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CHARACTER LIST

(known by name)

CLANS

THE DOG CLAN

Machdik Majtrej - considered an elected official

Demir - "elder brother", tutor and teacher of Machdik.

Jaras - Machdik's friend

Majtrej - father of Machdik, member of the clan council

Bahija - Mashdik's mother

Chetan - member of the clan council, operates the pump.

Piran - rokona driver

Oriana - member of the clan council, daughter of an official from outside the clan

Grandmother Szechna - shaman, member of the clan council

Grandfather Babur - one of the oldest villagers.

TREE CLAN

Zerah - village chief

Raja - Zerah's wife, "growing up".

VIGILANTES - TWIN HEARTS CLAN

Eilís Finnegan, Éanna Hayden, Blánid and Darina - residents of the facility

Siobhan and Phelan - priests

Wynn - a man with no ties of heart

CLAN OF THE BLIND - THE SINGING FAMILY

Anaru - one of the men

Manaia - one of the women

NIGHT WALKERS

Sovanna - President

Chenda - one of the defenders

CLAN OF THE ETERNAL FIRE

Jovan, Davor, Sanja, Cvetka - children

EASTERN JUNCTION

Gyuri Saz - ambassador in rhinoceros skin

Edina Fehér - one of the women

Vili Halász - young champion of the rhinoceros-skinned people

DOWNTOWN

"SCHOOL."

Ransam Saphed - Group Leader

Karan - Ransam's colleague

Ove - a big boy who lives in a "school".

Louise - a girl from the "school" who takes care of the sick.

Hayley - the girl who helps make up Aia's outfits.

RESISTANCE

Johtaja - leader of the resistance movement

Hiiri - Johtai's assistant

Valko - a chubby boy who shoots well.

Zyanya - middle-aged woman with dark skin.

ELITE

Eco Moonlight - City Manager

Torelli - is part of the manager's entourage

Jaana Polishenko - a lady living in the rich neighborhood

Jacqueline - Mrs. Polishenko's maid

Caelia and Frank Valentini - young married couple, neighbors of Mrs. Polishenko

Mr. Blumenthal - an old man called Grandpa

Charles - Mr. Blumenthal's servant

DECEASED

Mathis J. Carthy, Alan T. Ring - scientists

Abreu - politician

Roger Johnson - politician

OTHER

Sidonia and Eliza - nicknames Aii and Hiiri

GLOSSARY

Dooies - dead creatures that suck the life out of living beings.

Dust - a source of energy.

Heart of the Bond - a term for one person in a Vigilant Clan empath couple. Each person in the couple is the heart of the bond for the other.

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APTER 1 The dog clan

Before I opened my eyes, I heard voices, footsteps, rustling and the sound of wind.

- Hey, look, there's a man lying here.

- Is he alive?

Someone started shaking me.

- Can you hear me? Hey, wake up. Are you in pain?

- Mm... Five more minutes. - I didn't want to get up. Consciousness struggled to break through the layer of stupor.

- Did it fall? I think the ceiling collapsed.

- Who knows, there are no visible injuries. Hey! Look at me. Can you move? - Someone started tapping me on the cheek.

I obediently opened my eyes. Above me I saw the thin face of a man whose age was hard to determine. His skin was marked with fine lines and wrinkles, but he couldn't have been more than forty. He looked like a bird of prey and this impression was reinforced by the penetrating look of his gray eyes. The man had a beard a few days old and gray hair.

- He appeared to be in shock. - A boy stood to his left, looking over the man's shoulder. He had breakfast-colored skin and even features. A small, straight nose, expressive eyes, and nicely cut lips would please the eye of an aesthete. To his right was crouched a second, slightly less handsome man, apparently of a similar age. Both were slightly disheveled and had shoulder-length black hair.

I wiggled the fingers of my right hand, fumbled with my feet and, having decided that I actually felt pretty good, leaned on my elbow.

- Don't get up yet. Let me... - The man gently took me under the chin and pointed the lamp at my eyes. - The student reacts - he announced with satisfaction.

- Did you fall from an upper floor? Or were you knocked out by a piece of broken debris? - one of the boys speculated.

