

A lush, dark forest scene with a stream and a wooden structure. The scene is dimly lit, with light filtering through the dense canopy of trees and hanging vines. A stream flows in the foreground, reflecting the ambient light. In the background, a wooden structure, possibly a bridge or a walkway, is visible, partially obscured by the foliage. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and serene.

Edition o

ANDERS

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Part I

THE DEAD CITY

1

Andrew was — other than that he had heard every joke, every wordplay, and each corny joke that you could do with his name¹, at least one hundred times and had in the meantime gotten quite used to it and didn't find any of them weird — actually always a little bit different than most of the others; at least what concerned his peers and all the other human beings he knew outside of the boarding school. It had all started with him going to the school at nine years old (nearly two years earlier than normal), and to bring the school system all the way to its knees, he actually skipped a grade right away. With the help of several private lessons (and a generous donation from his father to the boarding school) he was successful. Since he started the school of Drachental hasn't been his second, but *only* home.

Andrew pretty much spent most of his time in the time-honored Castle, behind whose simple façade one of the most

¹ *Anders* means *different* in German. Andrew was the closest sounding, so this intro doesn't work as well. Really need to think of a better intro, but I want to stay true to the source material.

exclusive and expensive boarding school in the country operated. He spent his school hours — Andrew was proud of not having ever missed a single school hour in his whole life, which was true, but already made him an outcast among his peers —, but also the most of his free time, including weekends and the shorter holidays at the castle.

Of course Andrew had friends among his peers, but not many, and if he were honest with himself (which didn't happen very often); he didn't have very good ones. That was probably because of who Andrew was. He was the only son of Ottmar Beron, the owner of one of the largest corporate empires, and also very intelligent. His IQ fluctuated — depending on what method one used to measure it — between 145 and 160. Neither one nor the other was *that* unusual in castle Drachental. The exorbitant school funds that the parents had to pay provided for some natural selection; even the parents that were able to pay for that level of education for their kids did it in the odd cases where their offspring was either *dumb*, or when they just wanted to get rid of them.

Being rich was nothing special at Drachental.

Being somewhat intelligent wasn't too special either.

But being stinking rich *and* gifted in one person, which Andrew quickly found out, was a combination that could evolve into a curse that was hard to get rid of. Instead of real friends, he had a bunch of jealous followers that just waited for something bad to happen to him so they could proclaim it as *higher justice*. So it wasn't a surprise that Andrew started early with keeping

more to himself and his Books, Music and DVDs, or with long walks in the dense forests that surrounded Drachental. While other kids wasted their afternoons in the small town that was a good 20km away, he rather watched a movie or read a book, and on the weekend he sometimes took hour long walks or once and a while an (illegal) climbing party in the near lying mountains.

He didn't mind being alone. Years ago he had watched the others play and had felt a mix between jealousy and feeling sorry when he saw them play and laugh – the physical demonstration of their *friendship* –, but that was a long time ago. He was a kid back then. Today he was not quite grown up yet, but also not a kid any more, and why should he long for something that he never knew, nor will he ever know?

Beyond that it wasn't quite true. There was a least *one* person whom he could call his friend, and the beeping of his cell phone not only reminded him that this person was on his way here, but that he could also be a very impatient man. He quickly dug his phone out of his bag and glanced at the screen, noticing that it was a text from Nick², exactly what he expected. And it was, also just as he expected, short and consisted out of three words: *Be right there.*

Andrew grinned. That was typical for Nick. Even if he never would have admitted it, Nick faced any new technology with a deeply rooted natural mistrust and hated almost every device that had more than one button and who's meaning he could not really figure out, which didn't mean he didn't know how to use it. It took Andrew almost a year to get him to use his phone in

² This name worked out pretty well, in the original German it's Jannik

more than just an emergency, and about just as long to get him to send texts.

This was another reason not to keep him waiting. If he sent a text saying *be right there*, it probably meant he was already driving up the windy driveway up to the gate. And at least today Andrew was equally eager to leave the castle as his peers. In three days summer break started, and that meant for Andrew that they started today. Sometimes, he thought triumphantly, it was good to be stinking rich and gifted for once. The Board of Directors would never dare to deny one of his father's wishes, and it wouldn't affect his grades that much. He couldn't get any better than A's in all his classes anyway.

He mindlessly stuffed a few more things into his backpack. Everything he needed he would find on the Yacht that his dad owned anyway, so the only important stuff was his MP3 player full of music and the book he was currently reading. He didn't really want to wait weeks to hear the ending to. Andrew threw it over his shoulder and jogged out of his room, not bothering to lock it. It was late afternoon and the weather outside had been picture perfect for weeks, so the Castle was pretty much deserted. And before the others would come back the janitor would make his rounds, clean up a little, and lock up afterwards. As mentioned before, sometimes it had its benefits...

He stormed down the long, wood paneled hallway and down the stairs as fast as he could without running. Even the large courtyard was empty. Years ago, when he was here for the first time, the huge hall with the strict checkerboard tiles, the dark wood paneling on the walls and ceiling, and the large pillars that were as thick as a person impressed him so much, that the word

scared would have fit better; and this effect was exactly why it was built how it was built. Today the hall had no effect on him at all. In contrast it made Andrew's feelings soar with every step he took toward the door. In front of him lay two weeks of the Mediterranean and a 30 meter Yacht. Adieu boredom, hello adventure!

Andrew was so deep in thought that he almost ran into a man who was just lifting an arm full of packages out of the van that stood directly in front of the door. It wasn't entirely his fault, the man had turned around just as Andrew was walking through the door with heavy steps. The man was either as deep in thought as Andrew, or was expecting somebody completely different. When he saw Andrew, he jumped so much that he dropped half of his packages, and a look of pure shock took over his face. The other three packages glided out of his hands and tumbled to the ground. As easily as they rolled away, they seemed like they were empty, and Andrew could just barely step to the side to avoid face planting.

"Sorry" he mumbled. With a second step that was more luck than skill, he got his balance back and turned around to the guy in the blue overalls. The dark-haired man had already bent over to pick up his packages and was hurrying to pick them up. Andrew noticed that his left hand was awfully scarred and that he had trouble using his fingers correctly.

"I'm really sorry about that" Andrew said. "Can I help you?" The dark-haired guy looked up and stared at him with a look as if Andrew had caught him doing something bad. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but then his eyes focused on a point behind Andrew. For a moment he got angry, but then he jerked

away and continued to pick up packages. When Andrew started bending down to pick up a package anyway, the guy shooed him away with an angry gesture. “Leave it alone” he growled. “I can handle it.”

Andrew almost gave him the answer that was on his mind—after all, it was just as much his fault—, but left it at a wordless shrug and turned around. While he was turning, his eyes fell on the inside of the delivery van, whose doors were standing wide open. Other than the boxes that the man had just taken out, there was just a crumpled up blanket and a roll of packing tape in the back. Behind the small window to the drivers cabin Andrew could see the outline of a second man. The driver didn’t come alone.

“Seen any ghosts today?”

Andrew closed his eyes for a second, counted to three, and slowly tuned toward the voice. In front of him stood a broad-shouldered, leather-jacket wearing teen with buzz-cut blond hair, who’s pig-like face and eyes were angrily looking him over. Right next to him stood a second figure that looked like it had tried its best to be a copy of pig-face; but had turned out to look like a cheap copy. It was Preston, the pride of the school, and one of the brain-amputees that followed him around wherever he went.

“Nope” Andrew answered after a short pause. “Only two assholes.” He registered movement from the corner of his eye and corrected himself: “three.”

Preston went white as a sheet, and the fire in his eyes told Andrew that his words might not have been the wisest, but had he not been taught to never lie?

“Today is your funny day, isn’t it?” Asked Preston. With a few steps he got closer and the treacherous fire in his eyes got stronger. Andrew stood perfectly still and somehow managed to hold his stare, but on the inside he felt completely different. The three stooges were the schools most famous bullies and, of course, their main victim was Andrew. Most of the time he managed to avoid them, and as long as they weren’t together, he didn’t have to fear them. Unluckily for him, they were in a group, and the threatening fire in Preston’s eyes made it clear to Andrew that he wouldn’t get by with a few insults and threats.

“Cat got your tongue?” Asked Preston when Andrew answered with the only answer that wasn’t suicide: not at all.

Andrew still didn’t say anything. His thoughts tumbled around in his brain. Preston only stood one and a half steps away and the other two had just moved so that Andrew was at their center. In other words, he was surrounded. No way out.

“Apparently.” Preston answered his own question with a nod and a wide, but not very humorous, grin. “I guess if I were in your shoes I would have shit my pants too.” He made a motion towards the bag that Andrew had hanging loosely from one shoulder. “Where are you going, crazy?” “Doesn’t matter” said Andrew “as long as it’s as far away from you as possible.” At the same time he hysterically asked himself if he was still all there. Maybe there was an astronomically small chance that he would escape this situation without broken bones or damage to his internal organs – but only if he would shut up soon.

The last trace of Preston’s grin crept off his face and in his eyes was pure blood-lust. “It is your funny day.” He stated while balling his hand into a comfortable fist. Andrew could hear his

knuckles crack. Strangely enough, he didn't look directly at Andrew, but at a fixed point behind him. Then Andrew got it. He wasn't looking at him or his friends, but at the driver of the delivery van. Maybe he was trying to calculate how soon the men would get involved.

"Okay, you're right." He said, trying to play the crushed one, showing just enough fear to make it believable. "I'm sorry. You could be generous and just for once you could just let me go." Preston was completely blown away. *This* reaction was the last thing he expected. After that, a huge grin spread out on his face.

"Yeah why not?" He asked. Then he held up his hand, stuck out his thumb, and looked at it. "And which one should it be?"

He *actually* tried to stick his thumb into Andrew's eye. The attack was so absurd and came so suddenly that it almost worked. In the last moment Andrew ducked, grabbed Preston's wrist and pulled as hard as he could. He then turned so that Preston flew over his bent hip and lost the ground beneath his feet.

Even while Preston was falling to the ground like a sack of cement, Andrew realized that he had made his third and final mistake. Out of reflex, he jumped back, ducked and stuck out his leg so that one of Preston's idiots fell over it and pulled the other one with him. Nick had shown him a few tricks, and he had taken two years of Judo until it had bored him, so he knew how to defend himself. The guys were each stronger than him, but all the training in the world couldn't equal out three heavy hitters against one Judoka. That might work in the movies, but not in real life. Andrew quickly moved back a couple of steps, felt for solid ground with his feet, and raised his fists while the three baffled bullies started to stand up. Behind him a car door

slammed shut and Andrew heard the motor start. The delivery guys had apparently decided not to get involved. He was finished. Preston and his friends would pound him into the ground and then jump around on him until they got cramps. Andrew decided to sell himself as expensively as possible.

Fate was being nice to him. Right when Preston finally got his 80 kg up off the ground and started to move in Andrew's direction, a loud honk followed by a sand-colored Hummer with a roaring motor flew up the driveway. The big wheels squeaked audibly on the cobblestone, the vehicle took a tight turn and – probably not on accident – stopped between Andrew and Preston. The only half-high door flew open and Nick got out, wearing the usual jeans, black turtleneck, and sunglasses. Today they actually worked with the weather, but he also wore the sunglasses when it was raining and even sometimes when it was nighttime.

Nick didn't even bother to turn off the car or pull out the keys – he didn't care too much for the environment or saving energy –, but abruptly turned to Andrew and then Preston.

The hard-headed boy hesitated, and Andrew could see the wheels in his head turning. Preston was just as big and heavy as Nick and at the moment he only consisted of muscles and anger. Neither of his buddies were weaklings either. Nevertheless, Andrew was relieved because he knew exactly what was going to happen even before the anger left Preston like air out of a popped balloon.

It wasn't the first time something like this had happened. Nick didn't look too harmless either. A well-built man with a three-day beard and short black hair, Nick wasn't something

spectacular or special. But still Andrew had witnessed men that were stronger than Preston turn white and then slink away when Nick just *looked* at them.

It worked this time too. Preston looked at him a second longer, turned around and crept away like an injured dog. Andrew didn't have to look around to know that his companions had fled the scene.

Nick turned smiling to Andrew. "Friends of yours?"

"The best" answered Andrew. "You came too early. We just were going to say goodbye."

"I can go drink some coffee somewhere" Nick suggested.

Andrew acted as if he was thinking about it for a second, and then shrugged. "It's okay. It wasn't that important."

Nick laughed and then got serious for a minute. "Do you want me to have a chat with those idiots?"

This time Andrew actually thought about it. It was an attractive offer, and he could vividly imagine how that lively *conversation* would look, but he shook his head.

"Rather not," he said, "I still need to spend a couple of years with them, you know." He laughed. "But not the next two weeks. So please drive over the vehicle, Jarvis. My plane is waiting."

"Just as you say, sir" grinned Nick. Andrew let his backpack slide off his shoulder and held it out to Nick, but he ignored the gesture and got back into the Hummer.

Andrew put on an exaggeratedly threatening face, went around the vehicle and climbed into the uncomfortable passenger seat without opening the door.

"That's an insert into your personal file, you know that, right?"

“Completely,” said Nick, “but one more doesn’t really matter. Buckle up.”

Andrew obeyed, and Nick put the car into gear and started driving without fastening his own seat belt. He only drove a few meters, then stepped on the brakes and looked in the mirror.

“What?” asked Andrew?

“That delivery van.” Nick began, motioning with his head toward the mirror, “Do you know who that is? I mean, do you know the men and what they’re delivering?”

“Which question do you want me to answer first?” Andrew asked. Nick glanced at him, but with such a sharp look that Andrew quickly added “Nope. No idea who that is or what they’re bringing. It’s probably some material for the school.”

“The school shuts down in three days” Nick considered.

“Maybe they need toilet paper, paper towels, or pencils...” said Andrew mockingly.

Nick remained serious. He looked at the van a little longer in the rear view mirror, pulled out a marker, and, due to the shortage of paper, wrote the license plate number on the back of his hand.

“Why are you doing that?” asked Andrew.

Nick put the Hummer into gear and drove off. “I’m going to check the plate later” he said. “One can never be certain.”

Almost against his will, Andrew also looked back and scrutinized the delivery van, which wasn’t very effective. It was just an older, somewhat beat up delivery van without logos, that was all.

“Has anybody ever told you that you suffer from advanced paranoia, Nick?” he asked.

“Your dad, for example” Nick nodded, “that was one of the conditions of him hiring Me.” he stated.

Andrew sighed. They had reached the gate that was only half raised, and instinctively he pulled in his head when they flew through the opening. Mud and gravel sprayed up around the tires of the Hummer as they raced down the driveway, usually with only two tires on the road and two on the shoulder. Even though he was buckled in, Andrew gripped the seat with both his hands and didn't let go until they slid onto the pavement. Any other car would have rolled at least three times in the last 100 meters, he was sure of that.

Nick, who noticed Andrew's sudden nervousness, grinned widely. “You're not scared, are you?”

“Of what?” Andrew responded. “I have one question, though. Are you sure dad is paying you to take care of me? Not to kill me?”

Nick laughed. He didn't say anything, but glanced in the rear view mirror and kept driving much too quickly. Andrew also turned around and looked back. The castle was almost out of sight. He could barely make out the delivery van exiting the gate and starting its way down the winding driveway, but of course much slower than Nick. Andrew sighed and turned around. “You're crazy.”

“Just careful” Nick corrected him.

“You don't really believe that they were more than just harmless delivery guys, do you.”

“I don't *believe* anything.” Nick answered sternly, “I try to *know*.”

“Which Philosophy book did you get that from?” Andrew asked with a grin, but Nick stayed serious.

“You’re not just some guy, Andrew” he said. “Your father pays me to take care of you.”

“That doesn’t mean that you have to see a skilled killer or a wannabe kidnapper behind every bush.” Andrew said.

“Apparently you still don’t know who your dad is.” replied Nick. Andrew wanted to answer, but Nick continued after a quick look in the mirror and in a slightly higher pitch “And your dad is a very wealthy man.”

“Oh really?” Andrew replied mockingly.

“It’s not just about money.” Nick insisted. “Powerful men often have powerful enemies. It’s just better to be careful. He smiled. “But in this instance you’re probably right. They probably were just harmless delivery guys.”

Andrew pointed to the plate numbers that Nick had on the back of his hand. “Then you could wipe that away, too.”

“Nope” answered Nick, grinning. He looked back in the mirror and still drove much too fast. When they were about five to six kilometers away from the castle, he finally slowed down a bit, but really only a little bit.

“Are you nervous already?” he asked.

“because you’re driving?” Andrew replied. “Of course!”

“In any case, you’ll be sitting in an airplane in an hour, and a few hours later you’ll be headed towards Agea. I would be excited if I were you.” he shrugged. “You’re going to see your father again. He’s is really looking forward to spending time with you for the next few weeks.”

“Does he even have that much time?” Andrew asked. He regretted those words even before he had finished. They sounded much bitterer than he intended. At least that’s what he told himself.

“Not really.” Nick answered with a shrug. “But he does take time off for you.” He glanced at Andrew quickly from the corner of his eye and most likely believed that Andrew didn’t notice. “He really is excited.”

“Yeah, me too.” Andrew answered honestly. It was just strange that even he realized the bitter undertone in his voice. “I might be even happier if it were more than two weeks a year.”

“I thought you liked it at the boarding school.” Nick sighed.

“I do!” Andrew answered hastily. He could have slapped himself. Why did he even start this?

“I’m with your dad a lot.” said Nick. “Actually, whenever I’m not with you. I’m not saying this to protect your dad now, but believe me, you wouldn’t be happier if you lived with him. The weeks that you’re going to spend together are all his free time. He travels a lot and he hardly ever gets back home before midnight.”

”To make another couple million? Asked Andrew.

“Nonsense!” responded Nick with an abruptness that even surprised him. After a noticeable pause and with a more controlled tone he continued: “It’s really not about the money. Your dad just takes his job very seriously. And it’s important, believe me. He has a lot of responsibilities.”

“What kinds of responsibilities?”

“For example all the people that work for him. And many more.” Again he hesitated and changed his tone of voice before

he continued. "Is it because of those guys earlier?"

It took a moment until Andrew understood what he was talking about. "Preston and his friends? No.", he said as he shook his head. "It doesn't have anything to do with them. Those three are the school bullies, they annoy everybody. By the time vacation is over they will have forgotten it anyway. Their memories aren't the best. I just don't understand how they haven't been kicked out yet."

"Maybe their parents believe that they can make the curve." answered Nick. "And probably one or the other teacher too."

"Them and making the curve?" Andrew ached.

"Give them a chance." said Nick. "They're young. For some people it comes with growing up to disobey orders."

"So you're telling me I'm not grown up yet?" inferred Andrew.

"No, you're not." Answered Nick seriously. "And you should be happy about it." He carefully tapped the brake, turned on his blinker, and turned off the main road with peeling tires. Andrew instinctively grabbed onto his seat, even though Nick was driving half as dangerous as earlier. Andrew probably would have answered, but the Hummer had terrible suspension so he was tossed around so much that he couldn't have answered without risking biting his tongue off. But somehow he was glad the road was in such miserable condition. It was a good reason to end the conversation, which had made him more and more uncomfortable.

The street stayed this bad for at least five minutes, then it got better, but it didn't easy Andrew for long. Nick drove another 100 meters, then they abruptly turned onto a narrow dirt road that quickly ended at a huge metal gate. Nick got out, pulled

out a ring of keys and opened the large padlock that secured the barrier shut. Without explaining anything, he got back in, drove five meters, and repeated the procedure in reverse order.

“Ah.” Andrew said as they drove off.

“We’re late.” Explained Nick. “If we drive through the woods, we’ll save 5km.”

“We can go so fast!” Andrew said sarcastically. “And it conveniently stops any white vans from following us!”

“Nonsense!” retorted Nick. “This way is a lot nicer. I thought you liked nature.”

Andrew resigned. If Nick didn’t want to talk about something, he didn’t. But that he wasn’t telling Andrew something was sure. Maybe he would tell him when they were on the plane.

There was definitely some discord between the two. They drove along for a good ten minutes in uncomfortable silence. The car shook like a bucking wild horse made of metal with each pothole, and it seemed like Nick was practically looking for them. At some points the path got so narrow that Andrew wasn’t sure if they would make it, until they clattered over a hillside where not only the forest gave way, but the path got wider, being tarred after about 100 meters.

“The worst is over” said Nick “the road gets a lot better after this.”

“Then we can trade places.” Andrew suggested. Nick looked at him incomprehensibly, but Andrew didn’t buy it. “Come on. It’s not the first time you’ve let me drive. You know I can do it.”

Of course Nick knew that, he had taught him, but still shook his head. “That was something else.” He claimed. “It was a closed off road.”

“Oh, and this is different?” asked Andrew. “Have a heart. It can be an early birthday present.”

“Your birthday is in four Months!” Nick reminded him.

“That’s why it’s early.” Andrew insisted.

“I can’t do that.” said Nick. “Your dad would kill me if he found out that I let you drive.”

“I’ll tell him either way if you don’t let me drive.”

“That’s blackmail!” Nick complained.

“True” said Andrew. “But you leave me no choice, and I am a spoiled, rich brat that is used to getting whatever he wants.”

Nick had obvious trouble being serious, but he perfectly played the part for a few seconds. With a grimace he stopped and got out.

While he was walking around the car, Andrew slid over into the driver’s seat and laid his hands on the giant steering wheel. Of course Nick knew that his Blackmail attempt was just fun, but it was part of it. If he would have just *asked*, Nick would have been disappointed.

He waited until Nick got in the other side and buckled up. Andrew then carefully stepped on the clutch. The gears ground against each other as he put it into gear and Nick made a face like he had a tooth ache.

“Please be careful.” He said. “This car’s pretty expensive.”

“I did learn driving in this.” Andrew reminded him.

“No you didn’t.” Nick stated. “Every time after you drove I went out and bought a new one.”

Andrew made a face and withheld any comments. He did drive the Hummer into the ditch the first time he drove and caused some damage, but as far as he knew, Nick had taken the

blame. It was still a good idea to not make that a habit since his dad wasn't stupid. If Nick always had an accident while Andrew was there, his dad would put one and one together and would cause a lot of trouble.

Andrew got rid of his troubling thoughts and concentrated on slowly speeding up while hopefully staying on the road. It had almost been six months since Nick had last let him drive, and the Hummer was everything except good natured. They had only driven on blocked off and well-built roads anyway, not on a bumpy, run-down gravel road that snaked back and forth. It took a while for him to get used to the complicated shifting and four-wheel drive, but when he finally got it, he drove so securely that Nick looked at him so surprised that Andrew could see his thoughts on his forehead³.

"You're sure that other than me nobody else is giving you lessons?" he asked.

"Definitely not." said Andrew. That was actually true. He himself was somewhat surprised how easy it was him, but he had always been a quick learner and had a natural understanding of anything related to tech that was almost as big as Nick's dislike for it.

He could think about that later. Right now he concentrated on enjoying the ride. He quickly had the car in control so well that Nick had to tell him to slow down a bit.

It was over way too fast. After 2-3 km the street got a lot smaller, and at the end, there stood a similar metal gate as the

³ *I don't know if this works in English, but it's similar to seeing someones gears turning in their head*

one at the top.

While Nick got out to open the gate, Andrew scooted over to the passenger seat. He was disappointed that it was over, but was glad that he had some excitement of this intensity.

“That wasn’t that bad.” Nick praised as he drove through the gate. Andrew registered that he didn’t bother to close the gate. “When you’re old enough to get a license your dad is going to save a lot of money on Drivers Ed.”

“That’ll be a big weight lifted off his chest,⁴ Thanks.” Andrew said sarcastically.

“There’s nothing to thank for! I was kind of forced to let you drive.” He said in mock anger and smoothly transitioned to being serious. “Your ticket is OK?”

“Last time I looked it was.” Answered Andrew. “This morning, to be exact. I’ll check again if you want me to.”

“Do that.” Nick said.

Andrew rolled his eyes, but reached back and fished for his backpack, took out the ticket and shoved it under Nick’s nose. He looked at it with a short, but very attentive look and followed Andrews movements as he threw his pass back into his bag.

“Good book?” he asked.

Andrew was puzzled for a second, then looked down and finally got that Nick was talking about the large book in his backpack. “The True-Dreamer, by Bernhard Hennen.” he said. “Pretty good, even though it is kind of weird sometimes, but it is an easy read.”

⁴ *In the original, it says “A stone will fall off of his heart”. That doesn’t translate well.*

“You still read that weird stuff?” asked Nick. Andrew could fool himself, but it seemed as if it was hard for Nick to stifle a disparaging chuckle.

“Fantasy?” Andrew asked with emphasis. “Yeah of course. And it isn’t weird; they’re just very imaginative stories.”

His voice was sharper than he expected, and Nick pulled his head in a little.

“I just can’t understand it. I tried reading a couple of those books, but I just don’t like them.”

“Maybe you just grabbed the wrong books.”

Nick shook his head again. “No, no; they were well-written and very gripping.”

“But?”

“I just think they’re futile.” Nick hesitated for a moment, and then continued. “Reality is just as exiting and the world is big already, you know? It’s just not necessary to imagine any other worlds. All those things that the authors make up in your fantasy-romance novels already exist in real life. It’s just completely useless to imagine new ones.”

Andrew swallowed everything down that he had on the tip of his tongue. It wasn’t the first time they had talked about it, but after what had happened with Preston and his two friends, he was probably overreacting. Nick wasn’t the only one that thought like that.

Of course fantasy Literature of every type was the most popular material with the students (some teachers too, but they would never admit that), and Andrew was god knows not the only one that read a lot of Tad Williams, Tolkien, Lovecraft, and Koontz. But there was one difference: It was natural for Andrew and his

peers to go through a lot of novels about Elves, Trolls, Fairies, and Goblins, but not let an opportunity to deny believing ‘any of that nonsense’ pass.

With Andrew that was different⁵. Of course he didn’t believe that there were – or ever had been – Hobbits, Trolls, or any other speaking animals. But he believed strongly that somewhere out there there was *something* that all of it was based on, a hidden world behind all of it, where there *were* Elves and Halflings and Fairies, and a whole bunch of others that were even more fantastic. Of course that gave him that reputation of being special and crazy.

With what had happened less than half an hour ago at school he decided that he should leave it alone. “How long is it going to take?” he asked instead.

Nick looked at him with an annoyed look. Andrew knew the way just as well as he did, but realized that Andrew just wanted to have a change in conversation. “Ten Minutes.” He said, as he looked at the speedometer, then the clock in the dash. He accelerated so suddenly that Andrew was pressed into the seat with enough force that he felt like he was on a roller coaster.

“Six.” Nick corrected himself.

Andrew didn’t add any comments to that, but he knew one thing for sure: Nick was not telling him something.

⁵ Directly translated from the original: “With ‘different’ that was (haha!) different.” See first footnote on his name

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It didn't take six, not even four minutes to reach the lonely municipal airport. Actually it didn't even deserve that name. The badly paved runway was only a little more than a gravel road on which Andrew could only imagine flying a kite, and would definitely not dare an airplane, and the building that called itself a tower was no more than a plywood box on stilts. In the single Hangar (a rusty corrugated sheet metal building) in which Andrew had never seen any other plane than the four-seated Cessna that belonged to his dad's company; and if he thought about it, he had never seen any other plane at that *airport*. Sometimes he thought that it was his own personal airport that didn't have any other license other than the one or two times a year Nick took him on vacation and back.

But since he knew how Nick answered questions that he didn't want to answer, he just didn't even ask.

The red and white striped barrier that blocked off the driveway to the airport lifted, and Nick, instead of driving to the 'tower' to go over the formalities, drove right to the hangar, where the blue

and white painted Cessna with the company logo on the side waited for them. Andrew wanted to get out, but Nick signaled for him to stay seated. Nick jumped out of the truck, grabbing his sweater. Andrews eyes got big when they saw the chromed pistol that appeared in Nicks hand.

Quickly, but thoroughly, he searched the entire hangar. Looking relieved when he came back, he motioned for Andrew to get out. He wasn't as relieved as Andrew would have liked.

"So much for everything being normal." Andrew said sarcastically.

As a reply Nick made an angry gesture. "Come on."

Andrew didn't move, just slung his backpack over his shoulder. "Don't you think its time to pour me some wine?" He asked. "What's going on?"

