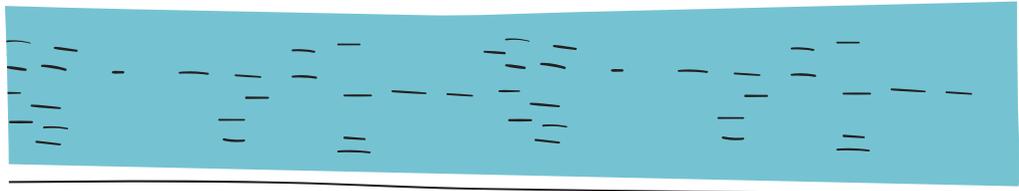


BARNEY AND THE EIGHTYONE PEBBLES



THE STORY ENDS HERE



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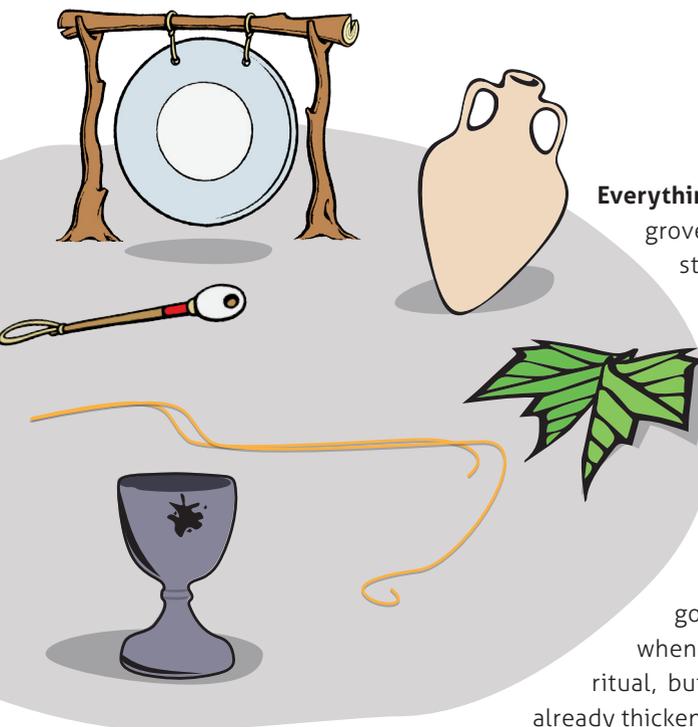
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Everything was ready in the little grove. The dragon flame soot, the still-green sycamore leaves, the dew-damp miniature amphora, the bell sound-filled hand-gong, and of course, Kerka's two hairs were on the outer line of a carefully drawn circle, the distances between them dictated by additional arcs and waves. It was still a good half an hour until noon, when they planned to start the ritual, but the raw natural magic was already thickening around the figures.

Barney was sitting on the edge of the clearing, his two elbows on his knees, his chin resting on his clenched fist, watching intently. He tried to remember each movement of the water fairy, who was working on her last features. It's been a long time since he gave up trying to record it on video. It's just one thing that those who can't see or hear the fairies in their lives, were unable to see or hear them in the footage, but it quickly became apparent that the magic pushed the technique even further: every picture, every video shot of Kerka during the spell became foggy and blurry, though at the same time it sucked the battery almost entirely. So he thought it better to leave the phone at home, lest the mobile or the ritual be in trouble.

With all the excitement and preparation, only one thing troubled him a little – that the Guard did not take on one of her usual, pretty shapes, but she was flying over the lines in her original (?) form as a floating mass of water about the size of a beach ball. It was difficult to imagine that this inexplicable alien creature is the

same with the dragonfly, old-young girl he knew. Kerka, however, stated that she would need even the last drop of her strength for the ritual, and she could not even spare as much as she would need to change bodies.

Finally, the last drops of water were in place. The Kerka creature hurried past Barney and the boy felt a mixture of pride, anticipation and a drop of nervousness flying towards him. The little spirit of the place also came out. Although invisible, Barney was able to follow his traces in the grass, which were getting closer and closer to the circle with great certainty. "As if he was grazing," he thought to himself, "I hope it doesn't turn into a guinea pig." He grinned at the idea, but then glanced at the water ball that swirled next to his head and rearranged his features.

"Power five, power great / if I want, they take shape..." he muttered to himself practicing the poem.