- I have no idea. I don't remember anything like that.

I sat a little more comfortably, looking around, while the oldest of the three did a meticulous examination. He was checking for signs of a blow to my head, for broken bones, for internal injuries. Distracted, I answered his questions with half-words and mumbles, looking at the place where we were. I was sitting on a pile of rubble in a large ruined building. Indeed, the ceiling above us had collapsed and we could see the ceiling of the upper floor up. The place looked quite old. Vegetation slowly began to occupy the concrete interior. I didn't notice any wooden elements. Even the windows and passageways were devoid of frames and doorways.

We were in a large room with daylight. In the distance, I could also see a green spot indicating where the exit was.

- What is this place? - I asked curiously.

- The old factory. This is where our clan's border is," the man replied, giving me his hand and helping me to my feet.

- What is your name? - the handsomest boy asked.

- I don't remember - I thought about it. - In fact, I don't remember anything.

- I am Machdik. And this is Demir and Jaras. - He pointed to the man and the peer in turn.

- You don't know how you got here? - Demir asked, piercing me from side to side with his gray eyes. I shook my head, helpless. - And where do you live? You don't remember either? Your family? Your clan? - I shook my head at everything. I stood up carefully, supported by Demir, and looked at myself. I was dressed in light-colored pants with pockets, a bland gray T-shirt, and a brown jacket with a collar. I began to search the nooks and crannies of my clothes. In the inside pocket of the jacket, I found a small black rectangle and an ID card. On the card was a picture of a girl with a pleasant but average, featureless, round face. Her brown hair was tied back in a ponytail. I reached over to the back of her head and ran my fingers through a strand of hair that had been pulled up in the same manner as in the photo. Below the portrait was the signature: Aia Ring. Beyond that, the plastic card was covered with strings of tiny letters and numbers and transparent, convex shapes of dots and dashes. Having lost interest in the card, I handed it to Demir and reached into a pocket on my left thigh. I pulled out a small folding knife. Curiosity. Demir handed me back the map and said with some reservation:

- Aio, let us take you to our clan headquarters. Although we have found no visible traces, your memory loss indicates some kind of trauma. It is good for you to remain in our custody.

- Thank you. - I accepted the offer with gratitude and smiled with confidence.

- You don't look worried," Jaras, the other boy, said to me, puzzled. He had more freckles than Machdik and a wide mouth inclined to smile.

- In fact, I feel excited," I admitted honestly.

The boys giggled with amusement, while Demir gave me a wry look. Maybe I shouldn't talk like that, but show more concern for my identity? But somehow I didn't feel depressed.

We emerged from the ruined building into the daylight. The surrounding area was covered with lush vegetation, all things you wouldn't expect to find near a factory. The grasses had dried, the leaves were slowly turning yellow, and some were already rustling underfoot. Still, it was green enough to effectively obscure visibility. On top of that, the air was not too cold, but still crisp - everything pointed to the beginning of fall. I turned to take a look at the building. Three stories, angular, unplastered. Its size disappeared from view.

- Where are we? - I asked as we followed a path through a wood.

- On the outskirts of the City - Machdik replied briefly, turning slightly toward me. We walked in a line. Demir first, then Machdik, me and Jaras at the end.

- Is it the city? - I expressed my doubts.

- No, it's not. The very edge.

Only now, in the light of day, was I able to examine my companions' clothing. They wore straight-cut pants and thick gray cloth shirts. Demir had a tunic tied around his waist with a belt, while the boys had short, loose shirts sewn diagonally across their chests. They looked worn, but the edges were decorated with beautiful colorful embroidery.

We walked for a while until we came to a cracked roadway, which was crossed by a very tall steel fence. Visible through the mesh of the fence, the road was probably an old exit from the city. The surface was in very poor condition, with weeds and tree roots sticking out, having torn up the asphalt. We approached a fence that emitted a quiet hum. When we reached the corner, Demir stopped and turned to me:

- There is a section here that we need to cross. Can you do it?

- Yes, I think so... But why?

- Let us explain it to you on the spot. You have to run as fast as you can, okay? Don't look back and don't stop. Run after Machdik and Jaras, I will be right behind you. Are you ready? - he turned to the others. The boys nodded seriously. - Now!