"Later." Answered Nick, his eyes wandering around the room. If it hadn't been a grotesque notion, Andrew could have sworn that Nick look scared. "There were a few ... threats. I'll tell you everything once we're at 1000m, but please just get on the plane."

There was something in his voice that made Andrew realize how serious the situation was. He took another quick, but similarly nervous look around the room, hurried to the plane and opened the door on the right side. He threw his bag on the back bench and, out of the same motion, swung himself into the copilots seat. In the last moment, he realized that he should have noticed something. Actually, he did notice it, because the sound his backpack made on the back seat sounded more like a grunt made up of half pain, half anger; not like the sound that a backpack full of clothes and books usually makes when it hits a

lifeless bench. Still – as if he were unable to stop his flow – he kept swinging and didn't understand what was going on until after he had sat down and a strong arm had wrapped around his neck, pulling his head back. Andrew knew that something was definitely wrong when a crippled hand appeared in front of his face, pressing a razor-sharp blade against his throat.

“Make a sound and you're dead.” A voice whispered next to his right ear. “Do you understand me?”

Even if Andrew had wanted to respond, he wouldn't have been able to. The arm choked him so much that he couldn't make a sound, and even nodding would have been dangerous because the knife was pressed firmly against his throat, making a thin, burning line across his skin. Just in case, he didn't respond at all.

His silence must have been a good enough answer for the man with the scarred hand, because a few moments later, he loosened his grip enough that Andrew could at least breathe, and the blade also retracted a bit. The burning sensation just got worse as † he felt a drop of blood run down his throat.

“Good” the voice in his ear hissed. “And now smile at your friend out there and ask him to come over here. Understood?”

This time Andrew nodded. A part of him wanted to tell him that this guys words were just empty threats. If he wanted to kidnap Andrew to get money from his dad, he could go to hell and just cut his throat. What would a dead hostage do for them?

But that was just the voice of his logic. It might be right, but that didn't play any role. Andrew was just scared. What he had read about in his beloved Sci-Fi books he now felt for real: He was scared for his life.

And it was not fun at all.

Extremely carefully, so as not to accidentally cut his throat, he turned his head and looked for Nick. His bodyguard, chauffeur and driving instructor had made a second round around the large, mostly empty hangar, and approached the Cessna. His eyes were still wandering around the large hangar, and the flashing of his chromed pistol in his hand looked like pure mockery to Andrew. Nick only looked at Andrew for a second, continuing to search the hangar for a danger that was awaiting him in the plane.

“Don’t even think about being a hero.” The voice in his ear hissed. “I’m serious.” Andrew didn’t doubt him for a second. He didn’t dare more, let alone turn around, but he thought he heard a second person sitting on the bench in the back. The man with the scarred hand wasn’t alone at the delivery truck either. Nick was right after all, but that made Andrew less than thrilled.

Nick approached the plane extremely slowly, reached for the door handle, and froze mid- movement. His eyes got big and Andrew could see his jaw muscles tense up. His pistol flew up with a surprisingly fast and accurate movement, aiming at the man behind Andrew.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” The man said, this time so loud that Andrews ears were ringing. “I do think you would hit me, but I would still strike.”

To give his words an emphasis, he put more pressure on Andrews Adam’s apple, causing another drop of blood to run down his throat, making Andrew clench his jaw to suppress a cry of pain.

Nick stood very still, and Andrew could see the wheels turning his forehead. Nick was undoubtedly an excellent marksman, and

Andrew trusted him to hit the person behind him, even before Scarhand had had any time to realize what was happening, let alone use his knife to cut Andrews throat. Maybe Nick would have risked it, but there were two of them, and from his position Nick couldn't possibly see if the other man was armed with a knife or even a gun.

"Come on, get in!" Scarhand hissed. "We need to stick to the flight plan!" Nick hesitated another endless second, but then he lowered his pistol and stuck out his other hand for the door. Just as he got in the man behind the pilots seat ripped the gun from Nicks hand. His eyes lit up, but Nicks face didn't reveal anything.

"That's better." Scarhand said. "Now close the door and start up this thing. We don't have all the time in the world."

Nick followed orders – at least with the door, but he didn't even try to start the motor. "I'm not going to *just start it up*. We'd have a police helicopter following us within 5 minutes."

"Then don't *just start it up*, tell the tower the pass-phrase." Replied Scarhand.

"I'm not even thinking about it."

"Don't be silly" Scarhand sneered. "If you were that cool, you wouldn't have gotten in and I would be dead."

"What hasn't happened yet can still happen." Nick answered angrily.

Scarhand sighed and made a short and quick movement with his knife. This time Andrew could not suppress a cry of pain.

Nick immediately stuck out his hand and turned the ignition switch. The motor burped twice, the propeller made half a turn and stopped.

“No tricks!” Scarhand said. “Whatever you do will hurt your little friend here more than me.”

Andrew was relieved that Scarhand forwent carving away at Andrews neck to reinforce his point, but Nick seemed to get the message. He went to turn the key, but didn't turn it quite yet. Instead, he initialized the first countermeasure. He turned halfway towards the kidnapper and brought his knee near the emergency radio switch, whose function Nick had explained to Andrew on his last vacation. “That wasn't on purpose. I'm nervous and did something wrong. Sorry.”

“He's being serious” Andrew said in an almost desperate tone that he had never known he could create.

Scarhands gaze wandered towards Andrew. “Shut up.” He said roughly. Andrew flinched as if he had been slapped. “OK” he said in the most humble and beat manner he could manage. His small distraction had worked. Even though he tried to avoid looking in Nicks direction, he could tell that the subtle gray button was pressed, which meant that a direct radio link was established with the police. If what Nick had told him last vacation was true, there were already a few cops listening in and deciding if it was an emergency or just an accident.

Scarhands attention focused back on Nick. “You better not make any more mistakes.” He threatened. “Lets get going!”

“I need to wait a minute.” Nick answered nervously. “If I just start it, I'll have to take the carburetor apart.”

That sounded honest. It could have been because of the nervousness of his voice, but Scarhand believed him and waited until Nick turned the key again. Even now the propeller only moved reluctantly, and at first the motor made a sound that

Andrew didn't like at all. Then it jumped right into gear and the propeller turned into a blurry shadow at the front of the machine until it seemed almost invisible. Nick grabbed the yoke and let the Cessna slowly roll out of the hangar.

"I need to talk to the tower." Nick said. "If I don't, they'll automatically call the police."

"We don't want to waste the taxpayers money" Scarhand said spitefully. "So talk to them and don't forget the pass phrase. Once we're in the air we won't have anything to lose."

Nick gave him an angry look, but still steered the Cessna to the end of the runway and stopped to reach for the corded microphone.

"Ground Control, Cessna 378MS, requesting full route clearance.¹"

It didn't even take a second for a slightly distorted voice replied: "Cessna 378MS, climb in VFR conditions until 3000. Maintain 5000. Runway 1, cleared for takeoff. Have a good flight."

"If the weather plays along." Nick replied. "378MS over and out."

"And what about the pass phrase?" Scarhand asked.

"The thing about the weather." Nick said. "Did you really think I would say 'And now for the agreed pass phrase'?"

He waited a couple seconds for an answer, but ended up just shrugging and putting his hands back on the yoke. The sound of the 310 horsepower engine got louder and the Cessna started to gain speed. The man with the scarred hand loosened his grip a

¹ http://www.niceairaviation.com/Documents/IFR_communication.pdf

bit and Andrew used the opportunity to carefully turn his head to look at the man behind Nick. He was about 30 years old and had such a stereotypical criminal face that it was almost funny. He probably didn't have much of a choice other than to be a career criminal. In addition, he was scared.

The man must have felt Andrews eyes on him, because he turned towards Andrew very quickly. "What?" He jabbed. His fingers played nervously with the gun he had taken away from Nick.

"Do you guys actually know who you're messing with?" Nick asked hastily, and probably out of no other reason than to break the uncomfortable silence that had been lingering in the cabin since takeoff. When he didn't get an answer, he continued: "His dad doesn't just have money. He is also a very influential man. **Very** influential. I wouldn't have the courage to make him angry, and we're closer than most of the rest of his staff."

"Let us worry about that." Scarhand said.

"You don't have any idea how much you *should be* worrying." Nick said coldly. "If you harm him in any way, you'll be wishing you were dead."

The Cessna got faster and faster, nearing the end of the laughably short runway very quickly and lifting off at the last possible moment. Andrew had been through this maneuver enough times to not worry about it, and besides that he knew that Nick was an excellent pilot. That didn't stop him from gripping the seat a bit as the machine barely lifted over the grassy hill at the end of the runway, cutting off the heads on a few dandelions. The two men behind them noticeably pulled in their heads like turtles

bracing for impact, and Nick put the cherry on top by pulling the plane up even more in a very sharp right turn.

“Don’t do anything stupid.” Scarhand warned. “Otherwise I might get nervous.”

“I need to pull up that hard here, the thermals here are terrible.”

Andrew just barely suppressed a surprised look. The couple of dozen times that they had taken off from there Nick had let the Cessna rise slow enough that Andrew barely even felt them rising. Besides, the whole thing with thermals was nonsense. They were too far away to be affected by the warm updrafts along the sides of the mountains.

Then Andrew realized what Nick was doing. He made that abnormal flight maneuver because he could inconspicuously talk about it, the police on the other end could listen for his subtle directions, and Nick could find out how much the kidnappers knew about flying.

Apparently it wasn’t too much of a stretch for Scarhand, but his partner didn’t buy it. “No tomfoolery!” he threatened while waving around the pistol.

“Or what?” Nick asked carelessly. “Are you going to shoot me?”

“No,” Scarhand answered instead of his partner. “But I could cut off one of your friend’s ears. He does have two of those.”

Nick gave him a hate-filled glare, but didn’t answer. Instead he concentrated on making the plane climb in close circles until they were at about 1000 m.

“Now it would be practical if I knew where I was going.” he said.

“Just fly south.” Scarhand answered.

“Good idea.” Nick nodded, obediently turning the almost invisible circle created by the propellers in the direction he was told. “And which mountain do you want me to fly into?”

That question was reasonable, seeing as there were only mountains in their line of flight. Andrew knew that most of them were too high for the little Cessna to fly over.

“Shut up and just keep Flying.” Scarhand hissed angrily. “I’ll tell you where to go.”

His voice told a different story. He wasn’t just nervous, he didn’t have the slightest idea of where they were going. Nick put what Andrew thought into words. “You’ve never been in a plane before, have you.” He asked. “There are certain pathways up here. If we leave one of those, we’ll have the police on us faster than you can imagine.”

Andrew was slightly surprised that Scarhand didn’t get angry. Instead he actually thought about what Nick said. “We need to get to the other side of the mountains.” He said eventually, making a gesture towards the left. “That way.”

Andrew’s eyes followed his gesture. Not too far away a small valley appeared in between the seemingly almost insurmountable wall of rock. From where they were, it looked like a barely finger-width gap, but they were still a ways off. Nick didn’t move a muscle to turn in that direction.

“Is there something wrong with your ears?” Scarhand asked.

“Completely impossible.” Nick said. “That’s a No-Fly Zone.”

“Who cares?” Scarhand replied. “Do what I tell you.” He pressed his knife to Andrew’s neck, causing him to bleed more. Nick hastily put the plane in the right direction and glared at Scarhand.

“If you touch Andrew again, I’ll kill you.” Nick said calmly.

“Shut up.” Scarhand replied. Nick’s threat had affected him nonetheless, as Scarhand quickly pulled the knife back a little.

“We’re going to be in huge trouble. That whole area ahead of us is a restricted military zone.” Nick insisted. “Either way, that valley is a weather hole. The thermals there will rip us apart.”

“You’re a good pilot, right?” Scarhand asked. “You’ll make it.”

Nick didn’t answer, but Andrew thought he could feel Nick’s nervousness. Scarhand was right: Nick was an excellent pilot, but this valley up ahead actually scared even Nick. *That* scared Andrew. He was thinking that Nick had made up the story about the No-Fly zone, but now he wasn’t sure if it was true or to let the police catch up.

“What are you even planning on doing with us, if I may?” Nick asked after a few minutes.

“No, you may not.” Scarhand replied sharply, but that didn’t stop Nick.

“I’m just wondering if you’re working for somebody or not.”

“Does it make a difference?”

“And how!” Stated Nick. “There are two options. If you’re really not working for anybody, you’re either completely insane or you don’t have a clue who you’re messing with. If that’s the case, I suggest we land somewhere around here and you two jokesters can get out of this situation as fast as possible. I promise that nobody will hear about this little incident.”

“What’s the other option?” Scarhand inquired.

“If you have an employer, name your price and a name. I guarantee that nothing will happen to you.”

“Yeah right.” Scarhand said mockingly.

“I’m completely serious.” Nick persisted. “Andrew’s dad could give a shit who is behind this. I’m pretty sure that he would give a bunch of money for information.”

“Stop blabbering.” Said Scarhand. Andrew thought he sounded a little nervous, perhaps even thoughtful.

Andrew was also nervous. His suspicion must have been more than just hot air. Nicks behavior on the drive to the airport seemed totally different; As did his James-Bond-like search of the hangar. Maybe the nervousness in his eyes wasn’t the valley or the No-Fly zone, but something completely different. It wasn’t the first time, but in a completely different way Andrew asked himself *who* his dad actually was. The short conversation that he and Nick had earlier included all he really knew about his father, since he had basically grown up at castle Drachental, and the time he had spent at home started to fade away in his memories. It wasn’t because it was so long ago, but rather because it was just so uneventful. Andrew had never even gotten to know who his mother was. Back when he was a *very* young child he had never even asked where his mom was, because he couldn’t really miss something he never had. After a couple of years he *had* asked where she was, but had only gotten either no answer at all or a very evasive answer, so he quickly gave up on asking any more questions. Using the little amount of instincts that small children have, he figured out that that was the one topic that was taboo with his dad. For a while he had comforted himself with the thought that she had died shortly after his birth, so his father didn’t want to talk about it because it brought back too many memories. That was the most comforting explanation, but deep down inside he knew that it was likely not like that.

Because of his age and the books he read, Andrew had developed the oddest and most chilling theories, all the way from her being kidnapped by the mafia and never coming back, to her being an Elven princess that had gone back to her secret kingdom after giving his father a child. Somewhere along the line he realized that the truth was most likely a lot simpler and more gruesome. Andrew's top theory was that she had walked out on him and his dad shortly after Andrew was born and that his dad didn't want to talk about her because he still couldn't get over the loss of her. And since he had gone to the boarding school and found a new home there, he hadn't thought about her for a while. But now, while he was sitting there trying to hold his head so that Scarhand didn't accidentally cut his throat if they got into some turbulence, he realized that he hardly knew anything about his dad. It was just like Nick had told him: Andrew had grown up under the care of nice, but often different nannies, and he had sometimes not seen his dad for weeks on end. His memories of that house were that it was a large, gloomy building, with long corridors and huge rooms with high ceilings, populated with heavy, antique furniture. And as for his dad, he only remembered a large, silent man that looked like he had white hair since a young age. Even in designer suits he looked like a medieval king or a magician.

As a matter of fact, he didn't know what his dad did. He knew he ruled over a large empire of companies that had grown over time, but that was all Andrew knew. In the few precious hours that they had spent together, his dad never talked about business, and Andrew wasn't very interested in that anyway. Maybe he should have been interested. With the way that Nick

was talking about him, he was worried that this really wasn't about the money, but rather that his dad was a mighty man and had some mighty enemies.

Andrew forced himself to stop thinking about that and pulled himself together. It wouldn't help him if he saw his father as a mafia godfather, with Scarhand and his partner being modern-day Robin Hoods that had just kidnapped him to protest against the pollution of the environment or to protect a sub-genus of the Daisy that is endangered. Nick was probably right and they were just some idiots that didn't have any idea with whom they were dealing.

But that didn't make them less dangerous.

The mountains gradually got closer. Andrew stole a glance at that radio, hoping that what Nick had told him was true. It was about time for something to happen before they got out of reach of the authorities. The gap in the face of the mountains had gotten bigger and Andrew saw now that it was anything but a small valley, which was what it had looked like from a ways away. Instead it was a massive canyon with almost vertical walls on either side. The air above it was noticeably darker, so Nick must have been right about it being a weather hole.

The radio emitted an incoming signal tone. Nick wanted to reach for the Mic, but Scarhand Shook his head. Nick shrugged and pulled his hand back.

"If I don't respond, it will be very uncomfortable for us very soon."

Five to six minutes passed as the massive mountains got closer and the darkness over the canyon darkened. Andrew wasn't quite sure if it was an actual storm cloud. It looked more like it was just darkness, as if there were something that didn't allow light to exist, however crazy that sounded.

"We'll be doing aerobatics soon." Nick suddenly proclaimed. Scarhand blankly looked at him and Nick made a gesture towards the mirror where there was a quickly approaching object flashing blue and red.

"Crap!" Scarhand said unfavorably. "How did they get here so quickly?"

Nick pointed at the radio, where there was still a flashing red light.

"They don't like it when you don't respond."

"Keep your smart-ass comments to yourself." Scarhand retorted.

"Just speed up and lose them, will you?"

"You really don't get it." Nick sighed. "This isn't a jet. That police helicopter is *way* faster than us."

Andrew suppressed the urge to tell Scarhand that the police had been listening this whole time anyway. He figured it would be better if he waited for the right moment to tell him, if there ever was one.

Either way the helicopter had gotten closer very quickly. Not even a minute later the helicopter had turned from a blinking dot in the mirror to a streamlined body that looked like it could catch up to the Cessna with no problems, even if Nick made the Cessna go as fast as possible.

“Dammit” Scarhand mumbled. The knife at Andrew’s neck trembled lightly.

Nick grinned coldly. “I guess you have a problem now, friends. Maybe you should have taken me up on my offer.”

“False.” Scarhand answered. “*You* have a problem. Figure something out to lose the pigs, or your friend gets a new face.”

The helicopter got closer and the red flashing on the radio got more hectic. Nick ignored it and the police helicopter made a surprisingly quick jump so it was right next to them, about 20 meters away. The Pilot gestured heavily and waved the microphone he held in his right hand. Nick looked at him, and shook his head with exaggerated motions. It was very obvious he couldn’t answer to the helicopter Pilot.

Even if the other Pilot had believed him, it didn’t help.

The helicopter got even closer and they suddenly heard an amplified voice that easily overpowered the sound of the motors.

“Attention! Three seven eight Mike Sierra! You are currently flying through a No-Fly zone! Turn around and follow us!”

Nick shook his head.

The helicopter repeated his announcement two more times, then he changed his tactic. He sped up and stayed about 50 meters away from the nose of the Cessna and started slowing down.

“Don’t you dare go slower.” Scarhand threatened.

Nick held his speed, but the helicopter got noticeably slower, and the distance between them melted away. Nick held the yoke with stoic calmness and Andrew wasn’t the only one getting nervous. Soon they were maybe 30 meters away from the back of the helicopter, then 20, 10...

The pilot would have had to accelerate to remove them both from danger, but those were obviously not his intentions. He stubbornly kept his course while still slowing down.

At the very last possible moment Nick pulled the plane into a sharp turn to the left and dove underneath the helicopter. As they were diving underneath it, Andrew could see the chopper swerve to the side as they surprised the pilot. For a split Second the helicopter fell back, but it quickly took back its place next to Cessna. Even at this distance Andrew could tell how mad the Pilot was.

For a moment he was still looking at Nick, then rose up above the Cessna and lowered itself so quickly that Andrew almost expected to see the skids poke through the cockpit's canopy. At the last moment Nick pressed the Yoke forwards and they went into a quick, but short, descent. Scarhand was not prepared and the knife slit at Andrew's neck, causing blood to run down to his collar.

"Put the damn knife away." Nick snarled, catching the plane and putting it back into position. "Or do you want to accidentally kill him?"

Scarhand hesitated another moment, but then he actually did pull the knife back – even if he wiped it off on Andrew's shirt first. He really was an idiot.

His buddy waved this pistol around as a threat. "Just don't do anything stupid!"

"Because you'll shoot me, I know." said Nick.

Andrew touched his neck and felt sticky blood, but not as much as he expected. Relieved, he turned his head to look at the helicopter. It had fallen back a little, but was easily catching up.

Nick was flying noticeably faster, but Andrew was still sure that the police could easily pass them.

As if the other Pilot had heard Andrews thoughts and wanted to confirm them, he suddenly sped up with playful ease and repeated his maneuver, so that Nick had to go into a hair-raising dive again.

Andrew was asking himself more and more desperately what was actually going on. During normal kidnappings they focus on deescalating the situation, not leading a small war against the kidnappers. Andrew didn't know what their aggressive behavior meant, but he did know one thing: Something was going completely wrong.

"God dammit get rid of him!" Scarhand yelled.

"Its more the other way around." Nick answered strained. "Just a couple more of those tricks and he'll be forcing us to land."

"Do something about it!" Scarhand yelled back.

"And what exactly am I supposed to do?" Nick answered at comparative volume. "Should I ram him?"

The guy behind Nick raised his pistol and tried opening the window. "The next time he passes us, I'll shoot him!" He threatened. "Try to fly smoothly."

"What a great idea!" Nick said with deep sarcasm. "Then they'll just send a military helicopter to shoot us down. I'm actually a little surprised they haven't done that yet, we're really deep into the No-Fly zone b—"

He got cut off by the Police Helicopter dove down on them like a bird of prey, forcing them to make another dive. Now they were at about half the altitude they started out at, so Nick tried to gain some back, but the heli was right back on them

“In there!” Scarhand pointed towards the canyon. “Fly into that storm!”

“Are you crazy?” Nick yelled.

“Not at all,” Scarhand replied calmly. “this is an airplane. We can handle the weather better than the helicopter by a long shot. He won’t follow us into the storm.”

Andrew figured he was probably right. The problem was that he was getting less and less sure that the strange darkness was just a storm. It looked more like something that just swallowed light like a black hole.

Nick was going to answer, but Scarhand spared him the effort by raising the knife and waving it around in front of Andrew’s face. Nick gave him an angry look, but he did steer toward the direction he was ordered in. The helicopter caught up with ease, but this time they flew alongside the plane.

3

“For god’s sake man, are you crazy?” The amplified voice roared out of the police helicopter. “Turn around right now or you’ll be in extreme danger!”

“You don’t say.” Scarhand growled. He pointed at the darkness. “Go faster!”

“This is your last warning!” The voice screamed. “Turn around!”

Nick wanted to say something, but at that moment a hard hit went through the Cessna as if they had hit a pothole, and in the same second the first heavy raindrop burst on the windshield. What followed was the most supernatural thing Andrew had ever experienced.

The storm never started. From one fraction of a second to the next it was just *there*. It was as if they had flown over an invisible border between two worlds. They were just flying through sunshine and nearly still air and in the next moment the weather included wind, lightning, and hail with fist-sized raindrops from hell. The Cessna reared up like an animal that

was shot at, tipped on its side and started corkscrewing.

Scarhand screamed out of fear, almost letting the knife go, and his companion actually *dropped* the pistol, quickly bending over to pick it up. Under more normal circumstances that would have been the perfect moment for Nick to intervene and stop the wannabe kidnappers, but instead he was busy trying to get the Cessna back under control.

Andrew was also thrown forward, and because of all the excitement he had forgotten to buckle in, he barely had time to throw his hands out in front of him to catch himself before he could dent his head on the metal Instrument Panel. The result of that haphazard action was a jabbing pain that shot through his wrists and brought tears to his eyes.

The plane swung back and forth so much that it was hard for Andrew to get back up. Half-stunned and with almost-numb fingers he felt for the safety belt and with some effort he finally got it buckled. Only then he dared lifting his head to look outside.

He regretted that as soon as he had done it. All round the Cessna hell was breaking loose. Andrew took everything back that he had said about the mysterious darkness above the gorge. It was a storm, and the worst he had ever seen. The sky above them was completely black, but he wasn't even sure it was the sky. The Cessna jumped around so wildly that he couldn't tell what was up or down, left or right.

Nick was yelling something Andrew didn't understand. The guy behind him had picked up his pistol, waving it around like a madman, fumbling about with a panicked look on his face. Every once in a while a blazing streak of lightning tore open the formidable darkness, allowing Andrew to briefly glimpse

the baseball-sized hail and slightly smaller raindrops that were rocketing towards the small machine from all directions.

The cockpit thudded as if invisible giants were beating on it, and most of the instruments on the dashboard seemed to be either broken or going crazy.

“God dammit, what’s going on?!” Scarhand bellowed. “Get this box under control!”

“I’ll get it, don’t worry” answered Nick. “Keep your nerves under control.”

It took a few more seconds that seemed to Andrew as if they were a string of eternities, but Nick fought back and won over control of the plane piece by piece. The Cessna still lurched side to side like a small boat in a hurricane. The pandemonium continued to make it impossible to communicate other than by yelling, but at least Andrew was pretty sure that they weren’t flying upside down any more. Mostly sure.

“What in the devil is going on?” Screamed Scarhand. “You didn’t say anything about this. If this is a trick, you ’ll regret it!”

“Its not a trick” answered Nick. “The instruments are going completely crazy! I need to go lower so I can orientate myself.”

This time there was no doubt that the fear in his voice was real. There was sweat on his forehead although the temperatures inside the cockpit were dropping every minute. He was gripping the control stick as if he were trying to break it.

“How high are we?” Scarhand screamed.

“No idea!” Nick bellowed back. “But I’m going lower, we have to orientate ourselves!”

Scarhand didn’t talk back, so Nick lowered the nose of the bucking machine a bit. Andrew felt them lose height. He couldn’t

see it at all. The darkness that surrounded the machine was still just as opaque as it had been. The blinding lightning that flashed up irregularly did not assist with Andrews attempts to orientate himself, but instead seemed to confuse his sense of balance even more than the tumbling of the aircraft already did.

But then, for only a split second, he saw something. An especially large and wide lightning bolt split the heavens into two asymmetrical halves. In the reflection of the light off the ground, Andrew realized that the Cessna had lowered threateningly close to the ground. They were flying maybe eighty to a hundred meters off the ground and that distance was still rapidly decreasing. Andrew wasn't the only one that started screaming, but their screams were drowned out by the roar of the storm and the protesting whining of the motor as Nick desperately pulled back hard on the joystick. Still, the ground seemed to be coming closer and closer. Slowly the Cessna started tipping to be parallel with the ground, and finally started tipping upwards, climbing away from the certain death of a crash landing. Andrew had the dreadful feeling that they had gotten so close to the ground during that maneuver that they could have easily touched it with an outstretched hand.

He noticed something else. Shortly before the blazing lightning threw them back into the thick mass of clouds he thought he recognized why the bizarre formations of rocks that were reaching for the belly of the Cessna seemed to be so symmetrical. They weren't rocks at all. They were ruins. Below them lay the blackened, burnt out ruins of an enormous city. The flickering light went out for good and the eerie darkness closed around the Cessna like a gigantic black burial cloth.

Andrew blinked. When he opened his eyes again, the darkness below him was just as absolute as the darkness above him. He must have been imagining things. A city? This high in the mountains? Impossible.

The Cessna kept shaking more and more, tipping from one side to the other and back and threatened to tank completely before Nick took back control from the plane. All of a sudden three rectangular red warning lights lit up near Nick and a green flashing button joined them a split second later. Nick stretched his hand out to press it, but pulled it back quickly when the plane bucked against the joystick. One of the red lights extinguished, followed by another one. Andrew didn't know why, but he seemed to be watching a countdown that would end in something terrible.

It took Nick a bit to get the Cessna back under control. He was finally able to attempt letting go of the joystick with one hand and stretching out to press the button that was flashing faster now.

A cracking sound rang out and a hand-length orange tongue licked past Nick's shoulder and stamped a smoking hole in the dashboard exactly where the flashing green button used to be. Nick yelled out as if he were the one that was hit by the bullet, not the dashboard. He elbowed the shooter in the face with such force that he dropped his weapon and flew back in his seat.

"You're crazy!" He yelled. "I'll kill you for that, you fucking dog!"

"That isn't necessary any more." Replied Nick. "You just killed us all you blithering idiot."

He ripped at the joystick so forcefully that Andrew would have impacted the dashboard again had he not been buckled in, and tore the Cessna in a quickly descending pirouette that cost them most of the height that they had just fought for.