He had agreed with Kerka that, although he wouldn't be involved in the spell by himself, he'd mutter the spell all the time of the magic to help with the pace. And who knows, it might even be useful to have a person present. "Everything says it shouldn't be that way, but there has been so much weirdness lately, that it might be different than as I've always known ..." the fairy confessed when they talked about it one day. Then they didn't say a word for a long time – they both felt exactly how difficult and unusual this confession had been for her, who for at least for two or three hundred years had always known better.

Lunch time has arrived. Barney stood and Kerka hovered over the outline. If his senses did not disguise him, the little ghost was in the right place.

"Then again, one last time." He heard Kerka's voice in his head trembling with excitement. "Keep up the pace. You can strike with your feet, but do not move from your place, or enter the circle. We're going to say the chant seventy-seven times, be careful with the counting! All right? Then one, two and three! *Power five, power great / if I want, they take shape...*"

Not only was the voice ringing in Barney's mind now, but it seemed as if the whole clearing was jingling. It flowed from everywhere at the same time, yet clearly in Kerka's voice. The water globe moved majestically above the outline, lingering for a moment at the five objects, then roaming all the lines among them.



"... *Power and skill. they are giving / Eternity, mind and feeling...* – "Six." Barney counted on his fingers as he was more and more captivated by the wave of magic. Kerka was moving faster and faster over the lines of the ritual, and where the little ghost was, the air began to ripple quite visibly. The clearing was filled with the scent of water.



"... *Ghost, you speedy, ghost, you little, / you'll be the guard against evil...* – "Twenty-nine," Barney thought, his feet dancing involuntarily and his two arms swinging spontaneously. As Kerka continued to accelerate with each turn, her shape was elongated, less and less like a sphere. The five components were very bright on the ground, and the water-drawn lines among them began to glow. The little ghost crouched in the middle of the figure and slowly began to take shape. The breeze stopped, no leaf, no grass moved. "It will work!"

Then the Cat appeared on the edge of the clearing, sat down and began to clean itself. Barney almost fainted.

"Don't move!" Kerka's thought flashed in his mind, and he obeyed, only his gaze wandering back and forth with the lazily moving animal.

Something was not right.



"...*Power five, power great...* – "Forty-seven."

Even if he had wished he wouldn't have been able to stop chanting, his mouth, his lungs, and his limbs were moving involuntary. He had a slightly hot taste in his tongue, something like when he was licking a nine-volt pocket battery when he was a child. Kerka had already swept through almost every line and looked like a water thread, drawing almost the entire magic figure. Twenty inches... fifteen... ten... with each speedy swing, the two ends of the waterline were getting closer and closer. The light of the components and the watery lines on the ground intensified, and glowed in the colours of the rainbow. The little ghost began to rise from the ground.

The cat finished washing, and watched the ritual intently. The suspicion in Barney was slowly turning into panic. His eyes were flicking between the magic circle and the animal. He wanted to shout, jump, but he had no chance.

The cat didn't seem to care. It was waiting for four more turns, and when Kerka's two ends touched each other, it stood up and slowly, firmly, set off towards the magic circle.



"...*Takes shape...* – "seventy-one."

He was no longer chanting. There was no sound in his throat, the repetitive-rising magic that filled the entire clearing adsorbed his voice, too. It couldn't be stopped. There were tiny electric discharges on the surface of his skin. Now, whatever happens, the ritual will be completed – it just couldn't be stopped. Kerka was spinning at an unimaginable speed, which the eye could follow, her ribbon vibrating with the colours of the magic circle. Everything was rumbling. The scent of the water was waving, sometimes the picture of fresh rain and sometimes of the ocean filled Barney's mind. The little ghost didn't seem so small any more.

Cat reached the magic circle. It tilted its head to one side. Nothing happened, and yet something had changed. "*FAIRY!*" Barney wanted to scream as the outline of the tom-cat blurred in front of his eyes, and saw it as a crow, a pigeon, a cat, a rat, a fly, and even a brick at the same time.

"...if I want! – "Seventy.seven."

"*Oh my..!*" He could only say amidst all-encompassing magic. His widely opened eyes watched helplessly as the new fairy entered the circle.