I was off and running. I was happy to find that I was running easily, I was not dizzy or in pain. I easily followed Jaras' back. We ran along the path, shielding our faces from the growing branches. Soon the forest ended, turning into thick blackberry bushes. Only in places did young trees grow. I almost lost track when we came upon a cracked road, barely visible under the weeds and mosses. The crushed asphalt cracked underfoot. After a while, I noticed some buildings. We ran between them, not slowing down. We only braked under a small shack, built some distance from the rest of the houses. My companions were panting heavily, I didn't even gasp.

I fixed my gaze on the rows of buildings. They looked rather unhappy. One- and two-story terraced houses and a few scattered barracks. Plaster was falling off, paint was fading. Some of the windows were empty, devoid of glass. Small gaps in the walls were filled with glue. Walls that didn't stand the test of time were torn down. The roofs were patched together like a patchwork. Pieces of sheet metal, boards, clay... There was an obvious lack of materials. In the past, this could have been a housing estate, part of a village. There was still an asphalt road in the middle, partially covered with earth. Where we were, there was a little square and this little private house, which was more like an open-air museum than a subdivision. It was

small, one-story, with uneven clay walls, covered with thin tiles. The wooden shutters were painted with colorful patterns, and a bulky, burnt-out fireplace was attached to one wall.

- Machdik, go and get grandmother Szechna," said Demir. The boy disappeared into the hut, and after a while he came out, followed by a little grandmother.

She had long gray braids and a tan face, wrinkled like crumpled tissue paper. She wore the same light-colored clothes as the three I had met, complete with a woolen shawl and poncho draped over her shoulders. The woman supported herself on a knotted ankh, which clattered with a handful of beads, glasses, knuckles, and all sorts of little things that looked like trash. The grandmother walked past me, giving me a long look full of reservation. Her eyes were small and slightly squinted, but she wasn't wearing glasses. She approached Demir and the others. All three bowed their heads and the grandmother, gesturing with her ankh and her free hand, muttered words unintelligible to me. The ankh rattled with each movement, drawing circles before turning back into a convenient stick.

- Introduce yourself - she turned to me sharply.

I silently handed her the ID card. The grandmother looked at it meticulously and, handing it back, asked:

- Where are you from?

I sighed, thinking I was going to answer the same questions again.

- I don't remember.

Grandma Szechna just nodded.

- Amnesia?

I shrugged. The old woman turned to the boys:

- Machdiku, go get your father and bring all the members of the clan council. Jaras, Madame Oriana is in the field. Demir, Chetan should be at his house. Tell him we have a meeting. And you, Aio, come.

I obediently followed the woman inside the hut. Most of the space inside was occupied by a large table and benches. The ceiling of the hut was low, with bunches of herbs hanging from it here and there. In one corner was a small stove on which soup was quietly boiling. On the shelves were clay and plastic dishes. To the right of the stove, a slightly ajar door revealed the passage to the bedroom. Next to it was a cabinet, probably made of steel, but painted white. Rust was showing under the paint in the corners. Behind the cabinet, a pile of wood was gathered. The floor was made of rubble and crushed stones mixed with clay. They were paved evenly and covered with a carpet. Under the carpet, a flap protruded into a compartment in the floor.

- Some tea? - the grandmother asked almost gently. I nodded, afraid that a refusal would be met with disapproval.

She handed me a container with a strange smelling beverage. I took a sip carefully. A mixture of different herbs. I didn't dare ask for sugar. The grandmother paced around the room for a while before sitting at the end of the table and looking out the window. Some time later, the convocateurs arrived. Machdik opened the door and let in a stocky man. It was probably the boy's father, for he had long hair like his son and sparkling, cheerful eyes. His facial features were somewhat blurred by the growth of his beard, but they still betrayed an obvious kinship. Behind him came a tall woman with a long, narrow nose and equally narrow, tight lips. Machdik crept up behind them. Jaras was not there. Those present were seated at the table, casting curious glances in my direction. I bowed my head in greeting. In a low voice, Machdik's father exchanged a few words with the woman sitting next to him. A moment later, Demir arrived with an older man with gray hair accompanying him. The slightly stooped and extremely thin old man was the only one to greet me with a pale smile. They both sat down at the table.