“What are you doing?” Scarhand roared.

“Trying to save our lives!” Nick answered. “We need to get out of here!”

Another flash of lightning tore up the sky. This one was different, but Andrew didn’t have time to analyze it as Nick pulled on the joystick and flew a complete roll, throwing him into the safety belts and making the head of the kidnapper uncomfortably collide with the canopy of the cockpit. It was followed by a steep ascent, and a similarly steep plunge. Andrew clung to his seat and the two kidnappers behind him who didn’t have the chance to buckle themselves in did all they could to brace themselves against the crazy maneuvers Nick was pulling. They were yelling something that Andrew didn’t understand and probably didn’t make any sense in the first place. Nick fought more and more grimly with the joystick, forcing the Cessna to perform wild maneuvers that pushed the breakable machine to its limits. He was flying like a fighter pilot desperately trying to avoid enemy fire.

And it ended that way too. Nick made the plane take a jump to the right and it was pure luck that Andrew was looking over his shoulder at the exact right moment.

It took less than a second. Something in Andrew didn’t believe it at first when he saw it: A salvo of pencil thin, dazzlingly blue light bolts raced out of the darkness and stamped a perfect line of glowing red holes in the wing before Andrew could even process

what was happening. For a short moment flames shot out of the wing, extinguishing almost immediately with the airflow, but Andrew recognized that the wing was perfectly perforated. Even if the Cessna had flown straight ahead it wouldn't have lasted longer than a few moments. The cut-throat maneuvers that Nick was putting the plane through made them last until just about...

now.

Andrew watched in disbelief as the wing was bent upwards in slow motion, then fluttered upright in the wind for another half second before it was completely ripped off.

The Cessna tipped in the direction of the removed wing and started spiraling downwards. Andrew screamed with deadly terror and clung to his seat even though he knew how useless his actions were. The two kidnappers behind him were screaming as well while Nick was still stubbornly fighting with the joystick.

Outside another salvo of blue white lightning flickered past. Following the path of the bolts Andrew could tell just how fast they were heading towards the ground. He also saw that he wasn't wrong earlier, there *were* ruins littering the ground.

The light went out and the corkscrew the plane was making turned into a somersault. Nick accomplished an impossible miracle and not only caught the Cessna before it hit the ground, but he also got it into a racing glide.

That lasted for two or three seconds. Then something hit the landing gear and tore it off. The roaring of the storm came to a deafening crescendo as the wind suddenly pierced through the cockpit without any hindrance. Not only was the landing

gear gone, but so was the guy that had shot at Nick. Somehow Scarhand was still holding on for dear life.

The rapid flight kept going. A new flash of lightning ripped open the darkness and showed Andrew a gargantuan brick wall that seemed to climb to the heights of mount Everest as the plane was rushing toward it at a break-neck speed.

Nick tore at the joystick and even though they only had one wing, the plane reacted as if it were a dying war horse trying to get its rider to safety, even in death.

Maybe it was just a coincidence.

Instead of ramming into the brick wall, the mortally wounded Cessna impacted the street directly in front of it. The plane jumped into the air again like a flat stone thrown over water, spraying sparks everywhere as it skidded down a rubble-sewn alley that ran perpendicular to the wall.

The alley was too small, even for the already castrated machine. The second wing sheared off with a hard impact, turning the wreck into a spinning top that was spitting pieces in all directions. Andrew was thrown forwards and backwards in his seat belts and got hit in the head by something with so much force that he felt immediately sick. Glass splintered. He tasted blood and felt something break deep in the belly of the craft. The streaking ride lasted another breaths and ended with a final blow that was strong enough to make him almost lose his consciousness.

For a few seconds he just sat limply in his seat, with his seat belts being the only thing keeping him in his seat. He fought with all his might to keep from losing consciousness. Flickering red light filtered through his closed eyelids and his mouth filled

with blood. He had bit his tongue, or at least hoped it wasn't anything worse than that, and felt some blood trickle down his chin. The flickering red light meant fire, and he was sitting in the wreckage of a crashed airplane. If he didn't get out quickly, he would burn alive.

It was that thought that gave Andrew the strength to force the darkness out of his head and open his eyes. At first he still didn't see anything. The twitching red light transformed the world outside of the burst Cockpit into a hellish kaleidoscope of disconnected pictures and pure pain, with the blood that had run into his eyes not helping. Andrew blinked, but that only made things worse so he raised his hand to wipe away the blood.

Next to him Nick came to with a groan. He was also buckled in like Andrew, but seemed to have only hit his forehead on the control column since his sunglasses were broken in the middle. With laborious and dazed, unsure movements he righted himself, took the broken sunglasses out of his lap and looked at them confused for a second. Then he abruptly raised his head and turned towards Andrew.

"Are you hurt?" He asked, frightened.

"Not sure", mumbled Andrew. He moved himself carefully and listened closely to his body. There weren't many areas that didn't hurt on him, but nothing seemed to be broken. "I don't think so" he corrected himself. He needed to swallow to get rid of the blood that had collected in his mouth. Even though he himself knew how absurd it was in this situation, he was still embarrassed to spit in front of Nick.

Nick raised his hand to wipe the blood out of his face. He still seemed somewhat groggy, like someone who had just woken up

out of a deep sleep and wasn't quite used to real life yet.

"We need to get out of here." He said. "Can you walk?"

"I think so", Andrew answered. What other choice did he have? Nick didn't seem convinced. Andrew quickly released his safety belt and stuck out his hand to open the door. It did all the work for him by falling off its hinges and rattling to the ground.

"Be careful!", Nick said. Andrew heard him climb out of the other side, but didn't turn around to look. Instead he concentrated on getting out of the cockpit without inflicting further injuries, which was turning out to be much more difficult than he had hoped. He had pain all over and his left knee especially seemed to refuse to behave with the precision he was used to.

What he saw after he climbed out of the wreckage of their Cessna was not especially courage-inspiring.

The racing carousel ride had ended in the middle of a large, dirty, cobblestone court that was surrounded on all sides by many-storied brick buildings. As far as he could recognize in the flickering glow of the fire they were all ruins, burnt out hulls of charred brick and warped steel beams. The empty window holed seemed to stare at him with unseeing eyes. There was rubble and debris everywhere, but there were no signs of life to be seen.

Andrew turned around. The scene on the right was no different than the one on his left. The plane had left an uneven trail of burning debris, but somehow the tattered fuselage had somehow not caught fire yet. Andrew got goosebumps as he realized *how* big the miracle was that they owed their life to: The last impact had torn the gas tank off the airframe which now lay ten to twelve meters away blown open like a metal flower,

spitting fire and white embers in all directions. In the flickering light Andrew recognized a crooked form that lay motionless on the cobblestone. Scarhand, who seemed not to have survived after all.

He heard Nick rummaging around the other side of the wreckage and limped over to him as fast as his bruised knee would allow him. Just as he rounded the corner, he saw Nick tuck something under his belt: the chromed pistol that the untalented and unfortunate kidnapper had let go of.

“Come on”, Nick called. “We need to go!”

Andrew assumed that he was still scared that the wreckage could catch fire or explode at any moment, a fear that was completely based in reality. The tank lay at what seemed like a safe distance, but he didn’t know enough about aircraft to know for sure that that was the only tank that the Cessna had. Either way the interior of the plane still had plenty of burnable materials.

Nevertheless he stood where he was and pointed back at Scarhand. “We need to take care of him.”

Nick did something strange: he put his head back and quickly but thoroughly searched the sky before answering. “He’s dead,” he said. “He couldn’t have survived that.”

“And if he did?”

“He would only slow us down” answered Nick. He waved impatiently with his hand. “Come on, we don’t have time!”

Andrew was so shocked that he didn’t even react, just staring at him. Nick grabbed him by the arm and started pulling Andrew with him, slowing down after a few steps when he realized that Andrew couldn’t keep pace with his injured knee. Nick didn’t regard it very much, in fact he pushed him on quite roughly.

After a few moments they reached one of the burnt out buildings and stepped in. Nick pulled him with him for a good ways inside the entrance before letting go of his arm.

Andrew was still too perplexed to do anything other than stare at Nick stunned. That wasn't the Nick he knew! He hadn't added Scarhand to his inner circle, but to just let him lay there without even checking to see if he was dead or needed help.

"What was that?", he mumbled aghast. "What's going on here?"

"Not now", Nick hissed emphasizing his words with a commanding gesture. He looked around nervously and hurried over to one of the glassless windows, crouching down in front if it too look outside. Andrew stood there motionless for a few moments before he got his strength together to follow him. Nick signaled him to crouch down as well with a quick nod, and Andrew followed his lead automatically.

"Nick, what does that mean?", he mumbled again. "Where are we? What kind of strange city is this? You know what this is, right?"

At first he was sure that Nick wouldn't even answer, and endless seconds passed before Nick reluctantly answered "Yes."

"And?", asked Andrew. "Is that everything that you have to say about it?"

"Yes", Nick answered again, but continued with a reluctant tone: "The less you know the better, believe me."

"Very odd", Andrew said. "You don't believe that you'll get by with that."

"Yes, I do", answered Nick. "Don't worry, I'll get you out of here. I won't fail you again." He added quieter and with a bitter

tone.

“Again?” Andrew shook his head. “Are you crazy? Captain Picard couldn’t have pulled that landing off any better.”

“But he shouldn’t have been so easy to con. That shouldn’t have been so easy.”

“What?”

“What? Are you really asking *what?*” Nick shook his head angrily. “That shot should have never been fired. I didn’t plan for those idiots to freak out because of the storm. That’s crazy! If that guy hadn’t shot up the cockpit I would have been able to land the plane in one piece!”

“I thought your maneuvers were quite impressive”, Andrew explained. “Either way we’re still alive. And you aren’t a trained Hijacking-Victim, are you?”

Nick stayed serious. “It just shouldn’t have happened”, he insisted. “Not to me.”

“There was no way you could have expected that those two guys would get there before us”, said Andrew in an equally serious tone. “I don’t understand how they even beat us with that beater of a delivery truck.”

Nick didn’t reply with anything, but he looked at Andrew with a look that told him that *he* knew.

Then it dawned on Andrew: it was his fault. The two wannabe kidnappers wouldn’t have had a trace of a chance to catch up with them if *he* hadn’t given up their head start by driving the Hummer. It was most definitely his fault. He spared any corresponding remark. He heard Nick’s answer in his head already: *In the end it was my decision to let you drive.*

Instead of that he motioned towards outside. “And that?”

Maybe Nick would have answered in that moment, as Andrew felt that he wasn't quite as determined as he was earlier. But this time fate favoured Nick: Just as he was about to start his explanation, the crumpled figure on the cobblestone started to move. Scarhand was alive.

Andrew wanted to jump up, but Nick quickly grabbed his arm and squeezed hard enough that Andrew almost let out a yelp of pain. At the same time he pointed up toward the sky with his other hand.

Andrew raised his eyes and for a moment his breath caught in his throat.

Without him noticing, the storm had cleared just as quickly as it started. But the sky was not empty. Two blinding light points were getting closer with a sickening pace, and at virtually the same moment Andrew heard the muffled sound of a helicopter.

"Well that was fast!", he said surprised and very relieved. He wanted to stand up again, but Nick held him down again, this time with slightly less force. He shook his head.

"What is it?", Andrew asked confused.

"Quiet!", Nick hissed. "And don't move!"

Andrew was so perplexed that he didn't move. But he didn't stay quiet. "But why?", he wondered. "Isn't that the police? I mean didn't they come to ..." *save us*? The last two words didn't leave his mouth when he saw the look on Nick's face. If he had ever seen fear in his eyes, it was at this moment. That up there was not the police or anyone else that had come to *save* them.

With a throbbing heart he looked back at the sky. The two dots of light rapidly approached and moved independently, meaning that there were in fact *two* helicopters, not one machine with

two lights. That was odd. Almost as odd as that the supposed rescuers were here so quickly. Even if it seemed like it had just happened, it had only been about ten minutes since their last contact with the police helicopter, maybe less. Actually it was impossible that they would show up so quickly.

“What’s going on here?”, he asked again.

Nick shook his head again. “Not now.” There was something similar to panic in his voice. Andrew saw as he moved his hand along his sweater towards the pistol he had tucked in his belt, but pulled it back at the last moment.

He looked up again. The two blinding lights were now close enough that it was impossible to look at them without shielding his eyes from them. Something wasn’t right about the sound of the engines. He couldn’t say exactly what it was, but it didn’t sound like a regular sound a helicopter engine made. The weirdly dampened flapping increased from one of the two, and one of the lights turned into the beam of a searchlight that seemed to feel its way around the square, lingering on the wreckage for a moment and moving on from there.

Nick had also noticed the searchlight and painstakingly righted himself. His movements seemed weak and especially uncoordinated. Andrew accepted that he had had less luck than Nick and was wounded pretty badly. It was a borderline miracle that they were even still alive.

The two light circles ultimately separated. The searchlight stayed unmoving on Scarhand, who in the mean time had stood up completely with his left arm in front of his face to shield him from the bright light. The second light went out suddenly and

only a moment later the most special helicopter Andrew had ever seen lowered to the ground.

The machine was gigantic, streamlined and formed aggressively like a shark. It was such a deep black that it seemed to suck the light up instead of reflecting anything. It was also very quiet. The sound that Andrew had heard earlier was the hiss of the strangely shaped rotor blades cutting through the air. The turbine itself seemed to be completely silent.

If the helicopter itself was special, he didn't have any words for the three figures that stepped out of the flying fish of prey moments later.

They were definitely humanoid, but that was pretty much all he could say about them. The three men (if they were men) wore black shiny one-piece suits that blended seamlessly into gloves and massive black helmets. Their faces hid behind the black, mirrored visors and they carried clunky guns with stumpy barrels in their hands.

"Who is that?", Andrew asked. Nick brought him to silence with an almost frightened expression and Andrew turned back to the courtyard with a pounding heart.

Scarhand still stood in the middle of the searchlight that the second helicopter had pointed at him. He had turned around halfway to face the landed helicopter. His left hand was still shielding his eyes while he waved at the men that got out of the helicopter with his right.

"That idiot", whispered Nick.

Andrew didn't even get a chance to ask him what he meant with that.

He *saw* it.

Scarhand took a step towards the men in the eerie black protective suits and waved again. One of the men raised his weapon and pulled the trigger, barely bothering to aim.

4

He was an excellent shot. The blue bolt of light that his weapon spit out pierced Scarhands chest, bursting out the back in a cloud of blood and shredded tissue and spending the rest of its energy ripping an almost meter large hole in the brick wall behind him. Scarhand threw his arms in the air, stumbled back a step, and fell in on himself as if he were hit with a bolt of lightning. Andrew could only suppress his scream due to the paralyzing effect the gruesome scene in front of him had.

And it wasn't over. The man that had shot Scarhand quickly walked over, bent over to examine him. The second helicopter that that was still hovering motionless above the courtyard turned on a second searchlight that swept over the rest of the courtyard and its surrounding buildings like a searching hand.

Nick quickly ducked below the window sill as the circle of light moved in their direction, with Andrew following suit. Not even a second later the spotlight came through the window above their heads and tore the corresponding scene of rubble and hard shadows out of the darkness. Andrew's eyes didn't have enough

time to adjust to the new lighting conditions, but the fragments that he saw were enough to send a wave of goosebumps along his spine. They had taken refuge in a mortuary.

The searchlight moved on and the darkness surrounding them seemed to deepen. Andrew closed his eyes and counted to five in his head before opening his eyes again. At first he only saw Nicks face as a pale blotch, with the contours and depth filling in as his eyes adjusted.

Even so he could see well enough to recognize and comprehend his vigorous gesticulation. Instead of saying anything or asking a question, he carefully stood up and peered out of the window.

More men had gotten out of the helicopter and Andrews heart almost jumped out of his chest when he saw that two or three were moving in their direction.

Nick touched his arm and motioned for him to stay still, as if that were necessary. Andrew nodded and Nick made a motion towards the darkness behind himself. Andrew was anything but thrilled to follow him, but he also hadn't forgotten what had happened to Scarhand. Maybe he won't ever be able to forget it.

At least his eyes had somewhat readjusted to the darkness so that he could at least recognize the outlines of his surroundings. Not that there was much to see. They were in a large, nearly empty room that was littered with debris and rubble. But something was missing.

Andrew didn't know what it was, but it was missing.

Nick motioned forward and sped up, with Andrew not hesitating to keep up. He didn't even think about how Nick kept his orientation. The worst thing he could currently think about

would be to get lost by himself here. He laboured through the pain in his left knee, bit his teeth together and limped up to Nick.

Outside a particularly long muffled rumble rang out. Andrew recoiled and ducked instinctively, which probably saved his life as a second finger of light tore through the window, missing him by a few centimeters. Andrew instinctively threw himself in the opposite direction and spotted a low, especially edgy outline. As fast as he could he limped over to it. The light followed him like the feeling finger of a predator that had smelled the scent of its prey but wasn't entirely sure where it was. It suddenly stopped as it left the window frame, lighting up almost twice as bright at the next window frame. At the last moment Andrew reached the heap of rubble, diving over it and ducking. His already damaged knee thanked him with an angry pain attack for the rough handling. His knee folded away beneath him. He fell, and while he was falling the pale finger of light glided over him where he had been not a split second earlier.

The one and a half years of begrudging Judo training had finally payed off as Andrew not only caught his fall with a roll, but also slid completely behind the cover of the at least meter high pile of rubble. The finger of light wandered on to the next window, but it came back! Holding his breath Andrew pressed himself against the floor, his heart beating faster than before as he saw a second finger of light join the first, searching for his hideout. They had seen him!

For a moment panic almost took him over. It wouldn't have taken much to make him run, even though the beam of light would have definitely found him then. Only by scraping together his strength was he able to suppress the fear and stay laying

down.

At least the flashing the lights gave him a better overview of his surroundings. The room that they had fled to was the size of a small cathedral and seemed to be an old fabrication floor before something catastrophic happened here and in the rest of the city. A large part of the ceiling had fallen in and there were piles of rubble and large pieces of concrete with the bent remnants of rebar sticking out their ends littering the floor. Through all this Andrew could still recognize the large concrete bases that enormous machinery used to sit on. The completely black floor had kept the layer of dried oil, grease, and the tracked in dirt of half a century had survived the fire storm that had ravaged the city without giving up any of its stickiness. As the searchlight crossed the back wall Andrew saw a rusty fire door that probably weighed half a ton, but was still bulged inwards and crushed like a can of cola that someone had punched repeatedly.

Nick sat crouched behind one of the man-sized pieces of ceiling and waved him over hurriedly. Behind him Andrew saw something that reminded him of a heap of burnt spaghetti before he could identify that it was a twisted flight of stairs leading upwards.

Andrew answered Nick's waving with a quick nod and turned back towards the searchlights. With a type of exhausted horror he saw that there were now three of them. Now there was no doubt. Even if he was a hundred percent sure the searchlights hadn't seen him, they knew he was there. And Andrew hadn't forgotten about the three masked figures that were on their way over.

One more reason to hurry. For a moment he tried to find a

pattern in the searchlights, maybe a hole in the net of light that seemed to close in tighter and tighter around him, but here was none. He had to risk it and rely on his luck. He carefully lifted himself upright and carefully shifted some of his weight to his left knee to make sure it could support his full weight instead of giving out at a critical moment. It hurt, but it would work. Andrew wasted another precious half second searching for a hole in the grid of light that he knew didn't exist — and almost screamed. For a split second the light tore a face out of the dark that was peeking out from behind a pile of rubble. But this face was...

No. Andrew pushed the thought from his mind. His nerves were really playing *awful* pranks on him. Which wasn't really a surprise. He breathed deeply one more time, gathered all his courage together and sprinted off.

Every single step was hell. Glowing knives stabbed into his knees and radiated pain all the way up to his hip. Andrew whimpered from the pain. Tears shot into his eyes and worsened his vision even more, and after the first couple of steps he wasn't running any more, just limping in some form of a zig zag in the approximate direction that he thought Nick was in. He couldn't tell if one of the searchlights caught him or how long it took. Eventually a hand reached out towards him and pulled him around with such a hard tug that he almost fell into Nick's arms as he ducked behind the concrete boulder. Whimpering he broke down completely and wrapped his arms around his knee. An army of tiny rats with red hot teeth were biting their way up his leg.

"What's wrong?", asked Nick. Despite all the concern that

bordered on panic he had lowered his voice to a whisper. He bent down over him and stretched out his hands but didn't risk touching him.

"My Knee", Andrew pressed out in between his clenched teeth. He had trouble not sobbing. "Something inside ... Is broken."

"Can you run?", asked Nick.

Andrew carefully rolled around, stood up with his right leg and tried to carefully put weight on his other one. At first it seemed like it would simply break, but then the pain disappeared as if someone had turned it off and only a dull, pulsating pressure remained.

"I think so", he said. *If I'm careful and don't do anything stupid*, he added in his head. *For example walking.*

Nick looked at him with blatant doubt for another moment, but looked up to the still moving searchlights and pointed decidedly at the burnt out stairs. Just the thought of struggling up those stairs with his injured knee sent a cold shiver down his spine, but of course Nick was right. They couldn't stay. It was already a miracle that the men in the black suits hadn't reached them yet.

Nick signaled him to go first. The pale beams of light seemed to follow his movement, following the metal stairs as if to taunt him and show him the lunacy of their plans. In the short while that the searchlights were focused on the stairs, Andrew realized that the stairs were in bad condition but were functional. The railing looked like it would crumble under the lightest load, some of the steps were missing, but it would be doable. The stairs lead to a type of gallery that had mostly broken away. In the split second before the lights moved on, plunging the gallery back

into complete darkness, he was able to see that there were many doors up there that led further into the building.

It was time to go. The stairs groaned audibly under his weight and as Nick stepped on after him he felt the whole thing wobble back and forth for a second as if it were about to crash down to the ground. Andrew suppressed the images of the collapsing stairs and limbs pierced by metal rods that his imagination was torturing him with and limped up the stairs as quickly as he could.

A third of the way from the top he almost fell. He was able to maneuver around the missing steps easier than he had imagined possible, but one of the burnt out grates gave way under his weight and thundered to the ground with an immense clatter. If Andrew had used his good knee on the step he probably would have fallen to the ground with the grate. Luckily he was able to take a quick step to the next step, taking him to safety.

Being quiet now had become useless. Andrew recklessly stormed up the rest of the stairs, reaching the gallery in a few steps, stepping aside to let Nick pass him. A pale beam of light glid past him half a meter away, hovered at the newly mangled metal stairs, and turned off.

Nick stormed up the rest of the stairs after him and veered towards the first door haphazardly. It was locked. Nick swore, rattled the doorknob again as he was turning away, and went to the next one. This time he had more luck. He had to brace himself against the door and push with all his strength, but the warped door finally budged with a screeching that would have been heard on the other side of the courtyard. Nick grimaced as if it were the sound of his joints breaking, increasing the force

on the door to increase the gap so he could squeeze through.

He got ready to push but froze mid movement.

Below them the footsteps had loud. Andrew turned around and froze from terror as he recognized the three figures that had followed them into the building. In the stroboscopic light they appeared at one spot then disappeared and reappeared a ways away in a different pose, which made them seem more uncanny and bizarre than they already were.

Even with the flickering light Andrew could look at them better now than when they were outside on the courtyard. If you ignored the weapons that were as if they had been taken from the prop room of a science-fiction movie, they really didn't look as strange as they did at first. The black uniform that seemed to cover every square centimeter of their body seemed to be poured out of a single piece. From closer Andrew could recognize that they carried flat satchels on their backs that were connected by thin ribbed hoses to their helmets. Their faces were hidden behind mirrored visors. But as eerie as their uniform looked, Andrew could tell that they were nothing special at all. They were simple HAZMAT suits that firemen or the military used.

Other than the Star-Trek weapons of course.

He wanted to turn around, but noticed an almost horrified look from Nick and stayed perfectly still.

The three figures started to slowly spread out, turning around them selves and sweeping left to right. They were looking for them, and Andrew had the distinct feeling that they didn't rely on the light of the searchlights to pierce the darkness.

Nick had turned himself into a pillar of salt until all three were facing the opposite direction, then he flitted through the split in the door with Andrew quickly following. He was barely through the door when Nick pulled him to the side and breathed audibly.

“Movement sensors”, he whispered. “But I don’t thinking they saw us.”

A glaring blue bolt of light stamped a fist-sized hole in the metal door between Nick and Andrew, raced along the hallway they were in and in the same split second smashed in the back wall.

Nick swore, grabbed Andrew at his wrist and stormed off. Behind them a second bolt of light rammed the door completely off its hinges and tore off a part of the ceiling. In the glow of the sparks raining down Andrew saw that they were located in another hallway filled with doors. Nick stormed recklessly towards the nearest one, turned around at the last moment and ran further away, giving no heed to Andrew and his injured knee.

He repeated this seemingly pointless maneuver three or four more times before one of the doors finally got his mercy and he stormed through. The pattern finally made sense to Andrew: Behind the door were stairs that lead upwards and downwards. Nick stormed up the stairs, pausing on the first landing, shoving Andrew along which made him stumble up two, three more steps before clumsily falling on his injured knee.

Red flashes of pain exploded in Andrew’s eyes. As he hastily rolled to the side to take the weight off his knee, Nick also fell to his knee, pulling the pistol out at the same time. Below him

the door blew up in a flickering blue light storm and a figure in a black HAZMAT suit stormed through the door.

Nick and the attacker shot at the same time. The bolt of light missed Nick by only a few hairs and punched a meter sized hole in the brick wall behind him. While pieces of brick and dust hailed down on them the bullet hit the man in his chest and threw him backwards.

Nick didn't wait to see what would happen next. Instead he jumped up and hastily pulled Andrew up with him. They limped forward as fast as his knee could take it.

In the pale light that came in through the violently created hole in the wall, he could see the stairwell a little better. The walls were made out of the obligatory red bricks that were coated in soot, and there were many rectangular openings with torn off cables and melted wire ends sticking out. Even the lights that used to hang from the ceiling were missing, but here and there he was able to spot molten glass that had burned into the ceiling. The feeling that he knew what had happened here snuck up on Andrew, but he didn't let the thought take its full form.

The stairs led further upwards, but Nick stormed through the door that was on the next landing, shoved Andrew to the side (this time much more gently), got back in his combat stance by gripping the pistol with both hands and aiming at the landing below them. While he was waiting for his pursuer to follow them, Andrew took a look around the room. They didn't end up in another endless hallway of doors, this time they were in a special hall that seemed to extend up the whole level. The wall opposite of them used to be a large factory window, but all the glass had disappeared, leaving only an asymmetrical grid of

burnt out metal that let the pale grey light in.

The largest part of the hall was empty; there were some empty metal shelves that didn't hold anything other than a thick layer of burnt paint and dust. A bit away from that there was a construction that seemed to be in a slightly better state: A rectangular platform that stood on four slim pillars. Andrew wasn't sure what it was for, but he didn't really pay much attention to it, instead unsurely looking at Nick, who was still kneeling, focused on a target that probably wouldn't be appearing. Then he turned away and limped across the hall to look out of the window.

It hadn't really gotten that bright outside, but the storm had finally cleared up and in the dark grey twilight that it had left behind he could see a few streets of the burnt city before his line of sight was broken by taller buildings. What he saw didn't make his scary thought from earlier a certainty, but made it impossible to deny.

Without exception each house below was burnt to a crisp. There was not a single window with glass in it, and the few doors that he could find were made of metal. The streets were strewn with rubble and piles of debris and if you looked close enough you could almost see a sort of pattern, a pattern that also continued into the houses. The whole city looked as if it had been moved to the left by just a little bit; not far enough to make the buildings completely collapse, but far enough to disturb the strict geometric lines. He heard Nick's steps behind him but didn't turn around, instead staring down at the scenery of unimaginable devastation spread out below him.

"You should step away from the window.", said Nick. "If they see you from the street ..."

“What happened here?”, whispered Andrew. Even speaking these few words cost him a lot of strength. There was suddenly a bitter, hard lump stuck in his throat that would not go down, no matter how hard he tried to swallow.

“I think you know what happened here.”, Nick answered quietly.

“And?”, Andrew laughed bitterly. “Does it even make sense to run away, or are we already contaminated?”

“No”, replied Nick. “Don’t be scared, they were clean bombs.”