He didn't know how the last repetition happened, except that when the spell was heard the seventy-seventh time, everything turned blue. "*It's like in the swimming pool underwater...*" he thought, but he immediately realized he was wrong. It's not like being underwater it's like being water. He felt his sole smoothing all the grasses

of the clearing at once, his waves rolling down twigs and small branches, his body filtering through the thick of the bushes as if nothing was happening.

For a very brief moment, he remembered the six hundred and fifty years crystal clear, but the feeling was gone as it came. A few heartbeats, and again Barnabas Csetneki, in its entirety, with his own, with only his own feelings, memories and thoughts.

He felt terribly tired. He wanted to sleep. More than anything else. "Kerka... What's happened..." he managed to squeeze the words out, though he wasn't sure whether it was just a whisper or it was said in a louder voice.

He collected his strength, and lifted his head. The magic circle with the components disappeared, and he saw three shapes in its place. A large brown rabbit, with a green star on its forehead, slowly approaching him. A turquoise dragonfly sparkling on the rabbit's back. And a freckled, eight-year-old boy with messy, blond hair, lying in the grass in the middle of the clearing, leaning on his elbows, and grinning.

"Are you all right, Barney?" He heard the dragonfly's worried voice softly in his head.

"I'll survive," The boy replied, "but I think I'll spend the remaining two days sleeping. What has happened?"

"The magic succeeded," Came the happy reply, "But it didn't quite go as we had planned."

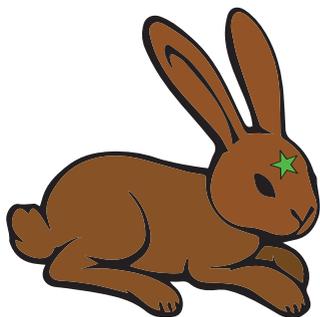
Barney, as if a wasp was biting him, suddenly jumped up. All right, he sat up.

"For a moment I was you!"

"Wait a minute, I'll pull myself together..."

A second or two passed, and then the dragonfly disappeared. The familiar little girl, Kerka, appeared in its place, took the rabbit in her arms and walked over to Barney. "Look, this is Grove. For now, at least that's how he calls himself, and then over time he'll find out if he'll outgrow himself and have another name. And yes, thank you for anchoring me."

"What did I do?" Barney touched Grove carefully, but he didn't take his startled gaze from Kerka.



"Anchored me. The magic became too strong, especially when he, she nodded to the new boy, as he entered the circle. All my strength was needed anyway, and when two channels started sucking in energy, I was almost lost."

She paused, her eyes drifting into an unknown distance.

"When the ritual was discharged, and I almost became one with them, in desperation I clung to you, who, being human, *knew* that I was not. – another silence. – No. „I clung to you“ is not the good expression. In fact, I started pouring myself into you, as well, beside pouring myself into them, to get me into a container that I could separate. Do you understand this?"



Barney nodded uncertainly.

"Even so, we got a little tangled, I just hope I managed to separate ourselves."

"Either way, you've saved me. If we were listening to the old recipes and you weren't here, I wouldn't be here either now."

"And them?" The boy gestured uncertainly towards the two newcomers.

"As you guess it, there's a piece of me in them already. But I think I have enough left here." Kerka was knocking her own forehead with a faint smile. "I think it might be the feeling when humans become parents."

The boy leaned back on his elbow. There were a thousand questions in his mind, but so slowly that it would have been difficult to grasp any one of them, because by the time he remembered their end in his head the beginning of the whole question already disappeared in the fog of thought. There was silence. Not magical, electricity-filled silence, or deaf, boxed silence, but a true, peaceful, talkative silence into which the thousands of tiny voices of the world had slipped.

They remained like this for a while. Grove nestled in Kerka's arms, and it was watching curiously all around, and Barney was lying comfortably numb. Finally, the three of them looked up at the sound of footsteps approaching from the clearing. The new boy stood beside them, and then, still grinning, fell down into the grass. "Hello!" – he greeted them cheerfully – "I think I should say thank you!"



Kerka recovered first.

"Hello." She replied with some distance in her voice and body language. "Who the heck are you? How did you get here? And how come I haven't noticed you so far?" "Hehe, I'm Aris. Millen, Aris, and if you like, an urban fairy. I arrived with Barney the Teddy bear." – Barney snorted at this word – "though not directly. I got stuck in the car when they left home. As for my great hiding technique, so to speak, 'becoming part of the world', everyone has got different skills, haven't we, without this special skill only a few Guardians would remain in the area for a long time, the city spirits aren't always friendly."