Demir and Machdik were asked to report on their trip to the factory ruins. Demir succinctly presented the entire incident, while Machdik, unprompted, injected his three cents.

- So, Grandma Szechna spoke up when Demir was silent, we have a case of amnesia here. The girl does not seem to be weakened and has no physical injuries. Nevertheless, she does not remember who she is, where she came from or why. The question remains whether she is telling the truth.

I shivered and everyone's eyes were on me.

- Why should I lie? If I wanted to, I would say that I came from a nearby town.

- This is a good example. The girl doesn't really know how to lie.

- Maybe she went into some kind of shock or was given a strong medication," suggested Father Machdika.

- What are you going to do? - asked a woman with a stern face.

- I don't know yet.

- Aio - the grandmother addressed me by my name for the first time - the clan council needs to consider what to do in your case. Wait outside. You will have Machdik to accompany you.

The boy dawdles a bit, but obediently gets up. We went out in front of the cottage.

- Come on, let's go sit somewhere.

Nearby was a bonfire circle protected by stones, and benches stood around it. We sat on one of them.

- We are not all like that in the clan. - Machdik smiled apologetically. - But these old crones are like that. They care about the well-being of all of us.

- And what is this clan?

- We are the dog clan. The area around the factory, this village and the surrounding fields are our land. We avoid going outside its boundaries.

- Why?

- Because the curse is on us. If we cross the borders of the clan, the demons chase us.

- Is that why we ran from the factory to here? - I finally figured it out.

- Yes, we had to cross a part of the no-man's land. Did you see anything?

I denied it.

- You said village... This old settlement you call a village?

- Anything strange?

- Earlier, you mentioned that when we were near the factory, we were in the city. Do you mean the forest?

- Everything around it up to the fence is the city. Look at this. - The young man drew a circle on the ground with a stick - this is the fence around the city. We are somewhere here on the edge. - He stabbed with the stick near the line of the circle. And this is the Center. - He drew a smaller circle inside the first one. The drawing looked like a fried egg. - The Center is the richest part of town. They have everything there. That's what I've heard. And all around, in the remains of the old metropolis, there are other surviving clans. - He pecked the ground a few more times in the "egg white."

- Survivors? What do you mean?

Before Machdik had time to answer me, the door of the hut opened and Demir came out from inside, waving at us. We climbed in quickly, braking before the very threshold.

When we returned to our seats, Father Machdika spoke:

- My name is Majtrej. The Council does not doubt your veracity. We also agreed that the situation should be explained to you.

It was now the oldest of the men, who had been silent until then, who took the reins. Despite his thin stature, he had a clear and pleasant voice.

- Once upon a time, there were people who lived in abundance. They had no shortage of space or food. They didn't have to worry about covering up or sheltering themselves. At that time, however, they were fighting each other. Many towns were surrounded by high fences like ours to protect their inhabitants from invading neighbors. Nevertheless, in possession of weapons, vehicles and energy, people killed each other. God, seeing the wickedness, transgression and debauchery of the people, became terribly angry. He caused a great disaster. He destroyed the machines, killed the herd and infected the human population with a series of curses, after which the people twisted with convulsions, grew extra limbs, suffered and died of terrible diseases... - Man was content to describe successive misfortunes, as if he were savoring the macabre and the sound of his own voice. - However, the merciful God finally

stopped tormenting his children. He did not intend to cancel the punishment, but he stopped the further development of deformities and diseases, thanks to which our city was saved. Thus, different clans were formed, including the dog clan. We are grateful to God for his mercy and look forward to the future for our redemption. Indeed, shortly after the divine plague, a prophet came to promise us that a savior would appear who would be able to save us.

I listened, dumbfounded, without daring to interrupt him.