Andrew stared at the scene in front of him for another breath, then abruptly turned around to yell at Nick: “What happened here?”

“Not what you think”, Nick said quietly. “At least not because of the reason you’re thinking of.”

“I want an answer, not a saying from a fortune cookie!” , hissed Andrew. “What happened here? Who did this? And why?”

“I can’t tell you, Andrew. I can’t and I won’t. You weren’t supposed to see any of this. And now we need to go. I scared them a bit, but that won’t last long. They’ll come back.”

Andrew shook his head. “I’m not moving until you tell me what happened here.”

“Then they’ll kill you.”, answered Nick seriously. “And me. Do you really want that?”

The second part of his question was pure extortion and Nick knew it — but it worked. Andrew stubbornly looked at him for another second, but obediently turned away from the window and followed Nick who had crossed toward the other end of the hall in quick steps.

“We need to get out of this building”, warned Nick. “When they realize that they can’t catch us they will probably just blow the whole place.”

Andrew didn’t doubt that the men in the black HAZMAT suits were already preparing for that. Everything else would be pretty dumb. Their behaviour didn’t point towards them having any plans to capture Nick and himself alive, and Nick had just showed them how high the price could be to capture them. Why would they risk losing another man? Nick was right.

Regardless, he slowed his pace as they neared the odd platform and finally completely stopped. Something about this strange construction caught his eye, maybe unsettled him. In the process of looking at it closer there was nothing out of place on it. It was comprised of a 2m×2m platform that was roughly put together from parts from different places. The legs were the same height, but different widths and shapes. A bizarrely deformed sculpture that was reminiscent of the ladder it used to be led up the 2m to the platform.

And all of a sudden it was clear what had made Nick so uncomfortable with the structure that even he, despite his warnings of hurrying up, had stopped to look at. The mysterious structure was not only built with little attention to aesthetic, but it was hastily cobbled together in utterly primitive ways. There were no welds or screws. Any connection was either pinned or somehow wedged together or roughly bound together with wire. The whole thing looked like it was put together by a kid that didn’t have much dexterity or experience, but pieced together with even greater enthusiasm. It didn’t fit in here. Whoever had built this structure was here *after* the catastrophe wiped out all life in

the City. While this thought only *irritated* Andrew, it seemed to more than *disturb* Nick.

Nick stepped back and looked up at the platform, then scrutinized the deformed aluminum ladder as if he were contemplating if it were stable enough to carry his weight. Andrew found the thought that he could climb up there quite unsettling.

Instead of climbing up the ladder, Nick squatted down. Andrew just now saw that the ladder — just like the legs of the giant table — was not directly touching the concrete floor, but was sitting in a dented zinc tub that had a couple centimeters of clear liquid in it. A putrid stench emanated from the tubs that Andrew couldn't quite place. Nick carefully dipped his finger in the liquid and smelled it.

“Gasoline?”, asked Andrew.

Nick shook his head and stood up. “Petroleum”, he answered. “At least something similar.” He stepped back two more steps and craned his neck to look at the bizarre construction with more scrutiny. The concern on his face turned into something different.

“What’s so bad about this?”, Andrew asked straightforward.

Nick tried not to lie. “It shouldn’t be here”, he mumbled.

A sudden blast of wind blew through the glassless window. Andrew turned around and Nick turned around as if he were bitten by a tarantula, but it was too late.

A flying black shark had appeared in front of the window, and in the exact moment that Nick turned around the Pilot turned on the giant spotlights. The light was so unbearably bright that Andrew screamed and threw his arms up in front of his face.

The Helicopter fired. The two glaring bolts of blue light – not those pencil-thin, elegant projectiles that the men in the black suits shot, but arm-thick, roaring monstrosities made of pure destructive power that pulled red-glowing ionised air behind it – missed their target and lit almost the whole wall behind them on fire. It nicked one of the legs of the platform, which was enough to bring the whole construction toppling over. At the same time glowing pieces of metal fell in the petroleum-filled tubs and set them alight with an enormous bang. All of that only took a fraction of a second, but it gave Nick the opportunity to save his life again.

As the platform was crashing onto its side, dissolving into its individual pieces on its way down, Nick pulled Andrew around and pulled him along, running in a zig zag pattern. To Andrew's horror he was heading straight towards the still burning brick wall.

The helicopter swayed lazily towards them. The pilot had turned off the spotlights so that he wouldn't unnecessarily blind himself, but probably had other methods of tracking his target. Even with that the next two shots missed them. The wave of raw energy made most of the metal shelving crumble into piles of glowing scrap, and the rest of the energy was enough to make the wall in front of them fully collapse.

Nick turned sharply, thoughtlessly pulling Andrew with him and changed direction again to head towards the door they came in. Andrew turned his head while he was running. The entire left side of the hall was in flames. The collapse of the wall must have affected the rest of the structural integrity of the building as part of the ceiling was visibly sunken. Andrew thought he

felt the floor beneath them move with the speed of a gigantic ice floe that was being influenced by a new current. The helicopter had moved away from the window a little more and had also simultaneously swung around to get in a better position. But the pilot did not fire.

“Why are they not shooting?”, yelled Andrew.

Nick stormed through the door in front of him and the hail of needle-thin blue blasts of light that flew up at them from below answered his question. Nick fired back without hesitation. This time he missed his target, but the black clad figure at the bottom of the stairs hastily pulled back and Nick stormed up the stairs further, pulling Andrew along with him. One moment later and a whole salvo of blue lightning turned the door that they had just come through into scrap.

They arrived at the next landing but the door was locked, with their pursuers not giving them time to forcefully open the door. A shower of blue lightning hammered holes in the wall of the stairwell, getting closer by the second. Their pursuers were careful not to get in Nick's field of fire, even though they didn't really need to worry about it with their superior weapons. Andrew guessed that there were at least three of them. Sooner or later they would have to hit Nick or him by chance if the entire building didn't collapse on them first.

“They're forcing us to the roof!”, Nick panted.

And he was probably right about that. They only had one more landing between them and the top. If this door were also locked they would have no place to go except the roof, where the helicopter was almost guaranteed to be waiting for them.

The door *was* locked. This time fate was against them. They had no other choice but to run up the last flight of stairs and storm onto the roof. Andrew's worst fears weren't coming true; there was no steel shark hovering above them waiting to hurl its burning breath towards them, and there also weren't any men in black HAZMAT suits.

Nevertheless the roof was a dead end. The building stood by itself, and there was no other way off the roof. On the opposite side a small collection of ventilation shafts and spherical ventilators that through some miracle seemed undamaged. The nearest roof was at least 20 meters away; They were stuck in a trap. If that wasn't enough, orange-red flames licked up the edge of the roof behind them and Andrew was sure he felt a faint but heralding vibration underfoot.

Nick pointed toward the other end of the roof. "Come on! Maybe there is a fire ladder!"

They hurried off. Andrew counted on the door behind them flying open at any second, if the whole bulkhead¹ didn't just explode with men in black rubber suits and frightful weapons.

Neither of those happened. They neared the edge of the roof and Andrew's heart jumped when he saw the end of an outdated iron fire ladder that protruded above the knee-high parapet. He hurried forward and when they were two steps from the ladder a black behemoth with glowing eyes raised from the deep. The sound of sword blades cutting the air and an ice-cold wind whipped their faces.

¹ *There isn't really a good translation for "Dachaufbau" which is a roof access stair enclosure.*

Nick yelled, yanked his pistol into the air and shot the helicopter three times. The bullets glanced off of the armoured glass of the cockpit and screamed away as ricochets. In response the helicopter inaudibly glid back and pivoted ever so slightly. Then *he* fired. The pistol disappeared along with Nick's entire left hand and the majority of his lower arm. On the other end of the courtyard a small building lit up in flames.

5

Nick didn't make a sound. For an elongated second he stood there motionless, then he slowly raised his arm and unbelievably examined the smoking stump that was right above where his elbow used to be. He took a staggering step, turned around to face Andrew and tipped over the edge without a sound.

Andrew stood there, paralyzed. He felt ... nothing. No horror, no shock, not even pain or fear. He had seen what had happened, and a part of him made it mercilessly clear that Nick was dead — but somehow this realization didn't get through to his consciousness. Nick was dead and now he would die too; But all of that didn't seem to matter anymore, as if it were something that were happening to someone else, someone who's fate he could follow from afar.

Slowly he raised his head and looked at the helicopter. The enormous machine had gotten closer again and the nose that reminded him of a shark's mouth pivoted in the same moment that the pilot made one final adjustment to force him into the perfect position.

Andrew was close enough to the helicopter now that he could discern the pilots in the dimly lit cockpit. He could see the pilot stretching out his hand and braced himself for the terrible, but surely short pain that the blue lightning would hit him with. But in that moment something very strange happened: The second man in the cockpit made a quick movement to hold back the other pilot with one hand and pointed at Andrew with the other. These two also wore HAZMAT suits with mirrored visors, but Andrew believed he could feel their piercing gaze.

Suddenly the Helicopter silently tipped to the side and disappeared.

One second later two things happened at the same time: The door of the bulkhead flew off its hinges with a loud bang and the paralyzation finally wore off. With an immense pang he grasped what had just happened. That they had just killed Nick in front of him. The pain attacked him without warning and clawed itself to the depths of his soul. But he also saw three mummified figures storm through the broken door, running in his direction, and at that moment his survival instinct proved to be stronger than anger and sorrow. He turned on his heel and ran away as fast as he could.

There weren't very many places to hide. A good fourth of the roof was already bordered with flames. Andrew couldn't tell if the ground below his feet was still vibrating, but he could feel it getting hot. The whole building was going to be engulfed in flames, and that would happen in only a few minutes.

A blue bolt of lightning raced past him, vapourizing part of the parapet. Andrew veered left towards the collection of ventilation shafts, a more than pathetic cover — strictly speaking it wasn't

cover at all —, but it was all he had. At least it would make it harder for his pursuers to hit him, and maybe there was another fire ladder over there that he could escape down.

Two more blue lightning bolts impacted the ground precisely one meter away from him on each side, and Andrew's careful ease was replaced with dull rage. Maybe the miracle that he attributed his survival to was more sinister than he had thought. Maybe they just wanted to play with their prey as revenge for the death of their colleague.

In spite of this he ran faster, limping in a zig zag between the ventilation shafts and made a grimace when one of the metal pipes was hit, bursting into thousands of tiny bits of molten metal that rained down on him. Just a moment later he reached the parapet and almost yelled out of disappointment. There was a second fire ladder, but it only had three rungs that ended in the middle of nothing.

Desperately Andrew looked around for any other escape route. There wasn't one. The three men were maybe twenty steps away from him and were slowly closing in. They hadn't just stopped shooting, they had also lowered their weapons; one of them had even hung his rifle over his shoulder. They were probably just panning on tossing him over the edge or break his legs so he couldn't move and then let him burn alive, Andrew thought.

Something rattled. Barely a meter away from him one of the covers on the side of a ventilation shaft fell to the ground and a hand appeared in the square opening, frantically waving at him.

Andrew didn't think any further of it — there wasn't any time —, he acted. With a single step he was at the hatch and squeezed his way through. Something moved in front of him

in the darkness and he heard a series of rumbling sounds that perpetuated as [decreasing in volume] echoes in the deep. But he also heard other sounds: Stomping, heavy steps that were rapidly approaching.

He shoved the last doubts aside and crawled after the shadow that had lured him into the shaft. It was almost pitch black in there so he could only hear the scurrying in front of him; but whoever it was was moving with impressive speed and agility. Even without his injured knee Andrew wouldn't have had a chance to keep up.

Behind him the sound of squealing metal that was being torn apart with brutal strength filled the shaft. Andrew didn't stop, instead trying to go faster. He turned his head to look back and saw that one of the men had torn the end of the shaft apart and was staring in at him. This was irrevocably the end. The shaft was too small for them to follow him in their big HAZMAT suits, but it also made it impossible for them to miss him. He just had to raise his weapon and aim in his approximate direction and he *couldn't* miss.

But he didn't do it this time either. He just stood there and stared at Andrew through his mirrored visor.

Andrew turned back around. His leader had suddenly disappeared, and before he even had a chance to be startled, the same went for the floor beneath his hands. Andrew gasped from the surprise and tried grabbing at anything within reach, but it was too late. He tipped forward and slid head first into the depths.

Thank god the shaft didn't end in a sharp corner, and the frantic sleigh ride didn't last to long either. Andrew carried out an involuntary roller-coaster and impacted six or seven meters

further down; with a thud that sounded like the entire building around him wanted to collapse, but without injuring itself. He laid there motionless for a moment, then he righted himself and promptly hit his head on the low ceiling of the air shaft.

A quiet laugh rang out. Andrew blinked, carefully righting himself a second time and turning his head in the direction from which he heard the voice. It was almost completely dark in here so that he only saw a shadow, but the voice had sounded fairly high; and very young.

“Did you hurt yourself?”

“Not really”, answered Andrew. “Who are you?”

“Later.” The shadow moved around with a rustle. “Come on. We need to get out.”

His first guess must have been correct. The voice of a child, possibly a teenager that was significantly younger than him.

Either way, the voice was that of someone that was right. They needed to get out of here, as soon as possible. The air smelled burnt and it was noticeably warmer here than it should be. The building was on fire. And there were still the pursuers. Even if they hadn't followed him in here they could easily shoot the buildings to pieces with their helicopter whenever they wanted.

“Watch out!”, the voice of his hero rang out in front of him. “It goes down again.”

The warning didn't make it any better. He wasn't surprised this time, but the sliding didn't get any less uncomfortable and it lasted significantly longer than the first. The impact was correspondingly harder and the following rattling and droning was probably audible in the whole building.

Andrew hastily righted himself and saw something that *really* scared him: The darkness had given way do a dusky red light that was coming from the bottom end of the shaft. It had gotten warmer.

“The building’s on fire”, he said. “Are we gonna get through?”

“Its there or not at all”, his hero answered. “ And if we wait longer, definitely not. Can you keep going?”

Andrew nodded. He still couldn’t identify his counterpart, only that he seemed to be very slender and very pale. Without waiting for another answer the figure turned around and crawled away with astounding agility. The shaft led another fifteen or twenty meters straight ahead and went down at an angle again. As Andrew stopped to look into the depths, his breath caught in his throat.

Below them roared hell. A piece of the side wall had broken away and red fire light and flames licked into the shaft. Andrew couldn’t tell if the metal down there was really glowing red or if the fire was just reflecting off the side of the shaft. The heat touched his face like a warm uncomfortably dry hand, and the smell of burning was so strong that he had trouble breathing.

“Come on!”

Andrew noticed way too late that the light would have also given him a great chance to look at his hero more closely. They only hesitated for a split second before pushing off the edge towards the flames with their hands protecting their face. Andrew only got a fleeting glimpse of brown tattered cloth pants, bare feet and flowing long hair of unidentifiably colored hair. He collected all of the courage together that he had and pushed off as well.

It was only a couple seconds long, but it was hell. Andrew closed his eyes and instinctively held his breath, only following the example of his hero to put his hands in front of his face at the very last moment.

He felt like he was sliding across a glowing stove. It was definitely not just the reflection of the flames that he had seen earlier. Even with his hands in front of his face he believed to feel the fire licking the skin off his face; and the only reason he didn't scream was because he was scared that the burning air would singe his lungs.

It was finally over. He crashed into — this time with ferocious force —, slid another five or six meters and almost instinctively felt the danger. Without exactly knowing why, he stretched his arms out as far as they went and held on to the first thing that he could grab. A fraction of a second later his legs were dangling freely over an abyss that could have been one or one hundred meters deep.

A brutal jolt went through his wrists and perpetuated as a wave of smaller continually repeating explosions of pain all the way to his shoulders. Andrew wheezed, but continued to hold on tightly and floundered uselessly with his legs as if he were treading water.

“Jump!”, a voice urged from below.

“Let go! It's not that far!”

Andrew was in such a panic that he didn't even dare to look down, but he didn't have any other choice than to listen to the advice of his hero. His strength wasn't enough for him to hold on any longer. He jumped.

Not deep in this case meant a jump from a good four or five meters. He bounced off the ground and instinctively rolled off his shoulder. He didn't pull it off anywhere close to as well as he had hoped, and his plunge was abruptly stopped by something equally hard and edgy. He lay there a moment, waiting hopelessly for the pounding in his knee to stop, and saw a narrow face framed with straggly hair over him when he opened his eyes.

"Everything okay?"

"No", moaned Andrew. "But I'm still alive. Thanks."

Carefully he lifted himself up and looked around. It was almost grotesque: they were back in the hall where his and Jakes escape had started. Directly above him — at least five or six meters above him! — a burst air duct of burnt-out metal ran along the ceiling. *Not far?* It was a miracle that his jump from that height didn't break all the bones in his body!

Andrew experienced a second miracle when he tried standing up. It worked. His leg hurt and he couldn't exactly stand, instead forced to an absurdly slanted posture like an old seaman that had leaned against the wind that had only come from one his whole life. Be he could stand, and if he didn't over do it he could probably also run.

For the first time he could actually look at his hero more closely. He was wrong at at least one thing: it was not a hero, but rather a *heroine*. A dark-haired girl that was roughly his age, but a good head shorter than him and would have definitely been pretty if she weighed twenty more kilos; or maybe thirty. Her sunken cheeks, the deep eyes and her bony hands destroyed this impression thoroughly. The girl was half starved, and the

dirty clothing that seemed to be made mostly of lumps only emphasized this. Nevertheless he swallowed all the questions that lay on the tip of his tongue and forced himself to an unsuccessful smile.

“My name is Andrew”, he said. “I’d guess you saved my life. Thanks.”

“Katt”, the girl said.

“Katt?” Andrew blinked confused.

“My name”, she explained. “My name is Katt. And if you want to live a little longer, we should disappear from here.”

An unusual name, thought Andrew, but Katt was also an pretty unusual girl. And either way she was right, they needed to get out of here. The building above them was still on fire and it had gotten significantly warmer down here. After the firestorm that had been hot enough to melt the glass, Andrew couldn’t imaging that there was anything left to burn here. But apparently the flames found enough fuel to burn. Maybe it was because of the strange weapons that the shark had started the fire with.

He nodded. Katt was about to turn around and march on, but at that moment a glaringly bright light lit up that plunged the entire hall in an almost painful brightness. Andrew protectively tore his hands in front of his face, and the girl with the unusual name also pressed her eyes shut and instinctively pulled her head in.

This time it wasn’t just a single spotlight that was feeling in through the window. All of the windows and also the open door were filled with blazing white light that was so bright that the half dozen black mantled figures that came storming to the building were as ice cubes under a heat lamp.

Katt shrieked and whirled around, with Andrew instinctively following her moves. If there were anyone who knew how to get out of here it would be the girl.

They ran as fast as they could to the other end of the hall and then Katt had suddenly disappeared. Andrew stumbled on for a few more steps and would have almost fallen again; right in front of him where he expected there to be more floor was a steeply descending set of stairs. Katt was now only a blurry shadow somewhere at its lower end.

Andrew quickly grabbed for the bent railing and used his momentum to skip the first couple of steps as he stormed downwards. Before he sank below ground level he looked back at the entrance. At that very moment one by one his sinister pursuers rushed through the door into the hall. None of them had their weapons in their hands, but they didn't really need to. In spite of their plump looking exterior they moved with such speed that Andrew probably couldn't have kept up with them if he were well rested and unharmed — and he was neither of those.

Katt had stopped at the lower end of the stairs and waited for him. In the looming twilight her face had turned back into a pale blotch with no sharp edges, but her nervousness was blatantly obvious. She fidgeted impatiently with her hands and whipped around as soon as he was next to her.

Andrew was completely out of breath, but Katt didn't make any effort to slow her tempo, instead hurrying along a few steps before stopping to look back at him impatiently. Even Andrew hastily looked over his shoulder a couple times, ready for men in black protective suits with frightful weapons to appear behind them, but curiously it didn't happen. Their pursuers had had

plenty of time to catch up with them.

“Don’t be scared”, said Katt suddenly. She had interpreted his looks correctly. “They never come down here.”

“Really?”, Andrew asked out of breath. “Then why are we running?”

“Because we shouldn’t be here either”, Katt answered in a slightly surprised tone; as if he had asked the dumbest question imaginable. “It’s already way too late. Hurry up.”

Andrew tried, but his knee was impairing him so much that his tempo was only getting slower and slower. His gaunt leader reacted with visible impatience, but kept any comments to herself. Apparently she had noticed that he *couldn’t* go faster.

While he was fruitlessly attempting to keep up with his puzzling hero, he looked around for the first time; with about the same level of success. It was so dark that he could only recognize Katt as blurry silhouette even though she was only three steps ahead of him. And even if there were better lighting, there wouldn’t have been much to see — they were in a bare hallway made of naked concrete. Rusty pipes ran along the top of the wall and at regular intervals he saw open flaps in the walls with wires sticking out of them. However there was one difference between this tunnel and the stairwell up there: The burst lamps that hung from the ceiling at regular intervals weren’t melted, and the walls were blackened but not burnt to a crisp. The heat must not have been as devastating down here.

“I haven’t properly thanked you yet”, he said after a while.

“Yeah, you did”, answered Katt.

“Then I guess I’ll do it again”, insisted Andrew. “Why did you do it?”

Katt turned her head and looked back at him. Andrew could recognize her face even less than before, but he believed he could actually feel her confusion. She answered with a bit of hesitation at first and with the almost flippant tone in which you answer a known to be dumb answer to a dumb question. “I felt like it.”

“You put yourself in mortal danger.” Andrew stayed serious.

“Barely”, Katt answered. “They’ve chased me lots of times before, but haven’t ever caught me. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here to save your neck.” Her voice got quieter. “They killed your friend.”

“Yes”, said Andrew. Suddenly he had trouble keeping back his tears. Of course he hadn’t forgotten Nick, but Katt’s words had freed his pain from its prison where his subconscious had locked it up. In a fraction of a second and against his will the whole scene played out again in his head, but with gruesome precision that didn’t spare him even the smallest detail. He would never be able to forget the look in Nick’s eyes when he turned around and plummeted into the depths.

“Yes”, he said again. “But before he also got one of them.”

Katt abruptly stopped causing Andrew to run in to her, making them both stumble. With a start she turned around to him and stared at him.

“What?”

“He shot one of them.”, Andrew repeated. “Or at least severely injured. And he would have gotten more of them if they had given him a fair chance. Nick was ...”, he had to swallow to suppress the tears, “... a good man.”

Andrew surprised himself with how coldly he talked about the death of a human. And it wasn’t lightly said. He *wished* in

that moment that Nick could have shot more of the men in the black protective gear; if possible all of them. Even to them the life of a human wasn't worth anything. They had murdered Nick in cold blood and would have shot him in the back if they had had the chance. They had tried to often enough.

"You aren't being serious", said Katt. "You're just saying that to impress me."

"What? That he shot one of them?" Andrew shook his head. "I'm just sorry it wasn't more."

Katt looked at him with a piercing gaze. She tried to read his face to find out if he were lying, but seemed to arrive at a conclusion. Ultimately she stepped back, shaking her head. "If that's true I'm not surprised that they're so mad."

"Who are those people anyway?", asked Andrew. "You seem to know them pretty well."

This time Katt's face didn't hide her doubts that he still had all his wits about him. "You are a really odd guy, Andrew.", she said. "Where are you from?"

"From ... far away." Andrew wasn't sure himself why, but he felt like it wouldn't have been a good idea to reveal the whole truth quite yet.

"That's what I thought", Katt replied with a grin. "But if you want to pull my leg, you really have to think of something better." And with that she abruptly turned around, storming off with such large steps that Andrew fell behind and lost sight of her within moments.

6

Being left alone in the darkness in the middle of an almost completely destroyed foreign city that had given him neither refuge nor protection from the kidnapping and the plane crash, instead relentlessly chasing him from one second to the next, was almost more than Andrew could handle. Almost immediately panic bubbled to the top. It wasn't completely dark down here, but he could still only see two to three steps ahead of himself. If he lost the girl, he probably wouldn't have a chance at finding his way back.

Katt understood him though. After ten or fifteen careful steps through the darkness she stood there, waiting for him. Andrew was counting on her asking him another question, but instead she just waved at him and went on in front of him. This time she didn't go outside his field of view. They took maybe fifty or sixty more steps when the hallway ended in front of a massive concrete wall. Andrew only saw the half-meter height hole that was in it when they were a few steps away.

"Hurry!" Katt motioned with a reluctant gesture at the hole

in the wall. “It isn’t that far.”

Andrew looked at her quizzically for a moment, then got down on his hands and knees and crawled ahead. The hole in the wall turned out to be the entrance to a tunnel of the same size that seemed to go through crumbly earth and partially also through solid rock. Andrew was only guessing as there was no light at all in the tunnel, making him crawl through complete darkness. He couldn’t tell how long the tunnel was; for his subjective perception it felt like there was no end. Andrew hadn’t ever suffered from claustrophobia, but in this narrow hole his imagination started to play tricks on him. What if the passageway just ended in the middle of nowhere or just started getting so small that Katt would fit through, but not him? Andrew didn’t believe he had enough strength to crawl all the way back backwards. And what if it suddenly collapsed, squishing him under tonnes of earth and rock or – even worse – buried him alive until he agonisingly died of thirst three or four days later?

Just when his imagination was about to go on to the next step and start giving him frightening hallucinations it got brighter in front of him – even if he wouldn’t have noticed the pale grey shimmer in normal circumstances. He instinctively tried to crawl faster.

“It gets a little narrow up there”, Katt called after him.

Andrew rolled his eyes and with a silent sigh suppressed any comment that came to mind. If had had the room for it he would have wiped the sweat from his brow. Instead he use the last bit of strength that he had to think about what Katt meant with a *little narrow*.

But it *did* get narrow. The ceiling lowered so far that Andrew couldn't belly crawl like he was before. He had to pull himself along the ground with his head turned sideways and the hard rock still scraped across his face and back. The claustrophobia hit with full strength. His heart started racing and he trembled all over, drenched in sweat. The only reason he didn't completely panic was because he somehow managed to focus his fear on what would happen if he *stopped*.

All in all he only had to pull himself along for about five meters that he covered as if it were the longest five meters in his life. Then his hands suddenly reached into emptiness. Andrew lost his grip, impacting the hard rock one and a half meters lower than the hole. That wasn't the first time today that he saw red stars when his forehead hit the ground. The pain was so bad that he felt sick.

In spite of that the first thing he felt was immense relief. He couldn't remember to have been as scared as he was for the last few minutes ever before in his life; not even earlier when he and Nick were running from the blue lightning bolts. Andrew just lay there breathing deeply, enjoying the indescribably feeling of being able to suck in the foul air into his lungs without feeling like he was in a vice that seemed to be slowly tightening at every breath. His head was incredibly sore (other than his knee) and the nausea that churned his stomach didn't want to die down, but that didn't matter.

Katt gracefully lowered herself from the hole and turned him on his back. She was incredibly strong if you considered that she weighed at most eighty pounds and was basically only skin and bones.

“That wasn’t too bad”, she said. “Honestly I wasn’t sure if you ...”

She broke off when she saw his face. Andrew saw her dark, slightly angled eyes widen. Did he look that bad?

Yes, as her next words confirmed. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing”, Andrew forced through clenched teeth, which probably made him not only look pathetic, but also stoked the nausea in his stomach. He breathed deeply and forcibly slow and suddenly had immense trouble to suppress the urge to vomit.

Even so he only let another second pass before he pressed his elbows into the hard rock and slowly raised himself. The room spun around him and the pulsating pain behind his forehead got worse, not better. He shakily raised his left hand and felt his face. At least he wasn’t bleeding from his ears, which at least meant he hadn’t broken his skull.

“Can you stand?”, asked Katt.

Considering the latently present nausea as a precaution he refrained from giving an answer and instead tried to fulfill Katts request. He was successful, but in addition he got so dizzy that he had to quickly stretch out his hand to grab a hold of Katt’s shoulder. But he could stand.

Katt said something, but he suddenly had trouble making sense of the tone of her voice. Everything spun around him and the face of the girl started to flow together. He felt his knees weaken. The nausea got worse ...

...and disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared. The unbearable thumping in his skull turned into a still bad, but bearable throb, and his vision also cleared. With a relieved sigh he raised his head and looked at Katt. “What did you say?”