The doubt was still visible on the water-fairy's face, and her voice was filled with incredulous curiosity.

"City fairy? City Guard? How is it possible among those many bricks, concrete and glass? Where do you find enough magic there?"

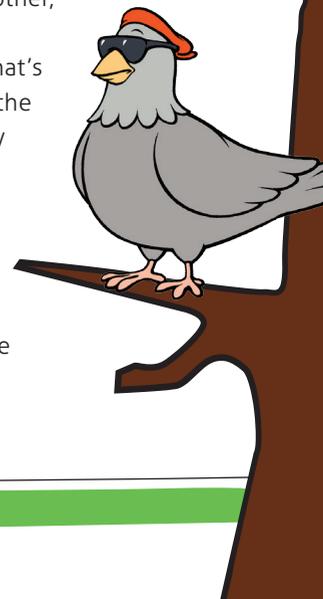
"Oh, people are people, they believe in a lot of things where they've created everything themselves. Cars, houses, computers... they see 'things' in everything, dress up the world with their own desires, successes and mistakes, and they don't even realize how it is slowly becoming a reality. Of course, that is another world, not as comfortable and dull as it is in the countryside, it is exciting, busy and dangerous. Yeah, and we're so many, that we're all in a constant battle for the areas, so the witty ones always win, and we get the weird ones out."

Slowly, also Barney recovered.

"Wait a minute! Are you saying that urban fairies are all dumbasses, who, because they don't get trust from people or from each other, they take everything by force that comes to their minds?"

"Um, whoa ..." Much of Aris' self-confidence disappeared – "That's not quite the case. There are only few who are like that, the majority are really nice, and can be good mates, they're only mistrustful, and many have a strange sense of humour. You can get used to it quickly, especially if a fairy was born into it."

"Shh... You're tongue-doughty still. You're talking as if you haven't done everything against us at every turn to try to deflect the spell, ignoring the fate of Kerka and Grove! I think you are really trash!" Barney began to become more and more furious.



"Hey, that's not right!" Aris snapped. "Who helped you with the dragon? Who stopped the ghosts? I also tried to save the leaf because you were clumsy, and with the sounds it seemed you would be completely incapable of cracking the solution, so I thought I'd help. Of course I had fun with you, but that's not a sin. As for the magic..."

He paused a little. When he spoke again, his voice became thoughtful, suddenly honest. The words came out of him slowly, as if he hadn't been used to that.

"I admit I didn't know what was going on exactly. I've never seen anything like that. I haven't even heard the news of such strong magic. Kerka, it was just cool! It just attracted me, it was irresistibly sucking me in. For one hundred and twenty-four years, as far as I know, I have wanted to get a human figure, but I've never succeeded. It just hasn't worked. I think there are too many people in the city, we don't get enough shape. You see, I can even take the shape of an inanimate object, but a person... I couldn't be human. And now there was the opportunity. I could not miss it. I didn't know such a spell, nor did I think that anyone could be in trouble. I just wanted, I really wanted energy, the human shape."

Silence. The freckled face had a hang-dog look, the cheery flickering was fading from the green eyes.

"Don't tell this to anyone, but I would have been terribly upset if anyone was hurt! And I'm really glad it didn't finally happen. The fact is, that I thought it wouldn't bother anyone if you have to pamper Grove for a little longer, I still consider it a better business to have a human-Aris extra to a rabbit-Grove, but, I would never hurt you, Kerka.

I'm talking gibberish. I guess it's because of the many new provincial, sorry, natural energies. I can feel that my way of thinking has changed, I'm not thinking as I used to even an hour ago – but I don't mind it at all."

Three pairs of eyes watched persistently as emotions and thoughts were flickering across Aris's face. No one spoke, everyone had something to think about. Some light breeze started, and the puffy clouds were chasing each other in the sky. Finally, Aris broke the silence hesitantly.

"Kerka, I wouldn't have said it out loud before, but I've learnt a lot from you during this one month. Now, that I have accidentally sucked out a part of your being, you've made me very curious. I don't know why, but I want you to feel that this piece is in the right place... Will you teach me nature? Can I be your friend?"

