

Dante's
ANTICHTHON

LUDMILA FILIPOVA

Translated from Bulgarian language
by Angela Rodel

EGMONT

EGMONT

Bulgaria

We bring stories to life

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved below, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the below publisher of this book.

Danthe's Antichthon first published in English language
by Egmont Bulgaria in 2014
9, Fridtjof Nansen Str.
Sofia 1142, Bulgaria

Text copyright © Ludmila Filipova, 2010
All rights reserved.

Translation from Bulgarian language by Angela Rodel
This book is translated with the support of the National Culture Fund of Bulgaria



Printed in Bulgaria

ISBN 978-954-27-1202-2

www.egmontbulgaria.com/ludmilafilipova

PROLOGUE

A Florentine legend recounts how, at the end of the seventeenth century, an antiques trader nicknamed Virgil claimed to have discovered a mathematical formula that could decipher the “Secret of the Ten” hidden in Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*.

He believed that the formula held a crucial message for mankind, and thus he tried to popularize it. He told writers, publishers, librarians, scholars, and even members of various religious orders and secret brotherhoods about it, but no one took him seriously. The legend ends by saying that a few months before his death, the merchant wrote the formula he had discovered on the final page of an old copy of *The Divine Comedy* and deposited it in the Vallicelliana Library on the Piazza della Chiesa Nuova in Rome. The formula was as follows:

$33+33+34=100$ songs = 10×10 ; $\Rightarrow 10$ rings $\times 10$ spheres =
 34 Hell + 33 Heaven + 5 Purgatory; $28 = \leq \geq$ in motion; $\Rightarrow 72$
 $\times 139 = 10\ 008$; $8 \rightarrow \infty$ in $9 - 10 = -1 \infty 10 = /+ - / 10\ 000 = 9 +$
 $1 = /+ - /$ Antichthon

ONE

Page 1 began with the following quotation:

THROUGH ME THE WAY IS TO THE CITY DOLENT;
THROUGH ME THE WAY IS TO ETERNAL DOLE;
THROUGH ME THE WAY AMONG THE PEOPLE LOST.

—Canto Three, *The Inferno*

Rome, 25 November

A spot flashed in the sky, which was heavy with rain clouds, and began to grow.

It became a helicopter that landed on the rooftop amid the thunder of its engine. The propeller blades were still slicing the air when EMTs rushed a stretcher to its door. After carefully positioning the prone body, they rushed it inside the Santa Lucia Hospital.

The stretcher flew down the broad corridor. The lamps glinted on the ceiling like cat eyes, while doctors passed through the metal doors.

Several of them ran alongside the stretcher. One was trying to determine the patient's condition on the go, checking her vital signs. Next to him, a nurse carried the IV stand with a saline infusion that was hooked up to the woman's right arm. A husky young

man, his face pale as frost, pushed the gurney. He frequently glanced at the unconscious woman. Her wet hair fell on the blanket, while several strands were stuck to her face. Her lips were the color of lilac, slightly parted, and her skin was a pale blue.

The gurney turned sharply toward a ward labeled with a neon sign reading INTENSIVE CARE UNIT.

The pale, tall man, an orderly, deftly moved the IV stand out of the way, making room for the other doctors. One of them took out a small flashlight, pulling open the young woman's eyelids with his left hand.

"She's responding," he cried.

"Hurry up and move her to the table!" the head doctor cut in. "We have no time to lose!"

Two nurses attached symmetrical electrodes to her body and head with practiced motions. The doctors stood by the table, simultaneously watching several monitors with greenish sine waves on them, waiting for the test results.

One of the nurses noticed that the orderly was still in the emergency room and tried to nudge him out. He stood motionless, staring at the still body. Then, not paying any attention to the nurse, he quickly stepped forward and tried to touch the woman.

"Orderly, this is not your place," the head doctor said firmly.

Two other doctors grabbed his arms and escorted him out of the hall. This time he obeyed. He knew that he had no right to be there.

A spot flashed in the sky, which was heavy with rain clouds, and began to grow.

TWO

ABANDON ALL HOPE,
YE WHO ENTER HERE!

—Canto 3, *The Inferno*

A month earlier

“**I**t’s here, it’s here somewhere—I saw a dead body by the river!” the woman in the military jeep screamed hysterically. “That devil I told you about was carrying it.”

Somewhere high in the heavens, the cry of a bird of prey rang out. A white-crested falcon pushed off from the cliff’s edge, spread its wings gracefully, and dove down into the cloud that was settling above the city of Marche. Its powerful body sliced through the dozing air currents and swooped low into the twilight of the breaking dawn.

On that day, the wind had died down amid the trees that dotted the green hills of the Italian region of Ancona. The morning fog breathed above the fields and the forests, squeezing them in its embrace.

