would actually sell me what I pay for? And if it was a scam, then what? I could hardly report them to the police; I might as well check myself into a mental institution right after that. And I ran into a similar problem with all the other poisons – they were unavailable. Yes, I know, it's logical, they're poisons. Not to mention, they usually didn't promise a very pleasant way to go.

I was beginning to worry that I would change my mind before I found a suitable solution. Not for my own sake; I had no reason to stay, but I was worried that this decision would affect my parents, though

I wasn't sure. Maybe I was hoping a little... For the first time, I was glad my grandmother was gone. I could never do that to her.

I needed to find something fast.

And then inspiration came like a bolt from the blue. That yew tree had been standing in the park in front of our house forever. I used to walk past it every day on the way to the bus stop, but it wasn't until then that I finally really saw it – strong, beautiful, ancient, and... poisonous. I knew instantly that tree would be the one to see me out of this world.



After I drank my tea, Lukas offered to show me around the house. I agreed, saying that I had to wait for my phone to charge anyway and that I had nothing better to do in the meantime. He showed me the rooms and threw in a memory or a funny story connected with each and every one of them. As he spoke, the house began to come alive before my eyes, no longer smelling of mustiness but of the melancholy of a lost childhood.

“How old were you when you moved away?” I wondered.

We were standing in an empty conservatory surrounded by yew trees on the north side, watching the lines that the rain I had summoned painted on the glass.

“Five,” he replied in an empty voice. Then suddenly he exclaimed, “Jeez, I didn't even offer you slippers! Sorry, I'm not used to people not wearing shoes. Your feet must be killing you!”

“They're not,” I assured him, “and I don't need slippers.”

“You're having the same attitude as you did at the bog,” he pointed a reproachful finger at me. “I could almost swear you were upset that I helped you back then.”

“On the contrary, I know you very well,” she snapped. “If you don’t return the Water of Life to me, your home will end up as a plowland. The sanctuary you have built will fall victim to human greed. Think about it, *Nemoj*.”

She pronounced his name in a strange way as if to give it another meaning. He let go of her and turned away.

Her footsteps rustled through the grass as she walked back toward the house, and I snapped out of my trance – just in time because suddenly the bludnik said to the seemingly deserted garden, “You don’t have to hide. I know about you.”

I straightened up as best I could in my current state and headed toward him, head held proudly high to conceal my embarrassment at being caught eavesdropping. I was about to pry out of him what it was all about, but he frowned at the sight of my glass, took it from my hand without hesitation, and poured its contents into the grass.

“You mustn’t drink wine. Alcohol blocks our abilities,” he said, exasperated, and for some reason, he also removed the mask from my face in an irritated gesture.

I rolled my eyes and staggered. He caught me as a precaution. I tried to push him away, but I almost fell into a rose bush.

Really, Lena, very classy.

Had I had all my marbles then, I would have shut my mouth, sat down somewhere nice and quiet, and waited for my head to clear at least a little. But the alcohol was giving courage to my blunt honesty, so I shamelessly asked, “What was Irma talking about? Why did she say to give her back the Water of Life?”

“Because she is the one who gave it to me,” he replied calmly.

The surprise left me breathless for a moment. I stared at him in utter astonishment.

“She gave it to you?” I repeated, and while saying those five words, I managed to get my tongue twisted.

He nodded and took me around the shoulders.

“Let’s go for a walk,” he suggested in order to explain the gesture as I shot him a hostile look.

The further away we moved from the house, the more tired I got. But I did my best to pretend to be fully alert. Even under the rule of the sparkling wine, my brain understood well that the content of Nemoj’s quarrel with Irma affected me in some fundamental way. Moreover, the intimacy with which the striga treated my bludnik irritated me.

We walked a long way and stopped in a small clearing. The waxing moon looked down on us from the sky woven through with constellations, and fireflies glowed all around us. Nemoj gestured for me to sit down and took a seat himself a short distance from me.

“I’ll tell you a story that few in our family know,” he began sternly. “I will tell it to you only because it concerns you now as well, but I do not wish you to ever repeat it to anyone.”

The threat in his voice was tangible and quite serious. I nodded in silence.

“When I was a human, I loved a woman from too good a family. We were seeing each other in secret even after she got married. We wanted to elope and start a new life together somewhere far away. There were many stories like ours at that time, and very few of them ended happily. I naively believed that our love was written in the stars and that fate would be on our side. I was wrong.”

I realized I’d heard this story before, just from the other side.

“On the night of the escape, I killed her husband in self-defense. But he was a prominent member of society, and I was a nobody. We were caught. And when we were accused of murder, the woman for



LIGHTS ABOVE THE BOG

Lena voluntarily took her own life – she could not live among humans any longer. She became navka, a newborn bludichka. In order to finish her transformation, she must learn many new skills, but most importantly – lure a human soul into the bog. However, after an altercation with a hostile striga, she only has seven days instead of seven years to complete the task. Lena has found a loving family among the bludichky and she's willing to do whatever it takes to stay with them. Can she bring a human soul in time, or is she bound for eternal damnation?