Kerka looked away.

"Mummy always seems to know better what I really need than myself. I wanted a mate, somebody to talk to, – and I got a student and a teacher. I have been around for six hundred and fifty years and I haven't even known the existence of urban fairies, and the tricks, paths and thoughts you know are completely alien. Yes, I think I'm happy to teach you if you teach me. I'm not saying I trust you, but I'm curious, and I'm happy to give us a chance. And the two of us are going to pamper Grove to help it to become a Guardian, who is – and here she looked at Barney – not afraid in the woods or on the bus. Barney, what do you say?"

"Well," Barney took a deep breath, "it really was a summer that has never been, and there won't be another. I can't say by words how happy I am that it's ended well! Three Guards, and I've helped all of them. No one will believe me if I tell it at home. But I have a few questions. Aris, will you stay here now or will you come back to Pest? If you stay, will you move here to the bank of the creek, or take care of Granny as a cat? How long does Grove need to be a regular Guardian? Kerka, aren't you as sad as you were then? And will you teach me some magic maybemaybe? And..."

The two fairies looked at each other and spoke at once:

"People ..."

"I, myself, will stay here. I've got a great comfort at Granny's house, and whenever I want, I can fly to a nearby town if I miss the houses and the sparkling," Aris said.

"Grove will definitely need time, but it will go quickly with two mentors." Twenty-twenty-five years may be enough." Kerka added. "I was never sorrowful, at least I was a little bored with the frogs and the reed elves ... well, yes, well, I was sorrowful, well. Now I'm not, because on the one hand, the previous month was great, and on the other, I've never been so tired, and thirdly, I'm really curious about how Aris can look like real animals and objects in front of anybody, without having a fairy aura around them.

As for magic, maybemaybe is probably the good word. Anyway, I'd be happy if you paid a farewell visit to the creek before leaving tomorrow afternoon.

She winked, and Barney forgot for a moment that he had ever been tired. He jumped up and danced and bounced like a billy-goat. After a while he stopped beside the three fairies.

"Look, Kerka! I've got an idea. Grove, and a little bit, Aris, too, will go to school with you now, just like I will do at home. What if you didn't carry that wealth of knowledge

and memory – he pointed at the water-fairy bag – with you as a burden to pull you down, but to plant them in the grove, to sprout? I know they're pebbles and this is a stupid idea, but ..."

"Yeah, that's a stupid idea," Kerka said, touched the bag carefully, "These are pebbles, not seeds. This is not how it works."

But Áris's face lit up.

"Wait, I'm not sure the kid's talking nonsense. Memorial pebbles also have power. Even if no tree comes out of them, they can fertilize the area with memories, knowledge, and magic. Grove, and every beginner spirit can benefit from it ... there was a good word for it, so flamboyant ... well, I've got it, NEXUS! You can take care – we can even take care so that it would not fall into the wrong hands. And it really can be easier for you, too, if you don't have to carry eighty-one such responsibilities that remind you of your loneliness everywhere."

Kerka froze. She was gazing in the air for a long, silent time, holding the bag with both hands.

"I still have to think about it," She finally said, "I think Barney's about to die of starvation, maybe it's time to leave."

"I've got used..." Barney began to protest, but before Aris could signal him, he clicked. – Yeah, I think a snack would be right for me. Bye, Grove, bye Kerka! Aris, are you coming?

He snatched all the stuff and started going home dancingly with Cat by his side.



Kerka was sitting in the clearing for a long time, holding her bag, and her tears were flooding.