“Nothing”, the girl answered. He was pretty sure that was a lie, but Andrew let it go and looked around curiously. There wasn’t much to see here either since the light was possibly worse than in the basement hallway that they left the burning building from. The few meters that he could see were enough for him to identify that they were in an old sewer pipe, but a sewer with not a single drop of water.

Andrew looked back at the hole that they had crawled through. He couldn’t believe that they had actually squeezed through that hole. At least they had definitely lost their strange pursuers.

“Should we go on?”, he suggested.

Katt looked at him for another moment with the same look on her face, then nodded silently and turned to walk away.

She was moving quickly, but not at quite the murderous tempo that they were going earlier, which Andrew was thankful for. Both his headache and nausea had lowered to a bearable level and even his bruised knee seemed to have realized that it couldn’t stop him, seemingly satisfied to bother him as much as an intense muscle ache. But in the last few hours he had endured more than the previous *years*, and he felt how underneath all the pain and bigger wounds a different, more dangerous type of exhaustion grew, something that he didn’t have a counter for. His body was already running on reserves. If those ran out he wouldn’t have anything to fall back on. The adrenaline and pent-up tension were probably the only things keeping him on his feet. Where ever Katt wanted to bring him, it would be better if they reached their goal *quickly*.

Katt was moving slightly slower through the darkness in front of him now, but still with the surety of a sleepwalker that Andrew

not only couldn't quite understand but also seemed eerie to him. You could almost think that she could see in the dark. But she had probably come this way often enough that she could have found her way through blindfolded.

"Where are we going?", he asked after a while.

"To the nearest safe place", answered Katt. "It isn't far away."

Safe place, thought Andrew. *Aha. Whatever that could be.* He remained silent.

Katt's notion of *not far away* must have been inherently different than his, as he had feared, because they marched on through the dry sewer for at least another fifteen minutes. Andrew didn't ask any further questions — the answers probably would have depressed him even more —, instead opting to use the last bit of strength he had after the significant effort of putting one foot in front of the other on observing the walls as carefully as he could. Other than that there hadn't been a drop of water down here for a long time the sewer was completely normal. Every once in a while a branch that was sometimes closed off with a rusted bars merged into the one they were walking in. The concrete was crusted with the dirt of centuries, but not burnt. The fire hadn't reached down here.

But there was something else. Andrew noticed it earlier when he walked into the hall with Nick, and even though he couldn't put the feeling into words, it had always been there. Something was ... missing.

And then he realized what it was.

All around him there was only stone and dead metal. In a place like this there should have been mildew, mold and rot, bugs and spiderwebs, at least *something*. But there wasn't any of that.

The sewer — and the entire city far above their heads — was completely dead. There wasn't a single trace of life here. The thought was so unearthly that it sent a shiver down his spine. And it awakened a gnawing fear in him. He had believed Nick (*They were clean bombs*), but if that were true, then life should have returned to this place long ago. Maybe Nick was mistaken or had intentionally not told him the truth so that he wouldn't be alarmed. Something hadn't just burnt this city, but rather had downright sterilized it, and maybe that something was still here. Katt hadn't really explained why she was in such a hurry. And maybe the men from the black helicopters didn't just wear their HAZMAT suits because they were so flattering.

Andrew stopped these thoughts with tremendous effort. It was as it was, period. He wasn't going to win anything by making himself go crazy.

Finally Katt stood still. In front of them there wasn't a ladder or stairs that lead out of the canals, but instead another, yet noticeably larger, hole that someone had forcefully broken out of the wall.

“Oh no, not again!”, moaned Andrew.

“This time it won't be as difficult”, Katt promised. “Only a few more steps. Do you think you can make it?”

Andrew fruitlessly listened for a satirical or even malicious undertone in her voice. He found none of the sort, her concern for him was real.

Even so he considered her with an insulted look and marched (well: limped) past her with a proudly raised head. “Of course”, he growled. “I'm not ...” He swallowed the rest of the sentence as a precaution. He had almost said *I'm not a girl*. But that

wouldn't have been especially smart. After all this *girl* hadn't only saved his life, but so far had also shown herself to be quite a bit tougher than him. But you probably had to be that to survive in an environment like this longer than a few hours.

He let Katt past him, ducked into the opening in the wall and saw that she was right: It wasn't far, but it also lead in a direction that he didn't expect. Behind the whole in the wall there was a five meter tall chamber with a collapsed ceiling. A downright risky ladder led to the jagged hole in the ceiling where Andrew saw something that he hadn't even hoped to see again: light.

It wasn't daylight. It wasn't even especially bright, but rather a dull grey glimmer that he would have labeled as darkness a few hours ago. But now the grey twilight coaxed a half-volume cry of joy. He grabbed the ladder and started to hastily climb up it without a second thought about the hair-raising construction and its ability to carry his weight. After a few moments he was at the end of the ladder and pulled himself through the jagged opening in the at least fifty centimeter thick ceiling.

What he saw hit him like a ton of bricks. Andrew froze mid-movement. He didn't even register that Katt climbed up the ladder behind him and was forced to do some complicated maneuvers to get out of the hole due to Andrew's sudden stop.

"You shouldn't be exerting your self so much", she said. "That really isn't ...". She stopped in the middle of the word. "Andrew? Everything okay?"

Andrew didn't really hear the question. He was still standing there as if paralyzed, one foot on the top rung of the improvised ladder, the other on the floor, and tried to process what he saw in front of him.

The ceiling of the chamber was also the floor of such a gigantic hall that its ceiling had to be regularly supported by square concrete pillars. The light that he saw was coming in through a rectangular opening behind which a gently curving concrete ramp led upwards. Even here everything was littered with rubble and debris. To the left of them there was an entire row of ancient cars. The hall was nothing other than your regular underground garage like he had seen dozens of times before.

And still this sight shook him more than anything he had seen so far. Maybe it was because it was so mundane. So *normal*.

So far he hadn't seen anything in this city other than burnt-out buildings in some state of destruction and entirely empty. But now he saw something that belonged to the *inhabitants* of this burnt city. Something that they built and used. The rusty cars that were covered in pieces of the ceiling and dust made this extensive hall into something that the buildings above their head had successfully hidden: a grave.

"Andrew?", asked Katt again. "Is everything okay?"

Andrew didn't answer this time either, but he overcame his paralyzation enough to finally step fully away from the ladder. His heart was pounding faster and he was getting dizzy, but he attributed it to the shock that the sudden sight had caused him. He stood there for another moment, then he slowly turned around and headed towards the vehicles.

Katt held him back by his arm and with the other one motioned in the opposite direction. "This way."

"Just one moment." Andrew tried to free himself with little strength and after a moment he succeeded, but only because Katt let him.

Slowly, with ever increasing heartbeat, he got closer to the first vehicle. It was wrecked and buried under such a thick and hard layer of dust that he couldn't have even guessed the original colour. But Andrew recognized the model, even if he wasn't a specialist for old cars. It was at least thirty or forty years old and the same went for the rest of the cars here.

"Good god, what ... what happened here?," he mumbled.

"Nobody knows.," said Katt. She followed him, but kept a greater distance than was necessary. "That has always been here. Nobody knows what they're good for." She was silent for a moment then added in a strangely different tone. "Do you know?"

Andrew didn't answer. He slowly approached the car and stretched his hand out toward the door handle. He didn't expect to be able to open the door; he was sure that it was warped or had rusted in place over time. But it swung open very easily and with hardly a sound, providing him with a look at the inside, which was somehow even more terrifying than the outside. Even here there was age-old dust and grime, but this time Andrew saw it immediately: The same thing that applied to the rest of the city was also true here. It was completely empty. The only thing Andrew saw was the naked metal parts of the chassis and the steel tube frame that at one point made up the seats. Everything that wasn't made out of resistant metal had disappeared, including the steering wheel.

Andrew took a step back and took a more critical look at the outside of the vehicle. The tires were also gone, just like the rubber seals around the windows. And something told Andrew that they hadn't *burned* away. He went to the next car, examined

it as well and arrived at the same worrying conclusion. Everything that wasn't made of glass or metal had disappeared. Even though he knew what he would find he examined three other vehicles. It was the same with all of them. Without exception the cars were ancient and seemed to have turned into iron skeletons.

"Is it going to take you very long?", asked Katt. "Whatever you're doing there." She had stopped ten or twelve steps away and was looking at him with suspicion, as if she were scared to get near him. But after a moment she lifted her arm and pointed in the same direction as before. "We need to hurry."

Andrew looked behind him and studied a narrow door that seemed to lead in a neighboring room. He had automatically assumed that they would leave the parking garage through the welcoming open ramp.

"Why don't we go that way?", he asked.

Katt stared at him. "You really have no idea, huh?" Her voice still seemed somewhat unbelieving, even though Andrew could tell that she was doubting her own words.

"No", he said. "Why don't you explain it to me?"

Katt sighed and shook her head, turning towards the ramp when her eyes widened. Andrew hurriedly turned in the same direction — and was incredibly shocked.

The four figures that were marching down the ramp were barely visible as slightly darker shadows in front of a barely lighter background, but Andrew still immediately knew with whom they were dealing. *How the hell had they found them down here?*

"Didn't you say they never come down here?", he asked.

“They haven’t ever done that before”, answered Katt. Then she yelled: “Run!”

She sprinted off and Andrew realized after her her first couple of steps how much he had underestimated her. Katt seemed to become completely invisible in the weak light of the parking garage and was not only moving silently, but also as quickly as a fleeing animal of prey.

One of the men fired at her. The light blue bolt of light missed her by multiple meters and caused a jet of fire to explode out of the wall. Katt started running in a zig zag and seemed to move in an even more impossible way. The next shot missed her by even more, but now the others started firing at her as well, and Andrew had already seen what good shots they were. A true storm of blazing blue light bolts was raining down on the fleeing girl. The wall that she was headed towards was already ablaze and at a dozen places there were sputtering volcanoes in the ground, spewing flames and molten concrete. Sooner or later they *had* to hit her, no matter how fast she was moving.

Andrew arrived at a frantic resolution. He didn’t deliberately do it — there wasn’t enough time to think about it, and if there were enough time he definitely wouldn’t have done it —, but he completely instinctively felt that it was the right thing to do. Instead of running behind Katt in a straight line, he swung a little to the left and ran as fast as his throbbing knee allowed him to. And directly in the line of fire of their pursuers. Three, four, five blindingly bright bolts of light hissed through the air in front of him and then the firing stopped as quickly as it started.

Andrew swung to the right, mobilized every last bit of strength he had, and ran after Katt. Just half a dozen steps and she was

at the door and stormed through; however only to stop and hectically wave in Andrews direction.

“Run!”, she yelled. “They’re coming!”

Andrew would have preferred to laugh. Did she think he was blind or who did she think he was running from? Nevertheless eh tried running faster, but he just couldn’t. It was quite the opposite, he was getting slower.

He immediately recognized a new danger. Even if the men wouldn’t shoot at him, they could run faster than him. If his strength didn’t last they would catch up to him before he even got to the door.

Suddenly the bright blue light flared up behind him again. Andrew gritted his teeth in anticipation of being hit, but their bullets of light and heat weren’t even pointed in his direction. Whatever those men were shooting at — it was definitely not him. Andrew stormed on, tumbled through the door with his last bit of strength and lowered himself against the side wall, breathing heavily. Only then did he turn around and look towards the men.

Their pursuers were still firing, even more frantically and faster than before. But they still weren’t shooting in their direction, instead concentrating their fire on the exit ramp behind the open gate! Bolt after bolt of lightning hit the burnt concrete and all over there were flames and sparks, but they seemed to go out astoundingly fast.

But was that even concrete that they were shooting at? Andrew wasn’t sure. The light was too poor to identify details, and the hectically flashing firelight didn’t make it any easier — but it seemed like the entire ramp was covered in lumbering movement and that the entire breadth was sliding downwards.

Or maybe something was crawling along it ...

“Hopefully they’ll eat them up”, Katt hissed. She looked at him. “Can you still go?”

Andrew nodded, but the movement was more automatic and not because he was convinced of it. His head was hurting more and more and even the nausea was gradually returning. His knee throbbed.

“Then come on. I don’t think they’ll be able to hold them up for long.”

Andrew silently nodded again, but let another few seconds pass as he looked at the horrifying scene in the parking garage before he braced himself off the wall and tediously dragged his feet after Katt. The men had gotten closer together and were concentrating their fire on the glittering darkness that was silently crawling down the ramp. But all though their weapons seemed to contain the fire of hell, the teeming masses had gotten visibly closer. Andrew thought he could see that they were trying to cut a hole in the ceiling, but their fires were going out almost faster than they could start them.

“Thank you”, said Katt after she had been silently running in front of him for a while, looking back over her shoulder every once in a while to make sure Andrew was still keeping up — a feat that was getting harder to pull off with every passing step. He was almost at the point of complete exhaustion.

“What for?”, he asked, short of breath.

“You saved my life”, answered Katt. Andrew felt how hard it was for her to say that. She obviously wasn’t one of those people that were used to thanking people for things. After a moment

she continued anyway: “That was the most brave thing I’ve ever witnessed. Why did you do it?”

“Because I felt like it”, responded Andrew with the same tone and the same words that she had answered his question with earlier. “Either way it wasn’t as brave as you might think.”

“Why?”

“They had had their chance to shoot at me twice before but didn’t take it. I was just hoping that it would work a third time.”

Katt looked at him in disbelief. “And if you had been wrong?”

Andrew raised his shoulders. “Then I would have been the first to notice.” He heard how dumb it sounded – but what was he supposed to say? That he didn’t think about it at all and just *did* it? Or that he had put his life on the line not only to protect the lady of his heart, but also because without her he wouldn’t have a chance to get out of here anyway? Both were the truth, but to him it seemed unwise to admit those out loud.

In addition he had become very nauseous and in the meantime his headache had gotten so bad that his vision was starting to be impaired.

Behind them an immense roar and crashing rang out. The hallway swayed so much that they were thrown against the walls and Andrew helplessly slid down them. The reflection of an enormous glaringly blue lightning bolt flew over their heads and seemed to burn their grotesquely distorted shadows into the concrete floor. There was a sound as if the whole building was crashing in on them and a second, even more glaring blue bolt lit up the hallway and Andrew went unconscious.

7

It couldn't have been long, maybe a few moments and at most a couple minutes. He woke up with the same unpleasant feeling that he had gone under with — nausea and a terrible headache —, but something else had been added to the mix: He was shivering from the cold. He didn't have to raise his hand to his head to verify that he had a fever. He opened his eyes and realized with quiet surprise that they weren't in the hallway where he had gone unconscious. This corridor was much wider and there seemed to be a marble floor hidden under the layers of dust on which he was laying. Moaning he turned on his back and looked at Katts face. She seemed to have gotten more pale and her breath came in hard, short breaths. Her skin was glistening from sweat.

“What ...?”, mumbled Andrew.

Katt silenced him with a rash gesture. “Don't worry about it”, she said. “We're safe, at least for right now.”

Andrew struggled to understand her. She was breathing so heavily that she could hardly speak. Andrew saw that she was

shaking.

“Where ... Where are we?”, he dazedly mumbled.

“Almost at the safe place”, she answered. “It isn’t far any more.”

“And how did we get here?”, asked Andrew.

Katt raised her shoulders. “I carried you.”

“Carried?”, ached Andrew. “But I weigh twice as much as you!”

“Oh really, I didn’t notice”, answered Katt. The ironic laugh that she tried to underline her words with turned into a grimace due to the exhaustion. “But I didn’t have a choice. Everything was suddenly on fire and I was scared that the whole building was going to collapse. I haven’t ever experienced anything like that! I don’t know what happened.”

With those last words she looked at him quizzically, but Andrew ignored her gaze and acted as if he hadn’t even heard her question. He had a *pretty solid* explanation for what had happened. It had something to do with flying sharks that cut the air with buzzing sword blades and spit hell fire — but how was he supposed to explain that to someone who didn’t even know what a car was?

“If it really isn’t far, we should keep going”, he suggested.

“Are you able to?”, asked Katt.

“Its not that bad” Andrew claimed. Ridiculous. In spite of that he continued: “I don’t know what’s going on with me. Normally I don’t get worn out so quickly. I guess I’m not in shape.”

To prove his claim (mostly to himself), he tried standing up, which he was only successful at with Katts help. Everything that was further than ten or fifteen steps away didn’t disappear into total darkness, but seemed to dissolve into grey streaks.

He blinked a few times and took a clumsy step, fighting for his balance the whole time. And then the same thing happened as he had experienced before: As suddenly as if someone had flipped a switch inside of him, the nausea, vertigo, and pain disappeared and the only remnant was a faint dazed feeling; and a feeling of weakness that was going to increase very soon.

“I think I’m okay”, he said.

Katt nodded seriously. “That’s from the exertion. If you’re careful we’ll make it for sure.” She smiled at him cheerily in a way that almost made him angry and in utter excess also stuck out her arm for him as if he were some frail old man. Andrew only granted her an insulted look, took a prideful step past her and requested that she show the way with a gesture. Katt inspected him again in the same dismissive but worried look, but turned around with a shrug and walked off, *not* accidentally slightly faster than Andrew could effortlessly keep up with her.

Even with her visible exhaustion she was moving so elegantly that Andrew felt a pang of jealousy when he looked at her. Her movements had lost most of their speed and effortlessness, but they still seemed just as sleek as those of a cat. Andrew would hadn’t believed for a second that Katt was her given name — but now he thought he knew why that was what she was called. That girl had something in common with cats. She was at least just as touchy.

After a few minutes Andrew lost his orientation, even though he was trying (for some reason) to remember the way that Katt was leading him through this maze that seemed to be mostly under ground. The crossed through multiple huge rooms and a myriad of hallways and corridors lined with doors that seemed

to all be unique but sharing the same eerie quality: They were just as empty and lacking of life as the underground tunnels and canals that they had come through before.

Eventually Katt stopped and motioned towards a narrow metal door. “Up that way, then we’re there. Can you make it?”

Andrew just looked at her quizzically. Why wouldn’t he be able to finish the last bit of the trip? He didn’t exactly feel good, but after what he had just gone through it wasn’t a surprise. He didn’t even dignify the girl with an answer, instead reluctantly motioning at her to open the door. Without saying a word Katt shrugged her shoulders and continued onwards. Behind the door was a narrow staircase in which there were about a dozen concrete steps that led up to a door outlined in dim twilight. She glanced at him with a last, almost cold look and jogged up the stairs with a pep in her step.

Naturally it was clear to Andrew that he was behaving childishly. It just went against his ego that this unassuming girl was stronger and tougher than him – and that his brain was showing him this fact with luxurious clarity right in front of him didn’t change anything. Apparently the psychological strain wasn’t enough to overwhelm his Ego.

He followed Katt. As he had ascended half of the steps he heard a sound and stopped moving. Nothing. He must have been imagining things. The only odd thing was that Katt had stopped too and tilted her head to pay attention. Andrew closed his eyes and concentrated, but there was only his own breathing and the beating of his heart. But then, right when he was going to keep going, he heard the same sound again: A scratching like fingernails on hard stone or glass. And to dispel even the last of

his doubts, Katt recoiled lightly.

“What ...?”, he started.

Katt silenced him with a distinctively frightened gesture. He could see that she was concentrating even more on listening. The sound didn't repeat itself and she was still extremely alarmed as she turned around half way and nervously motioned for him to keep going. She stepped through the door but only took a single step before freezing up. Andrew could see from her shadow that something wasn't right. With two, three elongated leaps with which he stepped over multiple steps at a time he was next to her in moments and stood still as well.

In the next moment he incredulously looked from the floor in front of Katt's feet to her face. She had lost every last bit of color from her face. Her lips were slightly open and trembled and blank horror was in her eyes.

It really wasn't a pretty sight. Just a hand width in front of her naked feet was the most repulsive creature that Andrew had ever seen: At first he thought it was a cockroach, then he thought it was a spider, until he realized that he was dealing with something equally impossible as grotesque mix of the two. The creature definitely had the eight legs that looked like bent metal and body made of two unequal spheres like a spider, but they also had a bluish black iridescent chitin¹ shell and oversized long bobbing feelers that swung side to side like small antennae, sweeping the air for the smell of its prey. A half dozen tiny beady

¹ *Primary component of cell walls in fungi, the exoskeletons of arthropods, such as crustaceans and insects, the radulae of molluscs, cephalopod beaks, and the scales of fish and lissamphibians*

eyes peeked out from underneath the carapace with a guileful intelligence that a being like this just shouldn't have, and the small pincers made the impression that they could bite down quite hard, especially if you were barefoot like Katt. But why was he wearing stable shoes with thick leather soles for?

"Don't worry", he said. "That creature won't hurt you." And with that he raised his foot and stomped on the miniature monster, turning it into a slimy spot on the ground.

Katt screamed and tried pulling him back, but it was too late. Andrew fought for his balance for a few moments with windmilling arms, looked at her bewilderedly and scraped his boot over the doorstep to get the disgusting remains of the spider-cockroach off his shoe sole. He had squished the bug; but even though he had used considerable force, he was unable to break the chitin armor.

"Oh no, what did you do?", whispered Katt. "Andrew!"

"Don't worry", answered Andrew. "That beast can be as poisonous as it wants, these shoes are very sturdy. They have steel toes, you know?"

"But don't you understand?", puffed Katt while staring at him with wide eyes. "That was a scout!"

Andrew blinked blankly. A strange feeling started to spread out in him. "A ...scout?", he repeated her. "You mean there ...there are more of ...of those things?"

Katt nodded and Andrew's inner eye replayed the scene of the garage entrance that seemed to have suddenly transformed into shimmering, eerie life. An ice cold shiver ran down his back that reminded him of countless spider legs running across his body.

“And this thing was their scout?”, he confirmed. “Well then everything should be fine. I mean it’s dead. You don’t need to be scared that it can alarm its friends.”

“But don’t you understand, Andrew?”, ached Katt. “If you kill the scout, at the moment it dies it alarms the rest of them!” She hurriedly looked around. “We can only hope that they are still far enough away!”

“Nonsense!”, answered Andrew. “Are you trying to tell me that these critters are telepathic or something?”

“I don’t know what that word means, but it is like that, believe me.”, said Katt. “You don’t know anything! I’m gradually starting to believe that you just fell out of the sky!”

Andrew started to answer, but Katt cut him off with an angry gesture. Despite everything she had just said she didn’t make any effort to run away, instead closing her eyes and listening intently with her eyes closed. After a moment of listening with utter concentration, she nodded grimly. “They’re coming.”

Andrew also listened for a moment, but he couldn’t hear a single thing. Apparently Katt didn’t just have better eyes, but she also had better ears. She motioned to the right. “We can still make it. It isn’t far to the safe space.”

Andrew wanted to turn around, but Katt just shook her head again and took a step in the opposite direction. “This way. Come on.”

Andrew obeyed, but made an unsure look in the direction she had just pointed. “Isn’t the safe place over there?”

“Yeah”, answered Katt. “But we can’t go that way. Hurry up. And be quiet!”

In contrast to her own words she wasn't moving especially fast. She wasn't strolling along, but she wasn't going as fast as she could, let alone run. They crossed the room and stepped into a narrow burnt out corridor whose ceiling seemed to be more below their feet than above their heads. Katt didn't berate him until she had stopped to listen with her eyes closed.

"They're getting closer", she murmured. "This will be close."

"If we're in such a hurry", asked Andrew, while he tried stepping over a meter-high concrete chunk *without* injuring himself on the rusty spikes of metal that were poking out of it, "why aren't we going faster?"

"Because you might collapse again", said Katt. "And I don't have enough strength to carry you."

Andrew gave her a toxic look and swallowed any comment that he had. The little one was gradually getting on his nerves, even with the thankfulness that he was feeling. He had run out of steam once and he wasn't sure if he could have done for her what she had done for him, but that wasn't a good reason to ride his back about it all the time! As soon as they were out of here, they would need to have a clarifying conversation about it.

At the end of the corridor it went to the left, then right, then left again. Katt was truly leading him through a labyrinth, and even though after a few minutes he had not only lost his orientation, but gradually the meaning of the word, he still had the feeling that they were more or less moving in a circle. What if Katt knew where they were just as little as him and was stumbling around the dark blind?

No, he didn't want to think these thoughts.

Besides, he was wrong. They passed two or three more junctions that definitively killed any orientation he had, and stepped into a long hallway that disappeared into blue twilight in both directions. The fork to the right was completely empty, in the other direction Andrew saw a blurry outline that reminded him of something, but he wasn't quite sure what.

Katt sighed with relief. "Looks like we've had luck", she said and pointed towards the shadow. "Do you think you can make it?"

"That's enough", answered Andrew in a huff. "I am very thankful, but ..."

He stopped as Katt sucked in air between her teeth and stared to the right with wide eyes. He hastily turned his head and audibly gasped. Whoever was pulling the strings in this story had a deceitful sense of humor.

Out of the gray on gray blurry distance at the end of the hallway appeared three figures in shiny black rubber suits.

Katt screamed and whirled around and Andrew followed her as quickly as he could. Now they had to run, whether they wanted to or not.

Behind them a blue lightning bolt lit up. The shot missed them by so much that it couldn't have been an accident, making a piece of the ceiling rain down in front of them. Katt made a quick hook to avoid the hail of debris and dust and Andrew followed her movements as well as he could to cover her with his body. This time it was a conscious decision. The warning shot had made it clear that the men were specifically *not* aiming at him and were probably wouldn't either. For whatever reason they had apparently decided to take him alive. Maybe they were

taking the death of their squad mate worse than he had thought and had something special planned for him.

Unfortunately they weren't dumb. His little trick to use his unexplainable untouchability to protect Katt worked, but the men had learned: A salvo of three shots missed them both by a wide margin and hammered into the ceiling halfway between them and the safe place.

This time it came down in almost the entire width, and while tonnes of dust and burning pieces of ceiling were raining down, a second salvo hammered into the sidewall of the hallway and made it collapse as well. Kicked up dust and flames filled the air to the point that they could hardly see any more, and even though they were twenty or twenty-five meters away from it Andrew could feel the deadly heat that was emanating from the glowing rocks. The men had laid a fire barrier through the hallway that they couldn't cross. Just two or three more of those and they would be trapped! If only Nick were here! He would have known how they could get out of here.

But Nick wasn't here and the next salvo of dazzling blue light bolts destroyed the other side of the hallway as well, increasing the barricade of dust and glowing debris.

The fourth salvo didn't come.

Andrew took four, five, six steps before he turned his head.

He thought the it couldn't have gotten any worse, but of course he was wrong. It was worse. The men had stopped firing because they were suddenly focused on something more important: Running.

The ground behind them had awoken with glittering life.

It was like a faithful reproduction of the scene in the parking garage, just that he was a lot closer this time: There must have been millions of tiny armored, clicking and snapping spider-cockroaches that had appeared behind the men like a living carpet, getting closer and closer. They weren't particularly fast, maybe about as fast a running man, but their numbers seemed to be infinite and the living carpet didn't just cover the floor, it also sloshed up the sides of the walls and a not insignificant number of them crawled upside down on the ceiling without losing any of their speed.

And this time there wouldn't be an attack helicopter² outfitted with laser cannons to blast the living flood away at the last moment.

The men appeared to see it the same way since they didn't waste time shooting at the quickly approaching mass of insects, instead focusing on running away as quickly as possible. The distance between themselves and the monstrosities was melting away. Slowly, but relentlessly.

They had arrived at the pile of rubble. Katt tore her arms in front of her face and jumped into the wall of smoke and fire without hesitation. Andrew took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and followed her.

Something seemed to brush across his face and singed his hair and eyebrows. He stumbled, found his footing with a clumsy step and wheezed for air. Heat and thick smoke forced tears into his eyes, but he saw that they had almost arrived at the safe place.

² Send me something saying "I sexually identify as an attack helicopter" if you get this far.

And now he knew why its outline seemed so eerily familiar: he had seen something like it before. It was the same type of construction that looked like a table with way too long of legs that Nick and him had seen before in the burnt-out factory. Even the legs and the home made ladder that led up to the platform stood in metal barrels that had been cut in half. One of them was spewing flames. Apparently the heat from one of the shots that missed had ignited the flammable liquid.