The level of the river that sprang forth from the deepest cave in Italy, Grotte di Frasassi, had risen menacingly, flooding its banks. But unlike every other winter, the swamps were teeming with frogs that sonorously puffed up their throats and stalked the worms hidden in their underground lairs. All the locals were snug

in their homes, waiting for the first rays of sunshine to tinge the day. At that moment, it was as if the world had deliberately fallen into universal silence so as to catch the echo of that which had been waiting for so long to happen.

“What in God’s name is that?” the gunner in the jeep suddenly yelled.

“I don’t know but it can’t be human.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it—

“Fire!”

“But what if I hit the woman?”

“Fire, or that fiend will get away!”

A pale creature was running ahead of the army jeep, leaping every which way to avoid being caught in the machine gun’s sights. It was as swift as a deer, with a humanoid body, but sinewy and short, less than five feet tall. It had no clothes on, and the light from the jeep’s searchlight was shining right through its flesh. When it escaped the powerful beam, it seemed to glow, swallowing up the beam’s reflected light. It was carrying a woman on its back; she wasn’t moving and seemed to be unconscious, as pale as a corpse. All around them melodies and sounds vibrated, like music being played backward and sung by several voices.

Shots rang out, awakening the new day. The creature’s legs were getting entangled in the briars; its heart was pounding deafeningly in its chest. More shots were fired. One bullet hit its thigh and it let out a roar. The cry pierced the soldiers’ brains, and they covered their ears. The creature dropped the woman and disappeared into the shadows of the forest.

It stopped for only a moment, turned around, and took one last look at its final hope.

An hour earlier, the creature had been climbing along the edge of a damp underground tunnel. The woman had been following it, although she was hardly breathing. It took her in its arms and

continued on its way up. It tried to catch signs of life in her, to not think about death. If she lived, then hope would still be alive....

In the distance, light finally swam through the darkness. But the closer the creature came to this light, the more it burned its body and howled in its ears. The river's current swallowed them and tossed them up into a world far different from anything the creature had ever imagined.

Hell, the creature thought to itself, the world that no human being ought to set foot in until the shades leave it and the prophecy finally comes true.

When it came out onto the riverbank, the creature dropped the parchment it had been using as a map and looked down at the woman in its arms. She had passed out. The light lapped at her face like tongues of flame, creeping over her long hair and her fragile body. The creature touched her hand—she was the last angel to have come down to them from the heavens, and for that reason they believed that their hope was still alive as long as she was.

It carefully set her down on the riverbank. She seemed like the most beautiful being the creature had ever seen. Even elves and mermaids could not hold a candle to this woman, and it was prepared to give its life a thousand times over for her. Because its heart beat within hers.

It glanced at the icy river, and a face swam up to the surface. The creature recognized itself—an anemic body with translucent flesh, bright eyes, and an enormous head swathed in a cloud of colorless radiance, which flowed down toward its back into jutting appendages. Mud was still running down them. Its right wing was torn, probably from the sharp rocks in the cave. It let out a mute roar. It was seeing itself for the first time. The image in the water reminded it of how different they were—it and the angel, they and their different worlds.

The creature knew it was seeing her for the last time. It would remember her. When you abandon your hope, you can still take

the memory with you. Whatever you do, you are always left with memories in the end. But they also contain moments that can make up for an entire eternity of unfulfilled dreams.

Now it had to leave her and hide from everything until it died, because it could never go back. But this world was dangerous—it defended itself against outsiders. That was the law of nature. But if the myth was true, the shades were the rulers here. That thought filled him with fear. He had never felt fear before.

And at that moment, a terrible cry filled the valley. The birds scattered, the fog parted, the frogs screamed out in chorus, pheasants and deer ran for cover, while the sun swam out into the scarlet glow.

The creature looked around and saw a waxy body in a dress staring at them with glassy eyes and screaming hysterically. It once again pressed the angel to him, as if to give her strength, and ran off, carrying her on its back.

Then it could hear rumbling, smoking motors chasing them toward the forest, roaring along behind them. A white light kept swallowing them up and spitting them out as the creature ran with the woman on its back. And when the fire pierced its leg, it dropped her body and left its *hope*—the silent angel—on *that doorstep*, and darted toward the underbrush on feeble legs.

“It’s here, it’s here somewhere....”

THREE

MIDWAY UPON THE JOURNEY OF OUR LIFE
I FOUND MYSELF WITHIN A FOREST DARK,
FOR THE STRAIGHTFORWARD PATHWAY HAD BEEN LOST [...]
I CANNOT WELL REPEAT HOW THERE I ENTERED,
SO FULL WAS I OF SLUMBER AT THE MOMENT
IN WHICH I HAD ABANDONED THE TRUE WAY.

—Canto One, *Dante's Inferno*

They say that to find yourself, you first have to lose yourself. Perhaps that's because only when we're lost do we realize that we never had ourselves in the first place.

I seemed to be running through ashes that had buried a thick purple forest. It was growing upside down inside the earth, amid threads of light clinging to the wind. My feet were sinking. It was growing harder and harder to pull them out.... I thought this was the strangest dream I had ever had. But when I stepped across its boundaries, I realized that it had only just begun.