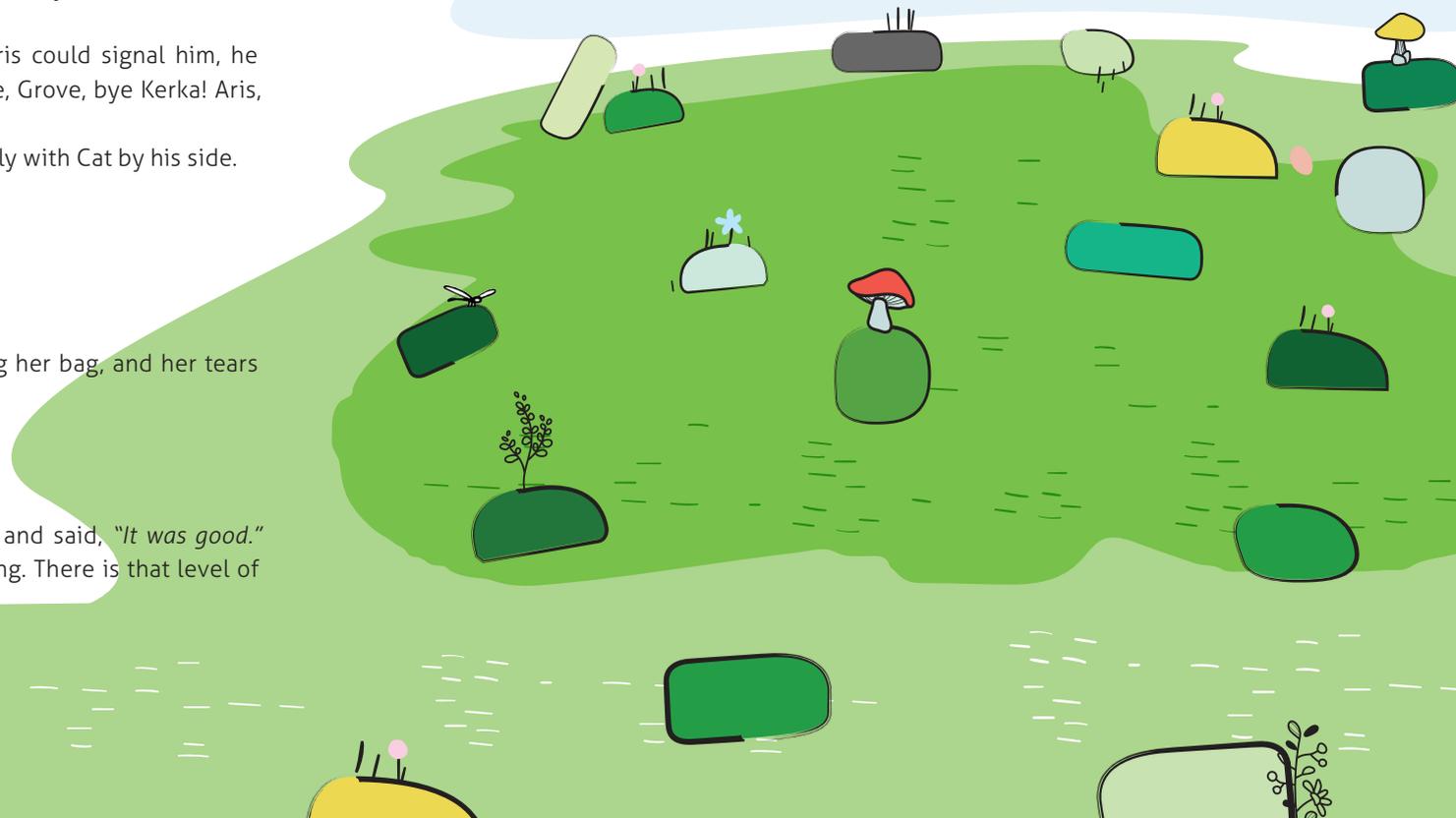


Granny was asking Barney in vain, he was just smiling, and said, "It was good." And he locked himself in his room without eating anything. There is that level of

happiness when you come out on the other side of the popping joy, and only peace and tranquillity remain. He fell down on his bed, and Cat crouched tightly beside him. Two minutes later they were both asleep.

That night, Barney dreamed a lot. As a mighty wizard, he saved the world over and over with his freckled helper, outsmarting urban fairies, giants and dragons. He became a class leader in everything, won sports competitions, and revealed ancient secrets in the afternoons. And at home there was a grove next to their house that resembled the small grove in Kerkakutas, with the exception that there were small mounds around the clearing, each with a flower, a mushroom, or a bunch of grass growing from them. In the clearing rabbits, birds, and a guinea pig were running back and forth, a giant blue dragonfly circling above them cheerfully. He knew exactly what he saw, but he counted them. There were eighty-one little mounds exactly. "Thank you" – He heard the familiar voice softly – "Tomorrow afternoon ..."

A turquoise flash and everything was gone. Barnabás Csetneki fell into a clear, dreamless, relaxing depth of sleep.



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