“*Up!*”, roared Katt. She hectically gesticulated towards the ladder and Andrew, who had finally gotten over the part where he was trusting his life to this curious girl, didn’t hesitate to reach for the shaky steps and climb up them. He counted on Katt following him right away, but instead she reached underneath her shirt and pulled out what looked like a ball of tightly wound thread. While she was unwrapping a meter long piece with nimble fingers, she ran to the burning barrel, dropped to one knee, and held the end of it in the flames. She had to turn her face away from the flames so that she wouldn’t singe her face. When she pulled it back out the tip was glowing red hot like a lit fuse. She hastily stood up and was at the next support in a bound and set the liquid in the barrel that it was sitting in on fire with her improvised fuse.

Andrew believed he had finally realized what she was planning and what the construction was for. Just the thought of it made his hair stand on end — but as Nick had said so often: Drastic situations require drastic measures.

While Katt was rushing to the next barrel, he raised his eyes and looked in the direction they came from. The hallway was closed off behind a wall of flame and boiling black smoke that

reached almost all the way to the ceiling. So far none of the tiny monstrosities had been able to break through the barrier, but he also couldn't see any trace of the men in black HAZMAT suits. The flames were burning brighter and higher as a minute ago when Katt and he had jumped through the obstacle, and Andrew could feel how much hotter the flames had gotten. Without the slightest feeling of malice or satisfaction he realized that the men had fallen into their own trap.

In the mean time the fourth barrel had caught on fire as well and Katt started to hastily climb the ladder. She still held the burning fuse and Andrew saw that it actually was some sort of ignition cord because it wasn't really burning, it was glowing very brightly and apparently was very hot.

When she had barely reached the top she tore off the glowing end of the cord and tossed it below her, throwing herself to the side as the contents of the barrel the ladder was standing in went up in flames with an audible *whoosh*. A jet of flame shot up to the edge of the platform and extinguished before it could get dangerous.

The first spider-cockroaches appeared at the ceiling above the barrier of fire and quite a few of the small beasts tried to use the wall to get past the obstacle, but were mostly engulfed by the flames and fell down to the grounds, charred. A lot of them started to glow and popped with the sound of popping popcorn, but Andrew didn't lie to himself: Even this wall of fire wouldn't hold up the incredible mass of killer insects.

"That was close", panted Katt. She righted herself with difficulty, wiped soot and sweat out of her face with the back of her hand and turned towards Andrew with a concerned look. "Are

you still good?”

Andrew didn't quite understand the question. He was a little queasy and his heart was racing, but that was understandable after what they had just done. Actually it should have been *him* that was asking how *she* was doing.

Behind the barrier of fire there was blue lightning. Suddenly they heard a screaming yell, and a piece of the pile of rubble collapsed in on itself throwing sparks everywhere, taking a heap of burning popcorn with it. Nevertheless more and more of the tiny monstrosities appeared and a mass of a thousand legs streamed through the gap. After that a man in a black rubber suit stumbled out of the fire, directly followed by second one. Behind them the hallway lit up with another two lightning bolts and again there was a screaming yell that was cut off with alarming abruptness. And then all of a sudden there were innumerable shiny, black, snapping monstrosities there, that were just flooding over the flames and suffocated them with their sheer mass. Thousands of them burned up or exploded in tiny yellow and red showers of sparks, but a disproportionate amount more stormed on behind them and raced over the carbonized remains of their brothers and sisters.

The two men ran for their life. One of them ran past them with long-reaching steps and the fear of death lent him the speed to actually increase the distance between himself and the abominable pursuers.

The other one made a fatal error. Instead of seeking rescue in escape, he swung around and headed towards the safe place. The spider-cockroaches caught up with him before he had even gotten through half of the eight to ten steps it was to the safe

place. Countless little monsters exploded beneath his heavy boots, but Andrew also saw how dozens, if not hundreds of the tiny eight-legged fiends started to crawl up his legs, run across his suit, or tried to sink their tiny teeth into the tough material of his HAZMAT suit. While he was racing towards the safe place he desperately tried to wipe off the monstrosities. He was successful, but for each one that he squished or hurled away, three or four new ones appeared. And their numbers were only increasing. When he reached the ladder he was already wading through an ankle-deep layer of shimmering chitin and snatching pincers.

With a desperate motion he jumped forwards and closed his hands around the ladder rungs. The whole construction ached and swayed so much from his impact that Andrew was scared that the whole thing would collapse in on itself, and the man started to hurriedly climb upwards.

He didn't make it. Just as his hand had almost reached the edge of the platform, he froze. A mixture of a scream and an agonized moan came out of his helmet and he slid downwards. Andrew threw himself forwards and grabbed at his outstretched arm with both hands. He was torn forward a little bit and was almost torn off the platform before he found a foothold somewhere.

And at the same time, he saw what had happened: The primitive defensive construction that the legs of the platform were sticking out of were performing their purpose with surprising efficiency. The burning liquid — possibly more the heat than the metal of the glowing barrels was giving off — kept the killer insects at a safe distance. The teeming stream parted in front of each of them only to close a few centimeters after it. The tiny

spider-cockroaches that were dumb enough to try it anyway carbonized with a hiss as soon as they touched the hot metal.

The man in the HAZMAT suit must have knocked over the barrel that the ladder was standing in. The flames had gone out and hundreds and thousands of tiny monsters crawled over the hot remains, crawled along his suit, or started to climb the ladder with frightening dexterity. Not only was the stranger in danger, Andrew realized with horror, but their own stronghold that had seemed so impenetrable a moment ago was in danger of being overrun!

Nevertheless he held on to the arm of the man with all his strength and tried to pull him up. But he was just too heavy. Slowly the man, who in the mean time had almost stopped moving entirely, slid back into the bubbling black depths and ultimately Andrews strength failed. He let go of his hand. The man tipped backward and just *disappeared* underneath the swarming shimmering mass.

Andrew sunk back with a sob, but he didn't even have enough time to process what had taken place in front of his very eyes. Katt tore him to the side with such force that he rolled over half of the platform and instinctively grabbed on to the grate, otherwise he might have fallen into the depths himself. Nevertheless he saw that the first spider-cockroaches had made their way over the edge of the platform and were tasting the air for pre with their greedily trembling feelers. Katt ignored them though. She suddenly held rusty wire cutters in her hands with which she hastily cut the wires that were holding the ladder to the edge of the platform. With a powerful push she pushed it back and made sure that it actually fell over instead of tipping back towards

them, only then did she turn around and beat the remaining insect monsters that had made it up on the platform to death with the rusty wire cutters.

Andrew had to fight with his sickness and pain again. It had chosen this moment to gang up on him, but this time he didn't lose consciousness, instead laying there for a couple seconds with his eyes closed and waited until the excruciating hammering in his head stopped and his stomach stopped trying to crawl out of his neck some how. When he opened his eyes, Katt seemed to have successfully eliminated the last members of the eight legged boarding party, since she was kneeling next to him with a mix of anger and relief on her face, which he didn't understand.

"Have you gone completely crazy?", she asked.

"Yes, thanks", murmured Andrew. "I'm doing better. But I'm glad that you're worrying about me so much."

"We could have both been dead!", Katt continued unimpressed and with a sharper tone. "Why did you do that? He would have killed us without hesitation and you risked your life to save him!"

Andrew painstakingly righted himself and crawled over to where the ladder had been attached before he answered. "No human deserves that kind of death.", he said with a shudder.

The ladder had disappeared, just like the man in the black HAZMAT suit. Below them was nothing but a seething, teeming mass that made a sound like a hundred thousand castanets that were clicking together. And not just in the depths below them. The walls were completely covered in the virtually endless stream of spider cockroaches. They were in the middle of a living tunnel, that stretched out in both directions as far as the eye

could see. It could also be described a different way: They were in the middle of a digestion apparatus that was only waiting on them to follow their destiny.

There was only one single interruption in the living, swarming, mass. As Andrew looked up, instead of a sweeping ceiling of spider cockroaches there was an enormous jagged hole that wasn't just in the ceiling of this hallway, but also in the one above it, and the one above that. He couldn't tell if it had been on purpose or if the safe place had been built underneath it. But at least it did its job and prevented the eight-legged attackers from dropping down on them from above. For now they were safe.

The questions was, for how long.

Andrew looked around the platform with a shudder. It wasn't empty, but had next to a number of tattered blankets two metal gas cans that each held about twenty liters, as well as a metal basket with tools, which is where Katt must have gotten the rusty wire cutters. Even if the construction wasn't particularly ingenious, its builder had definitely prepared for everything.

He glanced through the mesh floor at the burning oil barrels. Other than the part where the whole raised table was getting uncomfortably warm, something else was making him nervous: If he remembered the other safe place that he and Nick had examined correctly, then there wasn't much of the flammable liquid left in the containers.

He looked back up at the living carpet that the inside of the corridor was lined with. "How long will this last?", he asked.

Katt shrugged. "As long as it takes. There are lots of them."

“But that...” Andrew hesitated a moment and started again, all though he was noticeably more nervous this time. “But the fire will last long enough, right?”

Katt just shrugged again. She remained silent.

8

It had only been about three or four minutes in between the first spider-cockroach breaking the barrier and when the living stream gradually subsided and then finally completely stopped, but even such a short time could feel like an eternity depending on the circumstances — and these were *definitely* the right circumstances for it. Even though all his senses were tense enough that they were about to tear Andrew had the feeling that he was waking up from a nightmare as the last stragglers of the insect army finally passed them and it was quiet again.

He had counted on Katt waiting for a certain time just in case. Instead she impatiently gestured for him to climb off the platform as the last of the spider-cockroaches had barely disappeared into the twilight and Andrew obeyed silently. However he quickly gave up the attempt to climb down one of the metal legs. In the mean time the whole platform had gotten uncomfortably warm, but the iron support seemed to be downright glowing, even though the fire below it had gone out; only a few seconds after the last insect had disappeared.

He jumped the almost two meters and landed much to his own surprise safely on both feet. Even his bruised knee took the beating without complaining and Andrew quickly bent over to pick up the ladder so that Katt could get to the floor with greater ease. As he was leaning the ladder against the edge of the platform he looked around for the man in the black rubber suit.

He was astonished. Andrew didn't expect to find him alive or even somewhat whole. But he was just not there at all.

At first he thought the living flood had just torn him along, and in a certain sense that was true. His strange firearm was on the other side of the safe place, a good three or four meters away and what was left of his black satchel created a trail of pieces that lead further down the hallway. Maybe ten or twelve meters away he found a hand-sized shard of glass that was mirrored on one side. It took him a couple seconds to recognize that it was what was left of the visor of the helmet. Right next to it was a watch that was missing its leather strap, just like the rubber seal of the window. Andrew was reminded of the skeletonized leftovers in the parking garage and shuddered inwards. He suddenly didn't want to see anything else, even though the trail of macabre kept going quite a bit. He turned on his heel and went back to Katt who in the meantime had climbed down the ladder as well.

She hadn't come with empty hands nor had she been idle while he was following the gruesome scavenger hunt. She had hauled one of the rusty diesel canisters down and was just finishing filling the last of the four oil barrels with two fingers of the nose-burning liquid.

"Are you scared that they'll come back?", asked Andrew.

“They never come back”, answered Katt. She didn’t look at him, but instead was inspecting her work critically and filled one of the barrels with a couple more gulps of the liquid. “But the next person to come here might not have time for it. Whoever uses the safe place refills the fire water.”

That seemed only logical to Andrew but as Katt was about to fill up the last container that was for the ladder he stopped her with a questioning motion. “Why don’t you just pull the ladder up?”

“Because then you can’t get to it from below any more.”

Andrew didn’t give up so easily. It had only taken him a few glances to know what the weakness of the whole structure was. “This ladder is just a danger”, he said. “Why don’t you put steps on the legs? If he had constructed this peculiar structure, it would have only had one support that would have been a lot easier to defend than four.

Katt considered him with an almost pitiful look and licked her fingertips, with which she touched one of the legs for a short moment. It audibly hissed. “Because nobody wants to wait half an hour for it to cool down, smart ass.”

“I had the feeling that we were being grilled anyway if we had waited any longer”, said Andrew. That wasn’t an exaggeration. They had spent the last few minutes laying on the blankets that seemed to be up there for that specific reason, but the heat had been nigh unbearable at the end. “The steps would need to be made of some kind of metal that doesn’t transfer heat quite as well”, he said in a slight lecturing tone. “Just like the whole platform or at least a majority of it.”

“Oh?”, Katt asked snappishly. “And how would you know which metal didn’t transfer the heat as well?”

“For example you could try it out”, Andrew suggested.

Katt prepared for another just as unquestionable question, but she let it go with a peculiar look and a contemplative wrinkling of her forehead. “You are a strange person, huh?”

“No”, answered Andrew. “Where I’m from they call that logic.”

“Where you’re from”, repeated Katt thoughtfully. “Where is that?”

Andrew had almost answered openly — and why not? After all he didn’t have anything to hide! —, but a voice in his head reminded him to be wary. “Why don’t you finally tell me where I am?”, he asked hesitantly.

“In the dark land”, answered Katt. Aching and without even asking him for help she set the ladder back upright in its spot and filled the container up two fingers deep with the flammable liquid. The canister was as good as empty, but she carefully closed it and carried it up the ladder. Before she climbed back down to Andrew she carefully bound the top rung to the edge of the platform with wire.

“Who fills the canisters with the *fire water* when they’re empty?”, asked Andrew.

For some reason the question seemed to be uncomfortable for Katt since she didn’t answer for a couple seconds and didn’t look at him when she answered. “Whoever comes by”, she said with a shrug. “Sometimes its iron hunters.”

“Iron hunters?”

“They look for iron”, explained Katt. “Do you really not know anything?”

Iron hunters ... something about that bothered Andrew, but he couldn't tell what it was immediately. It sounded highly precise — once you knew what it meant. But now that Andrew had picked up the right trail in his head it didn't take long for him to realize what had bothered him about the term: It fell in the same category as *safe place*. There wasn't anything wrong with it, but it sounded like a kid had made them up.

"These little beasts", he asked. "what do you call them?"

"Gobblers", answered Katt. "What else?"

Yeah, that fit. The word sounded just like *safe place* and *iron hunter*. He didn't say anything, instead going over to where the man had let his weapon go and squatted down in front of it. Even though he had immense respect for the equally frightening and bizarre weapon, he had a little bit of hope that it would still work and that he could figure out how it worked so that he could give their pursuers an unpleasant surprise when they saw them again.

The gun was only a skeleton now. Everything that wasn't made of resistant metal or glass was gone — including the barrel and the sights that had apparently been made out of plastic. On the side there was a rectangular opening that looked like it had multiple printed circuits in it, but the gobblers hadn't stopped at the microprocessor.

Disappointedly he let the weapon sink back to the ground; At the same time a little relieved. He wasn't sure if he would have had the guts to point that weapon at humans. And he was glad that he didn't have to make that choice.

Katt had fastened the ladder behind her and climbed down to him. "They don't leave anything other than stone or metal

behind”, she said as if reading his mind. “You can leave that there. The Iron is too hard to melt down and that means we can’t do anything with it.”

Andrew didn’t show it, but Katt had just given him valuable information – namely that she or the people she belonged to had handled one of these weapons or at least their remains before.

He stood up completely, took a few steps and bent over again to pick something up. It was a slim silver nail with a peculiar head and ribbed shaft, half as long as his little finger and almost weightless.

“What is that?”, asked Katt.

“I’m not entirely sure”, answered Andrew, “but I think its a surgical nail”

“A what?”

“You need one of these to nail bones so they heal together”, answered Andrew. He closed his hand around his find and stuck it in his pocket. “At least I know for sure that there are people in those suits now and not aliens.”

Katt’s uncomprehending expression made it clear that she didn’t know where to start with some of those expressions. “Shouldn’t we keep going?”, she proposed. “We aren’t far, but its almost dark.”

“And the gobblers?”, asked Andrew.

“No problem”, Katt said pretentiously. “We just need to stay on their trail until we’re close enough to the river. They never take the same route twice. They wouldn’t find anything to eat.”

After what Andrew had just seen that sounded like a convincing explanation. “I’m asking myself what they eat either way”, he said. “There doesn’t seem to be too much here.”

“Oh this and that”, answered Katt. “Sometimes idiots who get lost here. Or a small animal. And in the end themselves.”

As a precaution, Andrew didn't think about the last sentence. The knot in his head was big enough as is. He insisted that she kept walking with a gesture and followed her after she started walking.

For the first while it was going well, but his bruised knee made itself noticed again and the nausea and racing headaches came back. Not as bad as they were before that he had to stop, but they were bad enough that he was slowly falling behind. His leader didn't seem to miss any of it, glancing back at him with worried looks. She didn't make any comments and altered her speed to match his sinking tempo without complaint.

He was getting worse, not better. Andrew had been hoping that he would recover after a while like he had in the past when weakness and pain had overcome him, but the headaches were getting worse and the nausea and fever didn't let up either. He had a disgusting taste in his mouth. Bitter saliva was quickly collecting under his tongue and the fever seemed to be raising and not easing up.

Finally Katt stopped and motioned towards the last of about ten thousand doors that they had gone through in the last hour. Fresh air rushed towards them and behind that there wasn't another corridor, stairwell, hallway or hall, but the open sky. Relieved, Andrew took a deep breath and wanted to pass her, but Katt held him back with a swift movement and motioned for him to be quiet with her other hand. Carefully he stepped behind her into the open and almost immediately ducked behind a hill of rubble that was a couple steps from the door.

In hindsight he was glad that Katt had warned him. Bit for the most part he was busy questioning what he was seeing.

The factory building hadn't collapsed like he had expected, but it was noticeably more slanted than it was before, sticking out from the other misshapen ruins due to its odd deformations. The fire was nearly out. He only saw sparks fly up here and there.

"We were ... running in a circle?," he wheezed. "The whole time?"

"Complain to the gobblers", said Katt laconically. "Either way we need to get to the river, and the bridge is behind this blockade."

"Then we'll find a different way!"

"Too dangerous", answered Katt. "If we run in to the gobblers again, we might not escape from them again. It won't take too long any more. We need to wait. They haven't ever stayed that long."

That last remark was about the good dozen figures that were clothed in the color of the night that were lingering on the other end of the plaza. Quite a few of them were busy collecting the remains of the Cessna and loading them into the two shark helicopters that had landed next to each other in front of the building where their frantic escape had started. Most of the men were just standing around.

Andrew laid his head in his neck and looked up. In the mean time the electrical storm had completely subsided, but it still was dark out. Above the ruined city there were neither stars nor the moon, just continuous, absolute, contour less black. And even though it felt like it had been forever since he and Nick

had crashed into the plaza, more than a few hours couldn't have passed since then.

"Didn't you just say something about *day*?", he turned to Katt.

"On the other shore, yeah." The girl made a head movement in the direction of the burning building. Andrew strained to look in that direction, but the sky looked completely black behind the building.

"I understand", he mumbled with a heavy tongue. His fever had gotten worse and his thoughts started to slowly get more and more confused. He had actually just imagined that she had told him it was daytime on the other side of the river.

"Can you answer one more question for me?", he mumbled.

"Gladly"

"When are the visiting hours here?"

Katt looked at him blankly. "What hours?"

"Visiting hours", answered Andrew. "Come on! We're living in the twenty-first century! You can have your family visit you every once in a while, even in the closed off wards."

Katt's looks were just getting more and more confused. She was getting ready to answer, but then sharply inhaled and looked toward the landed helicopters and their crews.

The men had stopped whatever they were doing and were running towards the helicopters from all directions. Andrew heard a fine humming as the turbines started, then the oddly bent blades started spinning faster and faster, becoming nearly invisible after a few seconds.

A few of the men fired, but most of them were rushing toward the open doors of the helicopters with long steps, jumping in before they turned around to give their comrades outside covering

fire. Andrew couldn't tell what they were shooting at, but where their blazing blue bolts impacted burning popcorn seemed to be flung into the air.

Even the combined fire power of a dozen of their odd weapons wasn't enough to repel or even keep back the millions of gobblers. The entire back third of the plaza had already awakened and was glitteringly, silently pushing towards them. Even before all the men were on board one of the helicopters took off, swiveled around a few meters off the ground, and used its unequally overpowered armaments to provide cover to the last few men.

It was still close. Only one of them didn't make it to the rescue helicopter. That one unfortunate soul grasped for the cabin door and missed it. But Andrew could see from this far away that his suit had caught on the landing skids and had ripped open on almost its entire length.

The helicopter took off before the man could even stand up, and two of his comrades bent over the side and shot him.

Andrew cried out in disbelief. "Good god! But ...but why did they do that?"

"His suit was ripped", said Katt.

Andrew had nothing more to say. Other than the horror that had closed off his throat, he was awfully nauseous and had to suddenly fully concentrate on controlling himself so that he wouldn't vomit. Bewildered and lamed from dread he watched the two helicopters quickly gained height and then disappeared with such an acceleration that a fighter jet would have been jealous.

"We should wait a moment", said Katt. "The gobblers will move on quickly, but it seems to be a pretty large swarm."

Andrew was barely listening. He was still refusing to believe what he had just seen with his own eyes. The men had shot their own comrade just because his suit had ripped? All of a sudden he wasn't sure if those were actually humans in those HAZMAT suits.

9

The nausea and pain let up for a moment, but in return Andrew felt like a newborn child. He visibly collapsed in on himself and had to fight to keep his eyes open.

“Are you okay?”, asked Katt.

“I don’t know”, answered Andrew truthfully. Even speaking was hard for him now. The fever that was causing him increasing discomfort was probably the reason for this whole absurd story: He was laying in a hospital bed somewhere, had a twenty seven degree¹ fever, and was hallucinating all of this nonsense.

“I think they’re gone”, said Katt.

Andrew couldn’t remember if any measurable time had passed since the last time she had spoken, but it must have been because when he — with Katt’s help — stood up and looked over the edge of his cover the plaza was completely empty. The girl gave him another doubtful look, but didn’t say anything else, instead continuing on at a pace that he could barely keep up with.

¹ *Celsius*

After she had taken a couple of steps, it got remarkably better. The fresh air felt good and the careful movements brought his circulation back in swing. In addition whatever he had seemed to come in waves and apparently the time between them seemed to be decreasing.

“How far do we still have?”, he asked.

“Two blocks”, answered Katt. She corrected herself. “Three. But the gobblers moved in a different direction. I haven’t ever seen them turn around.”

“And other than that there aren’t any people-eating monsters here?”, asked Andrew.

He almost counted on a *yeah* as the answer, but Katt just gave him a slanting glance and shook her head. “Nothing that the gobblers have overlooked.”, she explained. She didn’t say anything for a moment, then: “You’re from outside, am I right?”

Why should he still lie? In any case Andrew was sure that he wouldn’t survive the next hour. Either some bizarre twelve-armed and three-headed beast that Katt had forgotten to mention would eat him, or he would collapse after a few steps – or finally wake up from this insane nightmare. And he still hesitated to answer.

“I’m not sure if we’re talking about the same *outside*”, he said. Katt looked at him unsettled. “Is there more than one?”

“If you mean the world that *Men in Black* with their flying kitchen mixers are from, I’ll have to disappoint you”, he replied. “I haven’t ever heard of these types before. And of their Science-Fiction-Helicopters and Star-Trek-Weapons definitely not.”

“Aha”, said Katt.

“We don’t have any of that”, insisted Andrew. “Other than that ...” He shrugged and looked back at the sky, that was still completely black and starless. A crazy thought crossed his mind: Could it be, that he had jumped through time from some unknown phenomenon? Had he ended up in a bleak and fear-inducing future or in some kind of terrible parallel universe? He thought about that possibility in earnest for a moment, but arrived at the conclusion that the combination of accident victim/brain damage/nuthouse was much more realistic.

“I think so.”, he said in the end.

Again Katt looked at him for quite a while in a way that he didn’t want to interpret – even if it seemed to him that she wasn’t especially happy about his answer. “And how is it ... there?”, she asked with hesitation.

“Its kinda like here”, answered Andrew. “But completely different.”

Katt seemed to be somewhat insulted, but she didn’t say anything but walked a little faster so that he had to use what little strength he had left to keep up with her.

In some regards Andrew was right. He needed some time to clear his thoughts, and Katt would just ask him more questions that he wouldn’t or couldn’t really answer. There were enough questions bouncing around his head that he didn’t have any answers to. He was stranded in a place that shouldn’t exist, was followed by men that fired at him for no reason with weapons that have even less reasons to exist and flew in helicopters out of the next century, and had almost been eaten by monstrosities that looked like they had been created by Roland Emmerich.

Oh yeah, and just as an aside: Nick was dead.

A deep sorrow overcame Andrew as he thought of his friend – Nick hadn't been anything else. His friend. Maybe the only real friend he had ever had. He felt as if he had betrayed him, yes, as if he was at fault for what had happened to Nick, and in a certain sense it was true. If he hadn't convinced Nick to let him drive, then maybe the kidnappers wouldn't have been able to outrun them and hide in the Cessna ...

Andrew stopped that thought short. What-if thoughts wouldn't help him further. He didn't have any choice other than to keep going and to wait and see what happened.

While he was walking two steps next to and a step behind Katt, he stealthily looked at her probably for the first time since they had met with actual attention. He had to think of the nightmarish face that he believed he had seen in the factory hall. So far he had automatically assumed that it was Katt, but now he realized how bitterly unjust that was to her. He corrected his estimate of her age down by at least one year, maybe two. And he noticed something else that so far he hadn't thought was possible, but also confused him a lot: He suddenly saw how pretty Katt was. Even hunger and lifelong hardships that emaciated her to the point of almost being a caricature, her natural elegance and grace hadn't been affected.

“We're almost there.”

Katt raised her hand, and as Andrew followed her gesture, he saw that they had passed the burning building a long time ago. In front of them was another block of ruins and behind that he recognized an unswerving line of darkness that divided the city in two halves. The river, that Katt had been talking about? He tried to discern what was on the other side, but he couldn't work

it out. The ruined city seemed to continue there, but he couldn't really see anything other than more shadows. There were no signs of the *day* that it seemed to be on the other side as far as he could see.

A sharp pain shot through the back of his head. At the last moment Andrew suppressed a yelp of pain, breathed in deeply and held on to the mad hope that it was just happenstance and that it would go away soon. Instead of that it slowly spread out like a spiderweb of white-hot threads, and after a few seconds his old friends nausea and dizziness added themselves to the mix. He didn't have much time.

Katt seemed to feel how he was doing because she quickened her pace, and Andrew trotted after her until they had reached the line of solid blackness that separated the city of ruins. By now he was in such a state that he would have stumbled right into the abyss had Katt not held him back at the last moment.

"What...?", he mumbled dazedly. He wasn't sure if his voice was still understandable. Or if he was speaking at all or if he had just imagined it.

Katt just considered him with a pitiful glance. Her voice suddenly took on the tone that you only use with very young children (or very old people) and still weren't sure that they understood. "Just stay right here and don't move, okay?"

Andrew nodded obediently — he probably would have also nodded if she had told him the lottery numbers from last week —, and Katt made a funnel in front of her mouth with her hands and expelled an especially warbling scream; it wasn't especially loud,

but it was so piercing that it must have been audible² throughout the whole city.

“My sister is waiting on the other side”, she said. “She’ll let the bridge down, don’t worry.”

Andrew wasn’t worried. He also couldn’t remember if he had asked a corresponding question, but just in case he nodded anyway; Very carefully, as even that small movement made the headache he had explode.

Katt raised her hands again and repeated the warbling sound, then stomped the ground madly and yelled. “Ratt god damn it! Where are you?”

“Ratt?”, asked Andrew. Did she have to yell like that? His head would explode if she kept yelling around like that.

“My sister”, explained Katt.

“Katt and Ratt”, giggled Andrew. “How peculiar.”

“Does something about that bother you?”, asked Katt sharply. She glared at him defiantly for a moment and roared for her sister louder than before.

Andrew distorted his face demonstratively and took a step away from her; however not a very big one and not without getting within two steps of the *river*.

It wasn’t a river. Apparently they were speaking the same language that used the same words, but meant different things. What lay in front of him had no similarities with a body of water. It was a good five meter wide canal of weather-beaten gray concrete that went down an indeterminate distance. Andrew

² *this book sponsored by Audible™, use code ANDERS or text ANDERS to 500 500 to learn more*^{/s}

precariously bent over and immediately righted himself. He had only had a short glimpse into the depths, but he didn't see anything that reminded him of water.