The scent of toast wafted on the wind. Burned toast. Flaming gusts of wind were dancing in my head, melting my thoughts. I wanted to move my body. What could be easier than that? I tried to lift my hand, but the flesh remained chained to the covers. Then, for the first and last time, I was convinced that the soul could be independent of the body, that the soul has arms, legs, and a head that can move, even when the body itself cannot. But con-

scious awareness of this freedom arises on that thin line where the tangible dissolves under the pressure of dreams that are coming to life. Or between life and death.

I opened my eyes and the rays of sunlight seared my pupils. A tube had been stuck in my mouth, my tongue was dry and sour, and in my ears flies were buzzing in fits and starts, hitting the windowpane. And in the pauses between buzzes, machines by the bed beeped. I didn't know where I was, or who I was. It was as if I was feeling *here* and *now* for the first time. I could have been anyone.

The door to my room opened. A man and woman came in, dressed in freshly ironed white coats. From their exclamations and gestures, I could tell that they were glad I had opened my eyes. A sign reading DR. ANDREA BERNARDINI was pinned to the man's chest. He bent closer to my face and smiled gently. His fingers pressed several buttons, and the machine next to me ceased beeping. Then he grasped the tube in my mouth with both hands and pulled it out. My breath stopped. I couldn't breathe. I coughed with all my might, thinking I was dying. And my lungs abruptly filled with air.

The two of them waited for my breathing to normalize and started peppering me with questions. They were most interested in whether I knew who I was, where I was from, and what century it was.

The doctor had a goatee and straight salt-and-pepper hair. Thin, frameless glasses gleamed on his nose. His irises were a warm brown; only his right eye was slightly closed from a scar that cut across the edge of it. The scar suited him. It made him look like a person I could trust. I had doubts about him only when I noticed the knot of his pink tie jutting up over his white collar.

Andrea Bernardini often shot glances at the nurse, and every time he managed to catch her eye, his tick would start up again, a rhythmic shrugging of his right shoulder. The nurse was standing next to him, mostly silent in her smiling, supporting role. Sometimes she even nodded. She was a thin brunette with a white cap

on her head and a porcelain face with such regular features that you couldn't possibly remember her. She wasn't wearing any makeup besides pink lip gloss.

The two of them stalked me with hungry eyes, while I continued to stubbornly refuse to answer them. The terrible thought even popped into my head that I couldn't speak. At least for a moment. The doctor told me not to worry, because my condition was "completely in line with what was expected."

Then a whisper escaped my lips: "I saw them..."

They stopped smiling and exchanged glances.

"Who?" the doctor asked.

"They've lost patience," I replied. Then I realized that even I didn't know whom I was talking about, so I added: "But where am I, actually?"

My fingernails grasped the sheet as if I was afraid of falling out of bed. In the meantime, I thought over my possible locations and came to several contradictory conclusions: 1) I could have been reincarnated; 2) I could still be dreaming; 3) I could be in a mental hospital; 4) I could have amnesia; or 5) I was simply dead. But if the latter were the case, then I should have gone to Hell. Strange, but I've always imagined Hell as an accounting firm, filled with hundreds of cubicles packed tightly together, crammed with unbalanced financial reports and white-collared accountants. It's enough to make your skin crawl!

"You're at the St. Lucia Medical Institute for Scientific Studies and Hospitalization in Rome. I am Dr. Bernardini." He pointed at his name tag. "I'm the department's head neurologist, and I'm in charge of your physical and mental condition."

Even if you had held a gun to my head, I couldn't have repeated what the man told me. I decided that my problems were most likely memory related.

"Do you know anything about me? Who I am... and so on?"

"You were in a coma for a long time," he replied. "We didn't think you'd survive. But now, look, you've opened your eyes."

Your memory should gradually come back.”

“But you do know who I am, don’t you?” I insisted.

“Imposing an identity that you don’t consciously recognize might cause unnecessary stress.”

He hesitated as to whether to continue. The skin on his forehead squeezed out a few tiny droplets, which sparkled and lent him a certain dramatic air that contrasted with his pink tie. He finally announced in a more serious tone, “They discovered you a month ago at the mouth of the Grotte di Frasassi in northern Italy. Your body was almost frozen on the banks of the Sentino River, which passes through the depths of the cave. The current must have tossed you ashore.” He fell silent for a moment before finishing. “They brought you here in a coma. It’s an absolute miracle that you even survived.”

“But how?” I rasped.

“We were hoping *you* could tell us. They didn’t find any ID on you. We have no idea how long you were in the cave. If you were ever even in it.”

“I see.”

“At the moment, the police are working on several different hypotheses.” He lowered his eyes.

I was listening to him, but the words did not stay with me—it was as if they did not mean anything. They slid over the edge of my hearing, as if he was speaking to someone else. I couldn’t find within myself even the smallest trace of what had happened. I closed my eyes, looking for tears to wash away the dark thoughts gaping in the blank holes of my memory.

They say that to find yourself, first you have to lose yourself.