"What's down there?", he asked.

Katt shrugged. "The gobblers don't cross", she said. "Isn't that enough?" She didn't wait for Andrews answer, instead regarding him with an almost hostile look and roared as loud as she possibly could for her sister. This time she used a whole litany of insults and curses that would have made Andrew blush in any other circumstance.

It worked. This time it was just a moment before he heard a bright squeaking voice and a long spindly shadow appeared from the silhouette of the city ruins on the other side of the river. Andrew tried focusing on it with wide eyes for a few seconds, but he couldn't concentrate on one thing that long. His thoughts were increasingly revolving around himself. It was impossible to focus his thoughts on a single thing for more than a moment. He was more nauseous than he had ever been before in his whole life.

"We've almost made it", said Katt. "I knew that I could rely on Ratt. Just one more moment. Can you keep it up that long?"

Of course not. He nodded. "Yes."

Katt's facial expression explained very clearly what she thought of that answer. But she was diplomatic enough to not say anything, instead concentrating on the delicate shadow hat was slowly lowering over the river with a shrill screeching. Andrew followed her lead — at least he tried.

His thoughts were getting more and more confused. He was unimaginably nauseous. He had the worst headache on this side

of the Andromeda galaxy and his fever had a good chance to break the Guinness world record; actually his blood had surpassed the boiling point and must have been steaming out of his ears like an overheated pressure cooker.

For some reason he thought the whole thing exceptionally strange.

Squeaking and aching the spider-web-like outline lowered itself more before it impacted their side of the *river* with a long echoing bang and Katt was suddenly very lively. “Can you keep on going?”, she asked.

“Sure”, answered Andrew and sunk to his knees. Katt caught him and did the most embarrassing thing to him that had ever happened: She bounced a bit in her knees and threw him over her shoulders with no hesitation. He could feel her sway under his weight for a moment, then found her balance again with a quick motion. She turned around and ran off with almost provocatively light steps.

Andrew was almost glad that he wasn't currently understanding all that was going on around and especially *to* him. If what he could recognize of the *bridge* that Katt was prancing over with mischievous ease was real, then it was definitely a pure nightmare: a breakable structure of *tied (!)* together rungs and struts that was aching under each of her steps, as if it wanted to collapse at any moment.

Andrew looked into the deep, but he regretted that almost immediately. There was *something* below them, but he couldn't say what. Whatever it was, it scared him to imagine what it was based on what he had seen so far.

After what seemed like an eternity they arrived at the other bank. Katt stumbled two more steps on terra firma before she collapsed to her knees with an exhausted groan and let Andrew glide off her shoulders like a wet sack. He fell, which hurt less than he expected and rolled two, three times across the ground before he stopped, laying on his back. Underneath him was soft grass and earth, not hard stone. Through his closed eyelids he saw bright sunlight. But Katt had told him that the day wasn't over on that side of the river — whatever that meant.

He wanted to open his eyes, but he was only successful after his third try. Something really was wrong with him. Something was incredibly wrong with him.

It looked like the effort was worth it. Above him a cloudless and almost obscenely radiant blue midsummer sky stretched out over the facades. Their slightly shifted to the left lines weren't any different than the ones on the other side. They were the same burnt-out soot-stained ruins like on the other side. It seemed that the destroyed city continued on this side of the river as well.

As if from a great distance he heard Katt's voice, but it wasn't talking to him; even though he was too dazed to comprehend any of the words that were being spoken, he could feel it. A different, more bright and somehow hissing sounding voice answered, then light steps that were hardly audible on the grass approached.

Katt appeared above him. She looked sweaty and so exhausted as if she had just done such extreme bodily exertion that hadn't just pushed her to her limit of what she was capable of, but possibly a little over it. And the concern in her gaze had grown so much that Andrew, in spite of his dazed state, asked himself if it weren't advisable for him to seriously worry as well.

“This is Ratt, my sister.” She made a hand movement towards a shadow that was just outside of Andrew’s field of view, making him use quite a bit of what energy he had left to turn his head and blink up at the figure that was approaching him from the other side. Katt’s sister seemed to be somewhat smaller than her, and he had the crazy feeling that she had a type of shaggy fur coat, even though the sun on this side of the river was burning down so hot that it was almost uncomfortable. He couldn’t really identify Ratt as the sun was directly above her, so that the glaring light actually drove tears into his eyes.

“This is Andrew, who I was talking to you about”, Katt continued, obviously turned toward her sister.

Ratt came closer and bent over curiously. Andrew still couldn’t really identify her, but something wasn’t right about her head either. In spite of the head she seemed to be wearing not just a fur coat, but also a fur hat.

“He says he’s from outside”, Katt continued. “I don’t know if that’s true, but he has the sickness³.”

Ratt bent down even further, and Andrew, who had just wanted to start to be frightened about Katt’s last remark thought better of it and fainted.

³ *he got down with it*

10

There was no way he could tell how long he had slept, but there was one thing that was definitely different: The unconsciousness that he had fallen into had given way to a normal sleep after a while, even though it wasn't particularly long or restorative in any form. Even as Andrew's consciousness glid over the border between sleep and being awake like a dead-tired swimmer, he could feel that there was real relief on the other side. Not too much had changed. He still had a headache and he was still a little queasy; at the very best the two weren't as bad as before. And his knee had stopped hurting. At least something. It was surprising how undemanding you get when you're feeling bad enough.

He opened his eyes and at first he felt like he was still on the other side of the river in the burnt city, because he was still surrounded by grey twilight that removed all color and blurred the outlines of things as if he were inside of a blurred black-and-white picture. On second glance he realized that the explanation was much simpler. It had gotten dark outside and the holey

curtains that hung in front of the windows in the surprisingly large room he was in blocked out even more of the murky light. If he recalled the few short moments before his senses had faded it was early afternoon. Apparently he had slept a little longer than he had thought.

That memory let a different, more alarming picture rise to the top of Andrew's consciousness that he hastily dismissed. He already felt miserable enough without the tasteless jokes that his overstimulated imagination kept handy.

He blinked a couple more times to get out his stupor, propped himself up on his elbows and carefully sat up. Something glid off his chest with a rustle and as Andrew looked down he discovered two things: He was completely naked and someone had covered him with a shoddy sheet that was bristling with dirt and smelled as bad as the bed he was laying on.

Lightly disgusted, but also at least just as embarrassed, he sat up completely and swung his legs off the edge of the squeaking folding cot that he had woken up on and slung the grubby sheet around his hips. The floor that he set his naked feet on was warm.

Andrew slowly turned his head to look around the room with more attention. The pale twilight was making it hard to discern details, but nevertheless he saw that the room was very big and furnished with a surprising amount of furniture, although they were all very old and in not too good of condition. Anything near enough to discern details seemed to be made exclusively out of metal and had burn marks on it; apparently anything flammable hadn't survived the catastrophe on this side of the river either.

He heard a sound and turned towards the door that, like the

windows, only had a sheet hung in front of it. The scrap was pushed to the side and Katt stepped in. Andrew could only recognize her silhouette, but he could tell that she had stopped abruptly in the middle of taking another step as she saw him sitting on the edge of the bed.

“You’re awake?”

“As you can see.” Andrew started to cough and had to swallow a few times since his voice wanted to fail him.

“Wait”, said Katt. “I’ll get you water.”

Before Andrew could stop her, she turned on her heel and out of the room. Andrew stared after her befuddled, but he actually was thirsty; either way she had left so quickly that she would surely be back soon.

He stood up, slung the cloth closer around his hips, and clumsily felt around the room for his clothes. He of course knew who had unclothed him — even though he wasn’t entirely sure why —, but he thought it would be more embarrassing to get *dressed* in front of her.

He just barely made it. As the sheet was pushed to the side in front of the doorway again he was busy tying his shoes and only regarded Katt out of the corner of his eye. She hadn’t come alone. Behind her a second, smaller shadow — probably her sister — stepped into the room, but stood at the doorway. Katt carried something in her hands and as she got closer Andrew heard a quiet gurgle that escalated his thirst to an almost unbearable burning in his throat. Without tying his shoe completely he turned around towards Katt and downright ripped the metal container from her hands.

The water was warm and tasted a bit stale, but he still gulped it down with large, greedy swallows, and even though he emptied the whole cup he almost had more thirst afterwards than he had before. So as not to waste even the last drop he licked his lips and just now noticed how rough and chapped his lips were. The fever must have impacted him more than he had thought.

“Thank you”, he said and held the cup out to Katt. “Can I have some more?”

“Later”, answered Katt. “I don’t think that you should drink too much at once. How do you feel?”

The question was tinged with an unmistakable astonishment to see him not only awake, but also standing and fully clothed. She herself had also recuperated quite well. She didn’t necessarily look in the pink — she was too lean and the traces of lifelong hardship were dug too deep in her face —, but she seemed to have taken the previous day much better than he had, which Andrew registered with a slight stab of envy.

“How you feel after a day like yesterday”, he said. “Where are we?”

“Yessterday?”, asked Ratt from the door. Andrew took a quick look in her direction and a strange feeling washed over him. The picture from his memory wanted to push itself forward again, but Andrew hastily dismissed it again. Ratt had an odd way to speak, maybe even a speech impediment — so?

“In my house”, answered Katt. “Ratt and I brought you here.” She made a gesture as he wanted to say something and continued. “I would like it if you would sit down. We know how strong and tough you are, but that won’t matter if you just collapse again.”

That was too much, even with all the thankfulness Andrew still felt. Eventually she would have to stop getting on his nerves about her carrying him.

Twice, to be exact.

“Listen”, he started. “I think that...”

The shadow at the door moved. Ratt got closer and stepped into the grey light that streamed through the holes in the tattered sheet that covered the window, and Andrew stopped mid sentence. His jaw dropped. The cup slipped out of his hand and fell rattling to the ground, but he didn't hear it.

He stared at Katt's sister with an incredulous look.

His memory hadn't been tricking him.

And it wasn't a nightmare.

In front of him a one and a half meter tall rat stood on its hind legs.

“But ... that's ... impossible!”, he grunted.

“Yeah, I'm happy too meet you too¹”, hissed Ratt. “And if it makess you fffeel any better, I don't think you're handssome either.”

“I must be dreaming”, mumbled Andrew. Man-sized rats that walked on their hind legs and lisped sassy answers didn't exist.

“Please sit down, Andrew”, Katt asked. “I think we need to explain something to you.”

Andrew actually let himself sink obediently to the edge of the bed – even if it was just because his knees suddenly felt like they were filled with pudding, and couldn't support the weight of his body any more. Katt watched him very carefully, and he didn't

¹ *This needs some work. Book pg. 149*

overlook that she was standing in a somewhat tense position so that she could jump in if he suddenly went limp again. This time Andrew didn't take her unmistakable concern for granted. He really felt as if he could collapse at any moment. Everything was spinning around him, but this time it wasn't due to anything physical. He barely heard what Katt was saying. He could only stare at the unkempt shape next to her, who was now also a head taller than him as he sat there. She sneered down at him with her black eyes like a demon from a fever dream.

But it wasn't a dream. In front of him stood a rat.²

Good God, there was a man-sized, speaking rat standing in front of him!

"Pull yourssselfff together", hissed Ratt. "Have you never seen a girl?"

Not one like that, thought Andrew. He wasn't able to pronounce the words, it was as if his throat had been sown shut. *Girl? Girl?*

"I told you", said Katt, facing her sister but without looking away from Andrew's face. She looked as if she was awaiting a specific reaction from him. No. As if she was *afraid* of it.

"Bullshit", hissed Ratt. Her whiskers quivered like small nervous antennae as she shook her head intensely. "He'sss playing usss!"

Andrew was far from overcoming his shock, but he was at least able to look at the rat girl more closely. Katt's sister wasn't really a rat, at least not completely. She was naked, so he could see that she was nearly completely covered with thick brown

² *Oh shit! Its a rat!*

fur. Her build was more of a girl than a rodent: She had hands, her hind legs had turned into feet that were way too small on which she balanced with remarkable skill, and she even had a long naked whip tail that was nervously twitching back and forth. Her head was also a mixture of that of a human girl and that of a rat, but the result was utterly astounding: She was in no way ugly or even repulsive, in the contrary she was cute in a way that was hard to explain.

“Yeah, whatever you mean”, said Katt and pulled a face that made any further explanation unnecessary.

“Why don’t you go and get something to eat for Andrew? He must be dying of starvation. And don’t tell the others yet. I want to talk to him first.”

Ratt nodded, but didn’t move from where she was standing, instead flashing a more malicious look at Andrew with her little black button-eyes. Then she bared her teeth — just that they weren’t rat teeth, they were regular human pearly whites.

“That’s enough”, said Andrew. “Now its enough.”

Katt just looked at him questioningly, but Ratt puckered up disparagingly — at least that’s how Andrew interpreted it. He hadn’t exactly had much experience reading the facial expressions of a rat.

“You can stop with the theater now”, he continued. “I mean: you’ve had your fun, but I’m good now. You can take off your mask Ratt — or whatever your name actually is.”

Ratt stared at him with a murderous gaze and hissed threateningly — but Andrew had the feeling that none of it was real and that behind the staged anger in her eyes in actuality was only tediously ill-concealed mockery.

“The soup”, reminded Katt. “and put a good amount of meat in it, he has a lot to catch up on.”

Of course Ratt didn’t leave without giving Andrew another angry look – but she left. Andrew looked after her until the curtain had closed behind her, and even then he stared at the direction she had disappeared in for a considerable time.

“Everything okay?”, asked Katt.

“Of course”, mumbled Andrew. “I just had a conversation with a rat, but I’m fine ... I think.”

He tore his gaze from the door with some effort and looked at the girl. Katt’s uncomprehending look made it clear to him that the irony in his voice hadn’t been understood at all. He nodded again and this time in a serious tone “Yeah. I was just ... caught off guard. I didn’t figure something like this would happen.”

Katt remained silent for a moment, then sat down on the edge of the bed with him and laid her hand on his thigh with a strangely familiar gesture. Her touch wasn’t uncomfortable for Andrew, in fact it was the opposite. Even so he just barely could reign in his reaction to swat her hand away. He was frightened and for the most part more confused than he had ever been before in his life.

“You’re really from outside, right?”, she asked.

Andrew kept quiet. He wasn’t capable of thinking a clear thought, much less *answer* anything.

“Ratt still doesn’t really believe it, but I know that its the truth. You were talking in your sleep.”

“And?”, asked Andrew. “What did I say?”

“To be honest I didn’t understand most of it”, Katt admitted. She laughed unsurely, as if confessing it were embarrassing. She

raised her shoulders. “But maybe it was just pointless mumbling. You had a pretty high fever. For a time I wasn’t sure if you were going to survive it.”

“If I was talking in my fever, how would you know that it wasn’t all just nonsense anyway?”, asked Andrew.

“Was it?”

“How should I know? I would have to remember what I had said.” He regretted his rough tone before he was even done speaking them. “Sorry. But I really can’t remember.” He searched through his memory but the result was just a more confusing mess. He wasn’t even sure which parts of what he remembered were real and which parts were a nightmare that was following him after he woke.

“I’m not surprised”, said Katt. “You almost died. You’re the first one that got the sickness and didn’t die.”

“What sickness?” “*The Sickness*”, answered Katt. “Anybody that isn’t from here gets it. Anybody from outside.”

“Like the men in the black suits?” Suddenly at least one of the terrible memories that he had made sense, even though it was terrible through and through. “Is that why they killed their own comrade?”

“They don’t take anyone with them if their suit was damaged”, said Katt. That wasn’t necessarily an answer to his question, but Andrew was still too confused to pay attention to that amount of detail. “Some of them kill themselves. The others die from the sickness.”

“All of them?”

“I don’t know”, said Katt with a shrug. “It is said two of them were brought here, but they already had the sickness and died

without waking up again.”

“It is said?”

“I wasn’t here then”, answered Katt. “It was a long time ago. Maybe it isn’t actually true. Its a really long time ago you know? Even all the old ones didn’t see it themselves, they just heard it from their parents. That’s why a lot of them don’t believe that you’re from outside. But I knew it.”

The words were spoken with the utmost earnest, but something about them didn’t feel right to Andrew. She believed him so it wasn’t that. But the way in which she believed him and had taken him under her wing against the others (whoever that might be) filled him with unease. Little by little the feeling that Katt considered him to be one of her belongings crept over him. Something that she had found and didn’t want to give back.

“Your sister”, he asked. “Ratt, is she ...” He nervously flicked his tongue across his lips and had to start over. “Is she really your sister?”

“Of course”, answered Katt. “Don’t you have siblings?”

“Nope”, answered Andrew. “And if I had any they wouldn’t look like that.”

“Not like *what?*” Katt said sharply.

“Not like you”, explained Andrew carefully. “Not so ... different.”

He had done something wrong. Katt was silent for quite a while before she continued, and her voice was noticeably colder but definitely more inquisitive than before. “Does everyone where you’re from look like you?”

“Like me?” *No hybrids between girls and rats? Nope, definitely not.*

Katt looked at him expectingly, but pulled her hand off his leg and scooted a little bit further away. “You don’t want to talk about it”, she stated.

“No, that’s not it”, said Andrew hastily. He started to reach out to her, but didn’t dare touch her. Odd, when they were running for their lives she had seemed like a pretty good friend. Now that they were alone and in relative safety it felt like they had just met.

“What is it then?”, asked Katt.

“I don’t know.”, answered Andrew distressed. “I...” He shook his head helplessly. Everything was spinning around him. This could only *be* a nightmare! He stood up with a start, stepped forward and almost fell over because he forgot to tie his right shoe, promptly stepping on one of the shoelaces. He hastily bent over, tied his shoe and wanted to turn towards the door, but Katt held him back with a quick motion.

“Don’t”, she said. She almost sounded frightened.

“Why?”, asked Andrew.

“I would rather if you...” Katt raised her shoulders.

“If I don’t go out there?”, he asked with an accompanying gesture towards the door. Katt nodded and Andrew pursed his lips, arriving at the door with two faster steps. With a determined yank he pulled the hanging to the side and stepped out. But in spite of everything he was still level-headed enough to stop after one step out of the door to look around. And in the next moment he was very glad he had done that.

In front of him was a long, asymmetrical square that seemed to have been rectangular at one point. Now the entire row of houses on the other side had collapsed and made an enormous

pile of rubble that shoved long fingers of stone and concrete into the square. The rest of the buildings were more or less heavily damaged and altogether leaning in the same direction, just like he had seen before. Red or yellow fire light shone from behind several windows and on the square two or three large fires, around whom a number of figures sat. In the darkness he could only identify them as stout shadows.

And even that was enough for him to tell that they weren't all *human*...

Some of the outlines were too shaggy as if they had fur, had long pointy ears, or seemed to be humpbacked. Andrew saw more than one figure that had a tail trailing them, or some that seemed to walk on all fours. Even the sounds that he heard reminded him of the grunting of an entire zoo more than sounds humans would make.

"Come back inside", Katt said behind him. After a moment she added. "Please."

Even though it was too dark to see the expressions on the faces of the assembled nightmare figures, Andrew could still feel their gaze resting on him, and the feeling was so uncomfortable that he withdrew only a moment later. Katt was still sitting on the edge of the bed, but Andrew didn't go back to her, instead steering towards one of the ancient chairs and carefully sat down on it; a camping chair made of metal that only had the wire frame left.

"They're all like Ratt?", he mumbled. Katt didn't react to the question and Andrew struggled to continue. Why was it suddenly so difficult for him to find the right words? He usually

didn't have any problems with that. Eventually he got over himself and asked the question that he *actually* wanted to ask.

"But you're ...?"

"What?", Katt interrupted. "Normal?"

Of course she wasn't. *Katt*. At least after he had seen her sister — Ratt —, it should have been clear to him. She had heard things a while before *he* had. Her oddly elegant gliding way to move about and her alarming strength. And it was almost as if she could see in the dark.³

"No", she said after a few seconds. Her voice sounded rough. "I'm a monster just like the everyone else here."

"I didn't mean that", he said hastily.

"Yes, that's exactly what you meant!" Katt stood up with a jolt. The mattress springs squeaked loudly. "Do you want to see? Here! Look very closely!" She stepped towards him and started to rip her clothes off with angry movements — which didn't take long. She only had a shirt and pants with nothing underneath, and no shoes.

In the pale light that filled the room like dully glowing haze, he could only see her body as a silhouette even though she was only two steps away. Just far enough away that he couldn't see any details — or touch her if he had stuck out his arm quickly.

At least at first glance her body seemed to be completely human, even though it was very lean and emaciated. Just looking at it gave him a sharp pang of guilt. Under normal circumstances he would have been embarrassed that a girl had gotten undressed in front of him just like that, but in that moment he didn't feel

³ *Thanks for the catgirls Elon*

anything other than sympathy; and a gradual increase of anger for a fate that forced a kid to grow up in such squalor. Katt's gaunt body was just like her face: You couldn't ignore how pretty she *could have been*, if she would have had the chance.

Then she turned around and he saw what she was actually trying to show him: Between her bony shoulder blades a striped strip of fluffy fur that followed her spine and ended right above her butt cheeks; as if it were supposed to end in a tail that to his relief wasn't there.

Katt stood there motionless for a few seconds, then turned her head and looked at him through blinking eyes. Was he going crazy or did her pupils suddenly look small and shaped like those of a cat?

"And?", she asked pointedly. "Satisfied? Is it what you wanted to know or am I not monstrous enough?"

After some hesitation Andrew stuck out his hand. he had to stand up to get to her, and even the he hesitated again before touching her.

When he finally did it, it was the strangest feeling he had ever had. It felt like regular cat hair, but it was on the back of a *human girl*, and that felt more uncanny and *wrong* than he couldn't have imagined a second ago.

Katt recoiled slightly and shuddered from his touch, but Andrew had the feeling that it was for a completely different reason.

He quickly chased away that thought and pulled his hand back. Katt turned around to him and laid her head into her neck to look up at him, and for a moment they were very close to each other. Her eyes weren't slits like cat ears any more, instead being large and round and seemed to be endlessly deep. Her

look was so vulnerable and shy that it reminded Andrew of a scared deer. He raised his hand again, and the curtain behind them was pushed to the side and a hissing voice asked “Am I disssssturbing you?”

Andrew recoiled so quickly and abruptly that he tripped over the chair that he had just been sitting on. For half a second he stood there in an almost grotesque stance, waving his hands in the air to try and regain his balance before he fell over.

For once he didn't hurt himself, but he still lay there for two, three seconds before struggling to his feet. Ratt stood in the door and held a metal bowl with steaming contents in her dainty hands. She grinned shamelessly as her gaze wandered between Andrew and Katt.

Katt had taken a step back as well. All of a sudden it seemed that she was embarrassed to be in front of Andrew like that, because she folded her arms in front of her chest for a moment before bending over to collect her clothes and slip into them.

“No”, she belatedly answered Ratt's question while attempting to skewer Andrew with her glances. “Andrew just wanted to see how far my deformations reached.”

“I never said that!”, protested Andrew. Of course he had said that. At least *meant* it. Katt left it at another scornful look and stuffed her shirt into her pants with angry movements. Andrew could see in her eyes that she was getting more and more embarrassed that she had gotten undressed in front of him with every second.

Ratt grinned even wider and got closer. Her tail was waving amusedly while she held out the bowl. Andrew automatically grabbed for it and just barely didn't drop it. The metal was as

hot as its contents seemed to be. He quickly took a step back and set the bowl on the table. Ratt's grin didn't change a bit the whole time, but he was pretty sure she had done it on purpose. Her hands looked as vulnerable as baby fingers, but apparently she could withstand significantly more heat than he could. Or she had just kept her cool very well.

So as not to make the situation even more uncomfortable, he hastily set the stool that he had just tripped over upright and fished the rusty spoon out of the bowl. Of course it had slipped in, so he had to burn his fingers even more while he was fishing it out of the hot soup, but he would do anything to keep Ratt's grin from growing any larger. Without making a face he wiped the spoon handle, then his hands on his pants and started eating. The sou was so hot that he burnt his tongue immediately, and his fever-torn lips weren't exactly happy about it either.

But maybe it was a good thing that the soup was that hot. It looked like slightly colored water, and probably tasted like it too if he would have been able to taste it. Andrew remembered that Katt had asked her sister to add plenty of meat to the soup, but she must have missed hearing that or their definitions of *plenty* were completely different. Only a few stringy pieces of meat of an unidentifiable color swam in the almost colorless clear soup. And the spoon looked like it had been places a spoon definitely didn't belong.

Nevertheless, Andrew spooned his soup into his mouth until there was none left and devoured every last shred of the tough meat. He only realized after he was done eating how hungry he actually was, and the thin water soup seemed to not only not have stilled his hunger, but had actually made it worse. But after

all the last meal he had had was breakfast yesterday morning and he had barely touched it, since he was expecting to be able to eat on his father's Yacht by noon.

Andrew almost regretted having thought that. Remembering the boarding school and his plans from yesterday showed him with brutal clarity how much his life had changed in the past twenty-four hours. Just yesterday at this time he was the son of a rich industrialist, living well looked after and far from any dangers, who's brightest outlook was going on a two week long Mediterranean cruise with a man who was his father, but that he barely knew. Since then he had been kidnapped and their plane had been shot down. Someone had shot at him with laser guns. His best friend was dead, shot in front of his eyes, equally meaning- and causeless. He had only avoided being eaten by ravenous killer insects by a hair, and now he was in a city that had been hit by an atom bomb a long time ago.

Had he forgotten anything? Oh yeah, his food had been brought to him by a upright walking rat with a speech impediment.

“Wassss it good?”

Andrew almost let a full second pass before he realized the question was for him, and that Ratt had meant the soup with that; and then it took him another second to decide how he should answer. If she was being sincere and he gave her his honest opinion he would probably snub her, and he didn't want that. But he wouldn't put it past the pair of sisters to play a mean prank on him and would be laughing later, that he had gulped down their old dishwater out of politeness and the afterward had even acted as if it were tasty. He answered with a head

movement that was intentionally so vague that Ratt could decide its meaning herself. It was just absurd that he was still hungry enough that he had to control himself not to ask the rat girl for another portion.

“And now tell us!”, Ratt asked him. Her tail whipped around nervously and tapped a beat to an imaginary beat on the floor.

“Tell you?” Andrew turned to Katt with a questioning look, not to her sister. “What?”

“Of outsssside”, answered Ratt in Katt’s place. “If you’re really from outsssside, you should know what it’ssss like out there.”

“Let him catch his breath first”, Katt came to his defence. “He isn’t even all the way awake!”

“I think he slept long enough”, answered Ratt.

She bent forwards and sniffed Andrew’s face, but he wasn’t sure if she was just following her nature or taking the joke as far as she could. “I don’t think he smells like someone from outside.”, she hissed. “Nope, not at all. He smells more like a dirty spy.”

“Ratt, stop it”, sighed Katt. “I am just as curious as you, but we should give Andrew a chance to fully wake up.”

Andrew gave her a quick thankful look, but he was also somewhat puzzled. Katt’s skittishness confused him more and more. It made the girl even more unpredictable, and if it weren’t more confusing already Katt added: “I can imagine that he has a lot of his own questions.”

“Then you should hurry up and ansssswer them”, hissed Ratt. “A couple of the otherssss are already on their way here and they might not be assss patient assss me.”

Andrew payed attention to that. “What do you mean?”

“People like you aren’t exactly loved around here, that’ssss how I mean it.”, answered Ratt – and this time Andrew knew exactly what those words meant.

“Ratt exaggerates”, Katt intruded. With an angry look in Ratt’s direction she added: “As per usual.”

Ratt reacted by sticking her tongue out at her sister, shamelessly grinning the whole time.

“Go away and take care of Bat”, said Katt. “And keep the others away from us for a minute. Please.”, she added after a moment and with audible hesitation.

Ratt stared at her sister for another heartbeat with her provocative eyes, but then she threw her head in her neck and strutted out the door insulted to a level that little sisters of all time and of all people (and as Andrew was beginning to suspect, species) were capable of.

He waited until right after Ratt had left the room, then turned around to Katt with a worried look. “What did she mean with that?”

“Ratt loves exaggerating”, answered Katt, but Andrew felt that it wasn’t the truth. Katt was suddenly noticeably more nervous than before her sister had come in. She stepped back and forth in place uneasily for a moment and then continued without looking him in the eyes.

“It can’t hurt to be a little careful, you know? A couple of the others ... weren’t happy that I brought you with me. And one of two ...”

“...think I’m a spy, I know.”, Andrew finished her sentence when Katt didn’t. “Maybe it would be good if I knew who’s side I was apparently spying for?”

Katt hemmed and hawed for a moment and Andrew could see that she was straining to find a good excuse or some pretence so she wouldn't have to answer him.

She didn't need either of them. The curtain was pulled to the side and three so completely different figures stepped in, that Andrew had to reign himself in with all his might not to cough from the appalling view, even though he somewhat knew what to expect.

At least he believed he had known.

The first one was about as big as him, just as emaciated and haggard as Katt and looked like a normal human at first look, but had something unmistakably dog-like to him that expressed itself more in his behavior than physically. Directly behind him a figure stepped into the house who's gender Andrew couldn't have possibly guessed. In contrast he could very easily identify the species who's DNA had snaked its way into its human ancestors. Sleek reptilian scales spanned over a flat, nearly expressionless face, and just like on a snake his long split tongue moved mistrustful in his direction, seeming to take in as much information as the yellow reptilian eyes that stared at him coldly. Their eyelids were even thinner than Katt and the Dog-man's and trembled with every movement as if they had no bones or a couple dozen additional joints.

The third creature was so big that it had to bend down to get through the door to step inside, and when it stood back up Andrew couldn't hold down an unbelieving cough.

It was a living, breathing, minotaur.

11

The Minotaur was colossal. Even without the mighty horns that bent forwards he was at least two meters tall. His naked torso had the form and dimensions of a large wine barrel, and even though hunger and other deprivations had left an irreversible mark on him, his muscles looked like they would break railroad ties just for fun some times. The face was one hundred percent that of a bull, but from his neck down he seemed to be a normal person: if you ignored the nearly monstrous musculature.

“So it is true”, the dog man growled. “He’s finally awake¹” He actually *growled*, even though it was clearly modulated and had a surprisingly pleasant sound. All the same every word he said seemed to be accompanied by a threatening growling. The reptilian being didn’t add anything, but its tongue flicked in Andrew’s direction more nervously than it had been.

“Then maybe we can talk to him now”, the minotaur added. His voice was just as resonant and deep as Andrew had imagined,

¹ *You were trying to cross the border, right?*

but he spoke very slowly and added an audible pause after every word as if it were difficult for him to speak. Maybe his vocal cords were more that of a bull than those of a human, Andrew thought. The brain behind that massive forehead was definitely human, which he could tell from one look into his large unmistakably intelligence-filled eyes. Andrew made a mental note not to underestimate the minotaur. This creature was not only strong, but also smart.

He raised his shoulders. "No objections."

Katt gave him an almost imploring look. "This is Andrew", she said hastily, then just as quickly she pointed to the dog man, the snake, and the minotaur. "Rex, Liz, and Bull, the oldest in the tribe."

Short names seemed to be very beloved here, Andrew thought amused, and just as *unimaginative*. As to their authenticity he only had more doubts. He wouldn't dare guessing the age of the snake person, much less the minotaur, but there was no way Rex was older than Katt.

"You can't expect too much from him", Katt continued to the three *elders* in an abrupt tone and distinctly louder than it needed to be. Andrew had the feeling that she was just talking so that *he* wouldn't say anything. "He's still somewhat flustered and his fever isn't all the way gone!"

She made a circular motion near her temple, which apparently meant the same thing across cultures and species. When she turned around to Andrew she gave him the same imploring look she had given him earlier. It was impossible to overlook the immense respect she had for the three figures.

“Why don’t you let us decide that, Katt?”, asked Bull. The words confirmed Andrew’s suspicion. The minotaur was the leader of the three.

“Sure”, Katt said nervously.

“Why don’t you wait outside?”, the minotaur suggested. “You can help Ratt with Bat. I don’t think she is doing too well.”

Katt hesitated and Andrew smiled at her and said cheerily: “Go ahead. If they are your friends, then they’re friends of mine too.” He turned directly towards Bull. “I will answer all of your questions. As much as I can, that is.”

Andrew regretted the last restriction almost as soon as he said it. He could tell that the eyes of a bull were able to exude a feeling of mistrust, but he didn’t break eye contact. After a moment Katt reluctantly turned around and left. Rex followed her to the door. He didn’t hide the fact that he was doing it to make sure she actually left and didn’t just stand right outside the door to listen in.

“Katt said you helped her”, Bull began after the dog man had come back and had nodded to him. “Is this true?”

Andrew was a little surprised. He had expected that the minotaur would have asked where he was from. He simply nodded.

“Why?”, asked Rex.

“Why?” Andrew didn’t understand the question.

“Why”, confirmed the dog man. “Nobody helps anyone if they don’t get something out of it.”

“Where I’m from they do”, answered Andrew automatically.

“Not here”, said Bull. He didn’t even take the out Andrew had given him. “So, why did you help her?”

It was at the forefront of his mind to just tell the truth. *Because I owed her. She had saved my life before that and risked her own life for it.* But for something told him that that wouldn't have been smart. Apparently the values here were different than where he was from.

"Without her I wouldn't have made it", he said — which was the truth. "She knew the way. I didn't."

This answer seemed to satisfy the minotaur. "Katt also told us that the dragons had chased after you", he said. "Is that true?"

Dragons? At first Andrew wasn't sure what Bull was talking about, but then he understood: Frightening flying monster that spewed fire. Dragons. Of course. "Yes"

"Why?", Rex growled.

"That I do not know", answered Andrew.

"You're from outside and you don't know why the dragons were chasing you?", asked Bull. "Why would I believe that?" His drawn-out way of speaking gave the words a heft that warned Andrew to be especially careful. He had just been wondering why the minotaur hadn't immediately asked him where he was from, but now it was clear to him that they weren't talking about anything else this whole time.

"Because that is the truth", he said. "I don't know who these ... *dragons* are. And I don't know why they killed my friend or wanted to kill me. Before I came here I didn't know that they existed."

"Even though you claim to be from outside?", Rex asked. "The dragons come from outside. Who would believe that?"

"Not from where I'm from", answered Andrew. In a lightly snotty tone he added: "There's quite a few places, you know?"

Rex's eyes flashed with anger and Andrew had the feeling that he had said something that wasn't quite so smart. Regardless he not only forced himself to calmly maintain eye contact, but also smiled a little. He himself had never had a dog, but he knew that you could never show weakness towards them.

Liz hissed and Bull said slowly: "That's enough." Andrew noticed that the snake had always hissed before the minotaur had said anything. Was it possible that he had been wrong and that Bull was just the translator for the snake person?

"I'm sorry", he said. "But that is the truth. The world I am from is very large. I have never seen anything like these dragons before or ever heard of them, you have to believe me. I also don't know why they are trying to kill me."

"Then why are you here?", asked Bull.

Andrew almost laughed out loud. "Definitely not on purpose", he answered. "Nick and I crashed in our airplane. At least that's what I thought at first." He instinctively decided to leave off the whole prologue and not to say anything about Scarhand and his companions either. It was already complicated enough. "But now I think one of your dragons shot us down."

"An airplane?" Rex sniffed his shoulder as if he could tell if Andrew was lying by doing that. "What is that supposed to be?"

"A machine", answered Andrew. "A contraption that flies."

Mistake number ... oh whatever. A huge mistake since not only Rex took a quick step backwards. Liz hissed agitatedly and Bills eyes were saturated with mistrust.

"Like the dragons?", barked Rex.

"No", answered Andrew quickly. "Well yes, but ... " He shook his head confusedly. Something told him that a lot of things — his

life for example – were depending on his next words, but it was getting more and more difficult to find the right words.

“But?”, asked Bull/

“An airplane isn’t anything special where I’m from.”, he said carefully. “But they aren’t dangerous. You just use them to get from one place to the next. Not to kill people.”

“You fly from one place to another one with it?”, barked Rex. Maybe it was a mocking laugh. “What would that be good for?”

“Because its fast”, answered Andrew. “You can go the same distance in a few hours that it would usually take weeks or even months to travel.”

Bull and the dog man looked at each other with a knowing look, but Andrew couldn’t tell if they didn’t understand his question or if they just didn’t believe anything he said. Or both.

“Then its bigger outside than here?”, asked Bull.

Andrew didn’t know how big *here* was, but he nodded nonetheless. “I think so.”

“And they’re all like you?”

“Like me?” Andrew asked, but he already felt that the answer was a little too rash. From Bull’s and Rex’s point of view all the other people were *like him*. “More or less”, he constrained.

“I don’t believe him”, barked Rex. Liz hissed and Bull shook his head.

“We will see”, said Bull. “For now he should stay here. We’ll decide what will happen to him after the hunt. In the mean time he can stay here with Katt. But in my eyes you are responsible for him.” He had said the last sentence louder than the rest. He laughed and continued after a quick pause: “You understand

me, Katt? Come on in and answer. I know that you're standing outside eavesdropping."

For a moment nothing happened, but then the cloth in front of the door was pulled to the side and Katt sheepishly stepped in; followed closely from a somewhat smaller shadow with pointy ears.

"As if I needed to", Katt mumbled sulkily.

The minotaur laughed good-naturedly. "I know how sharp your hearing is. But the same doesn't go for your sister. Instead she is much more curious. You heard what we said?"

Katt nodded.

"Then remember it", Bull continued. "And pay good attention to your friend. If he does something that hurts the tribe, you'll be responsible for it."

Andrew tried to imagine what it would be like to hold a really long conversation with the bull-headed giant, much less an argument. It probably made people go insane waiting on someone who took fifteen minutes for each sentence.

"We'll be back this evening and will speak to your friend", he continued. "Make sure that he is rested up until then, because we have a lot of questions for him. And find something for him to do. He needs to work if he wants to eat."

With that he left. Liz followed him and lastly Rex too, but not without a final menacing growl in Andrew's direction. Katt gave him an angry look and Ratt stuck her tongue out at the dog man – however only after they had left and the curtain had closed so she could be sure he didn't see her.

"So those are your leaders?", asked Andrew.

"Leaders?"

“Your eldest”, Andrew corrected himself. “Those who have the say around here.”

Katt needed a couple ticks to understand what he meant. Then much to Andrew’s surprise she shook her head. “We don’t have any leaders”, she said.

“It didn’t sound like that just now”

“Bull and the others are the oldest”, Katt said completely uncomprehendingly. “Bull is very smart. He tells us what the best for all of is, but he would never order us to do anything.”

“You all do what he tells you because you know that its the best thing for you”, Andrew assured himself.

“Yes”, answered Katt. “Anything else would be dumb, right?”

“Sure”, sighed Andrew. He suddenly didn’t have any motivation to continue *this* conversation. Somehow it demoralized him. Instead he made a movement towards the door with his head.

“Can I leave the house or am I under house arrest?”

“You can do what you want”, answered Katt. But Andrew hadn’t forgotten what the Minotaur had said. Of course he wouldn’t do anything that would get Katt into trouble.

“Can you show me around?”, he requested. “I just don’t want to get lost.”

Katt gave him a quick thankful look. She had understood. Nevertheless she hesitated and only nodded after a considerable while. Andrew had the feeling that he had done something wrong again, but for the life of him he couldn’t figure out what. Katt didn’t make any efforts to explain anything. Without a word she turned around and left the building.

12

Even if it wasn't by much, the part of the city that Katt and her tribe lived in was different than the part where he had met the cat girl and ran for his life. There was one important difference: The night sky that spread out above the crumbling roofs of the ill-treated city wasn't a light-swallowing darkness, but a completely normal sky with a small sickle moon and countless twinkling stars.

And they had only left the house for a couple of minutes when it got bright. The sky in the east started to turn grey and started to brighten almost unnaturally quickly, but Andrew kept his thoughts in check even though they wanted to go on absurd wanderings. They were high in the mountains, which was known for how quickly it got bright, but also dark in the evening. Even if he didn't have a shred of proof for it, by now he was completely sure that he was on a different planet in the future or in another dimension. And he was also (pretty) sure that he wasn't having a nightmare or was hallucinating the whole thing. He was in the time he belonged in, and he was

actually experiencing all of it. He just did not have a single idea as to why.

Katt had accompanied him out of the house obediently, but had stood still, keeping just as silent as before and Andrew had left it at that for a while. What he was seeing was enough to keep his thoughts busy for a while.

Bull, Liz and Rex weren't the only uncanny mixtures between human and animal that he saw that morning, and not even the most bizarre. Andrew chose not to focus too much on a lot of the figures to keep them from following him into his nightmares, but he did see that not *all* of the members of the tribe were as mutated as Bull or Ratt. A lot of the figures that sat, ate breakfast, or were just taking in the sunrise at the extinguished fire looked completely normal. If they even had any mutations they were either hidden under their clothes or were so little that they weren't noticeable.

After they had silently strolled across the Plaza for a while the silence got so uncomfortable that he couldn't stand it any more. He stood still, turned around to her and tried to catch her eyes, but he didn't manage it. Just to say anything (and to not talk about Bull and the rest; he wasn't motivated to do that) he asked: "How is Bat doing?"

Katt threw a quick glance in the direction that they had come from before she answered. Fires burnt in most but not all of the buildings that surrounded the Plaza. One of them was lit up enough that it was bright as day inside, with fires even going on the roof of the three-storied building.

"She's getting better.", she said. "She's having a baby. But it doesn't look good."

“I’m sorry”, answered Andrew. “Hopefully it isn’t anything too bad?”

Katt shrugged. “It will only take two or three more days. Then we’ll see.”

“Is she your friend?”

Katt looked at the well-lit building again before she answered. “She’s having a baby”, she said as if that were enough of an answer. It could be that that was enough of one for her. Andrew didn’t ask her to elaborate any more. He didn’t really want to talk about Bat. It was just about breaking the increasingly awkward silence to him, and he had finally succeeded.

“So this is your ...” He searched for the right word for a moment. “camp”, he settled on. Katt just nodded.

“How big is your tribe?”, asked Andrew.

“Very big”, answered Katt. A trace of pride was interlaced with her voice. “We’re almost a hundred strong. The biggest tribe of all.”

“There are other tribes?”, asked Andrew surprised.

“Five others”, answered Katt. “But none of them are as big as ours. And we have the most successful hunters. Last winter nobody starved to death!”

“And even that is a success, huh?” Katt’s answer made him mad since he could feel that the whim of fate wasn’t the only thing responsible for the miserable life Katt and all these pitiful creatures had to live.

“That is more than some other tribes can say”, Katt reciprocated in a lightly wounded tone. “Is it not like that where you’re from?” She apparently did not understand his anger.

“Of course not!” he answered furiously. “Most people where I’m from don’t even know what hunger is!”

“Then you are from a very happy place”, said Katt. She sounded sad.

Andrew was going to give an even more furious answer, but left it at a wordless shake of his head, adding: “Sorry.”

“What for?”

“Nothing”, said Andrew. “Well, tell me about your people. How do you live here? What do you do? What do you live on?”

Katt looked at him for a long time and in a way that sent a shudder down Andrew’s back. “I would much rather hear something about you”, she admitted. “About the outside.”

“You don’t know anything about it, do you?” Andrew’s gaze left Katt’s face for a moment and glid to the mountains that surrounded the ruined city on all sides but one. Only the north was empty of mountain peaks, with only hazy distance to be seen. “Have you all always lived in this valley?”

“Nobody knows”, answered Katt. She shrugged and for a moment her gaze glid in the same direction Andrew’s did. A peculiar look appeared in her eyes that Andrew couldn’t identify. But it wasn’t pleasant. He wasn’t sure he actually wanted to know the story that was behind that look.

“I was born here and so was my mother”, she continued after a small eternity, unprompted and very shyly. “Nobody knows what was before.”

“What do you mean, nobody?”, assured Andrew. “There must be people who remember. Your parents! Or the old ones! I don’t mean Bull and the supposed old ones, but the *actually* old ones!”

Katt looked at him unintelligibly. “Nobody gets older than Bull or Liz.”, she said. “Bull has almost survived twenty winters. Nobody before him has lived that long before him, and the only reason he made it so far is because he is so strong. But he might not survive the next hunt or the one after that.

“And that doesn’t bother him?”

“That’s how life is”, said Katt apathetically. “Bull knows that. Is it different where you’re from? Do you never die?”

“We do”, answered Andrew. “But not like that! At twenty? Life is just starting at that point!”

Katt looked at him with a look that he didn’t understand at first. Then as he understood her look he recoiled and felt bad about what he had said. If what Katt had said was true, then she already had most of her life behind her; In fact it was the *biggest* part of her life. His words must be pure scorn.

“Sorry”, he said again. “But I ... I just don’t understand! What happened here? Why won’t anyone help you?”

“Help?”, repeated Katt uncomprehending. “But who and why?”

Andrew ignored the question about *who*. The only contact that these pitiful creatures had had with people from the outside were clearly just the men from the black fighter helicopters, which these people aptly named *Dragons* and that had already demonstrated what their *help* looked like. But why?

“Why did you help me?”, he asked.

“Because you had saved my life before that”, answered Katt. “I repay my debts.”

“That isn’t true”, Andrew insisted. “You started it. I would have been dead if you hadn’t pulled me off that roof. And now

don't you tell me it wasn't dangerous! They would have shot you just like they would have done to me!"

"Maybe I was just being dumb", Katt answered spitefully. "Or maybe I didn't want them to win."

Her change in tone didn't elude Andrew. Apparently it wasn't common for people to help strangers out here, and Katt seemed to be embarrassed to have broken that rule. He left it at that, at least for the moment.

"So, what happened here?" he asked again. He made a wide gesture. "Who did this to you?"

"Did this to us?"

"Somebody destroyed this city", Andrew persevered. "You must know who or why. There ... must be some kind of stories!"

"I don't know what you mean", said Katt. It sounded honest.

"Nobody here has any memories of the past?", asked Andrew doubtfully. "No lore? Not even legends of a big fire that fell from the skies, of as far as I'm concerned the wrath of the gods, or maybe a dragon that had burnt your world?"

"That's nonsense", answered Katt. "It has always been like this."

"No, god damn it, it was not!", contradicted Andrew. "And it isn't even that long ago!"

"How would you know?", asked Katt. Suddenly her mistrust was back, stronger than before. "Until now you have been acting like you don't know anything about us."

"That is true", answered Andrew. "But you know, we have cities like this too. Just that they are very different."

"And how?", Katt wanted to know.

“Not destroyed”, answered Andrew. “Not burnt like this one. The houses there have roofs and windows and doors.” He shook his head. “Have you never wondered who built all of this?”

“Nobody builds anything”, answered Katt offhandedly. “It’s not allowed.”

“Nonsense”, said Andrew vehemently. “Something isn’t right here Katt. Something happened here. Something terrible. And apparently none of you want to know what it was.”

“Knowing is dangerous”, answered Katt. It came as quickly as a lifelong memorized reflex, a litany that she automatically recited without thinking about it for a fraction of a second. “And useless. What do you get from knowing what happened before?”

Andrew started to formulate a sharply-worded answer, but he let it go. It didn’t make sense to argue with Katt. He kept silent.

“Maybe Rex and the others are right”, said Katt.

“Right? About what?”

“They say that you’re dangerous to us.”

“Yeah, maybe”, Andrew said with a shrug. “But you don’t have to worry. I won’t be here long enough to actually be dangerous for you.”

Katt wrinkled her brow. “What do you mean?”

“Just like I said”, answered Andrew. “I’m definitely not staying here.”

“Nonsense”, Katt rebutted. “Nobody leaves from here.”

“Has anyone ever tried it?”

“A couple”, answered Katt. “They all died. Nobody gets over the mountains.”

“I can”, Andrew insisted. Katt wanted to talk back again, but this time Andrew’s quick and slightly louder tone cut her off –

even though he felt like he shouldn't say it. "I'm not just anyone, you know? I mean: I'm neither extraordinarily important nor famous or irreplaceable. But my father is a very influential man and is also filthy rich. He noticed a long time ago that our plane hasn't arrived like it was planned, and he will move heaven and earth to find me." With a snide noise he motioned towards the black mountains that loomed over the roofs of the city like gigantic stone prison guards. "Those mountains would have to reach all the way to the moon. I'll bet it won't even take three days before he finds me."

"Are you sure?", asked Katt.

Something in the way that she asked that irritated Andrew. Maybe it would have scared him if he would have let her. He still nodded.

"You had the sickness, Andrew.", Katt said after a couple seconds. It was still in the same empathetic tone that was making him more and more uncomfortable.

"And?"

"You had a heavy fever", Katt continued. "We all thought that you would die, but you made it."

Andrew stared at her. His heart started beating. "How long ... did I sleep?", he asked hesitantly.

"Ten days", answered Katt.

13

Almost half of the day was spent in a state of shock between speechless horror, bewildered disbelief, and anger. Ten days? Apparently he laid there in a fever for *ten days* without noticing it? Other than that it was hard for him to believe it, he just didn't *want* to. The consequences would have been too frightening.

Just like before, Andrew was convinced that his father would try anything to find him. Surely he had already started the largest manhunt the country had ever seen, and he wouldn't rest until his people had overturned every stone, searched every lake, looked in every well, and grilled every applicable previously arrested wannabe-criminal for any information.

But ten days was an unbelievably long time. Of course Andrew had never been the subject of a manhunt, but he wasn't the first person to disappear, and he had followed other manhunts on the news: Hundreds of policemen and thousands of volunteers that searched woods and marshes, supported by airplanes, helicopters, and sometimes even fighter jets that would scan the ground below them with thermal cameras and all sorts of other

technical equipment. Regrettably, he also knew that the longer the undertaking took, the less likely it was that they would be successful. Missing people were mostly found quickly – or not at all. Most of the missing people that weren't found within the first couple of hours or days would only be found after weeks or sometimes months; Buried in the woods and found by people walking by or in a plastic bag that got caught in the dam of a sewage treatment plant.

It took some effort for Andrew to reign in his rampaging fantasy. In the end he was still alive, and with some luck it could stay that way. But not here. He just couldn't imagine that his father would give up before he hadn't found him – or held the definitive proof that he was dead in his hands.

Andrew didn't want it, but the thought created a reality in his head that he would have loved to deny: The men in the black outfits that had collected the wreckage of the Cessna and loaded it into the helicopters that had landed on the plaza. Maybe they *had* convinced his father of his death a long time ago, and instead of a search party he was standing in front of an open grave with an empty coffin in it, just like they did in some symbolic burials. Maybe he was already dead and this was hell, or at least the purgatory where he would spend the next six hundred thousand years or at least until Judgement Day.

Just that as far as he knew he had not done anything bad enough to deserve this.

The sound of naked feet on a hard stone floor tore him out of his sullen contemplations. He looked up and noticed that Katt had come in and was slowly approaching him with an almost shy smile. He returned it, even though it was more out of relief

that it wasn't her sister, but not *just* for that reason. Ratt had come in two or three times and he was happy when she left every time. He didn't have anything against the rat-girl; It was quite the opposite. Once you got used to the way she looked she was kinda cute in her own way. But she was also a complete pain in the neck: Her character had inherited a healthy amount of the non-human parts of her heritage.

"How are you doing?", asked Katt.

Andrew shrugged. Katt wasn't just making conversation, he knew that much. She was actually worried about him. "How am I supposed to be doing?"

Katt slowly got closer and stood still two steps away from him. Andrew could see how hard she was debating what to say. Eventually she shrugged her shoulders and made an awkward hand movement behind her, towards the exit.

"I have water duty", she said hesitantly. "Do you want to come with?"

What ever *water duty* was. Andrew shrugged, letting the motion seamlessly transform into a nod and standing up. He had sat here half a day and felt bad for himself; maybe it would be good if he got some fresh air and let the bleak thoughts blow away with the wind. "Why not?"

Katt looked at him questioning for another moment, but then she nodded and went outside, Andrew following close behind her.

The sun was shining down so brightly from the cloudless sky that he was forced to close his eyes and raised his hand over his face. It was very warm, almost hot, and there was not even the slightest breeze. Andrew let a moment pass for his eyes to

adjust to the change in light conditions, then motioned to Katt with a nod that she should keep going. She motioned to the left, but went in the opposite direction out of the same movement. Two steps away from the door an unorganized row of old metal canisters, rusty and big enough to hold at least twenty liters each. They were similar to the containers that held the *firewater* that Katt used to protect the safe place.

She took two of the containers that were apparently empty and Andrew followed her and did the same. Katt doubtfully furrowed her brow.

“Are you sure?”, she asked.

“What?”

“The canisters get pretty heavy when they’re full”, answered Katt.

“Doy you think you’ve recovered enough to be able to do that?”

“I guess we’ll see”, Andrew answered. Even though he knew that Katt only meant well, they bothered him again. Mostly because she was probably right. He felt everything but refreshed and as a matter of fact he already felt the weight of the two *empty* canisters. But of course he was too proud to accept Katt’s almost unnoticeable offer and only to only entertain himself with one canister. Instead he added in an obviously spiteful tone: “Bull said I need to work if I want to eat.”

“He didn’t say that you have to overexert yourself”, answered Katt, but left it at a shrug and turned around. Andrew was finally smart enough not to continue the senseless discussion, but to shut up instead.

In the bright daylight the ruined city made a maybe not friendly, but at least less creepy impression. The ruins were the same as they were before, immense black skeletons that looked like they had never housed anyone. The left side of the plaza was blocked by piles of rubble that nobody had seemed to put in the effort to move, and even though Katt had said there were at least one hundred members in the tribe, most of the buildings seemed to be empty. Only a hand full of the doors had the grey rags that Katt and her sister used as curtains. Almost nobody from the tribe was currently able to be seen, which Andrew wasn't too sad about. On the other side of the large plaza some kids were playing, but Andrew decided he didn't want to look at them too closely. Even if he had gotten a taste of the tribe through Ratt, Liz, and the others, he felt it would be better to get to know the rest of the menagerie in homeopathic doses.

Shortly before they left the plaza, Andrew stopped and looked around him. On the roof of the house next to where Katt and her sister lived a fire was still burning. It was too bright to really see the flames, but Andrew could see the column of oily black smoke that went almost completely vertical in the unmoving air, before it dissolved into the air thirty or forty meters up. He blinked questioningly.

"She'll have her child today", answered Katt, who had noticed his facial expression. "At the latest tomorrow."

"You always light a bonfire when one of you expects a child?"

"Is it not like that where you're from?", asked Katt blankly.

Andrew laughed. "No. Our tribes are ... a little bigger than yours."

"That much bigger?"

Andrew nodded.

“How many?”, asked Katt.

Andrew thought about it for a moment, then he made a sweeping motion around himself with the empty canister. “Imagine this whole city were full of humans. A whole family would live in each room.”

Katt’s eyes widened. “I don’t believe you.”

“And then imagine it was a hundred times as big”, Andrew continued. “And there were a hundred of those cities.”

Katt stared at him further in bewilderment and in her eyes a fear appeared that Andrew didn’t understand at first. She laughed, but it sounded nervous and not real. “You’re pulling my leg”, she said. “No tribe can get that big. What would they all eat?”

Andrew mentally warned himself to be careful. It might not matter to him if Katt believed him or not, but maybe the danger was that she *would* believe him. Maybe he wasn’t the only one that needed the truth in homeopathic doses.

“Yeah, you are probably right”, he said ambiguously and made motions to continue walking. She looked at him for a moment longer with such hopelessness and bewilderment that Andrew almost regretted his own words. As they kept walking Andrew mentally warned himself again to be much more careful with what he said. He really should be thinking about every word he says very carefully.

They left the plaza and stepped on to a street that was mostly blocked by rubble and other debris. It continued straight for a good one and a half or two kilometers. The houses, even though they were destroyed, were still so tall that they held most of the

sunlight back; At the floor of the brick ravine it was not only darker, but also noticeably cooler than on the big plaza where the tribe lived. only a small stripe on the left lay in the sun, but Katt avoided walking there, instead opting to march along the other side even though they were constantly forced to climb over frequent boulders and other rubble. Andrew was wondering why she was doing that, but he figured that Katt would know what she was doing and followed her without complaints. He also passed on asking how far they had to go. With two full water canisters the way back would be torture.

While he was closely following Katt he took the time to really look around himself.

Part II

THE DARK LAND

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Part III

TITLE OF BOOK 3

1

Part IV

TITLE OF BOOK 4

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