- Although this story may seem like a simple tale to you - the tall woman intervened and declaimed emphatically - it is the most sincere truth. When people began to get sick and change, we understood that this was the punishment for the arrogance, hubris and wickedness of us all. The curse crawled like the venom of a spider along the threads of its web. The further we got from the spider, the more fierce and severe the effects of the curse hit us. But our suffering was too great, so the good Lord took pity on us. He kissed his children to stop the curse. A spell was cast on the fence that surrounds the City, which keeps out snoopers and anything else that threatens us from outside. For beyond the fence, all was lost and all life perished. We were saved by God's merciful breeze. We are the survivors who have been given a second chance.

- Thank you, Chetan, Oriano - now, in turn, the thread was taken over by Grandma Szechna.
- As you can see, you could not come from outside the city. Nor from a place a hundred kilometers away, or even two, because the City is one and only. And behind the fence live hungry monsters, waiting for any living soul to venture beyond the fence. The dust that once kept everything running has dissipated. For eighty-two years we have lived in confinement, in safe confinement. The hospital you wanted to go to is in the city center. It is the richest and most populous district, ruled by the Moon Witch. Only she can use the power of dust. But she insists on granting it only to her henchmen. That's why we suggest you stay with us, in the dog clan. At least until your memory comes back.

- Thank you," I said after a moment. I couldn't think of anything else. My head was confused. I felt that other questions were slowly coming up, but until now, I had not been able to formulate them.

- Very good. - Grandmother Szechna got up from her seat. - I think that's enough for now. For the time being, we will put you up somewhere. Majtreju, is there an empty room in your house? - She seemed more human to me right away.

- I have to ask my wife's opinion, but I don't think it will be a problem. - He looked at me with a smile. I shyly replied with the same. I realized that they probably already agreed on all of this, but for my sake, they were playing a courtesy scene.

- Thank you very much. I won't take up much space. And I'm sorry for the inconvenience - I bowed slightly. After all, it's not worth making enemies among the people I will apparently have to live with.

- Aio, memory loss is no small matter. - Grandma Szechna grabbed me by the elbow as I was about to leave. - It's always good to have someone with you. Until we are sure that your health is not in danger.

The grandmother fixed her gaze on Machdik. It took me a breath to conclude that the boy was there to watch over me. Even so, they still didn't trust me. I felt a bit like a criminal.

The meeting ended. The older man who had picked me up earlier left first, followed by Demir. A woman named Oriana was talking quietly with her grandmother.

When we came out, I asked Machdik about the council members.

- Grandmother Szechna, Oriana, my father and Chetan. They form the clan council. Demir is also often present at the meetings. There are rumors that he might join them in the future. Together they decide things on behalf of the majority. When to sow, whether to build something, how to settle a dispute, etc. Chetan knows a little about technology. He knows how to operate a pump and keeps an eye on the fence to make sure it hasn't been broken somewhere. And Oriana is the daughter of a civil servant who used to come from the city center. She is also affected by the curse, but she can't see the demons, so she doesn't leave the village even for a step," Machdik told me, leaning behind his father's back.

I think I'll be surprised by a lot more. I followed Mr. Majtrey, looking around curiously. I had already guessed why the buildings looked like Frankenstein's houses. Since they can't leave a certain space, the abundance of materials is limited. Sometimes I found decorative elements - wood carvings, clay sculptures, embroidered curtains on the windows and paintings on the whitewashed walls. An effort was made to decorate the village despite the scarcity of materials. But I also noticed a lot of garbage, iron and debris. Some houses were collapsing, and grass and roots were emerging from underneath pieces of concrete and asphalt. The appearance of the surrounding area was apparently only half a thought. The village space was used to the fullest. Any open space between the houses was taken up by plant beds and pens for the few animals. Long vines of pumpkins and zucchini were placed on the balconies of unoccupied buildings. Some of the beds were even starred. Indeed, it looked like a village inside the City. I was curious to see what the other areas looked like.

The arrival of Ms. Oriana's father is proof that contact with the rest of the city is not completely blocked. I suppose there may have been some exchange of goods, but rather rarely and not in very large numbers. The closed city does not offer much.

The Majtrej house was located in one of the terraced houses that must have once formed a subdivision. Most of the neighboring buildings had been severely damaged by time. Humidity and temperature had taken their toll on the old materials.

We entered the seclusion of the house where we met Machdika's mother, so we explained the whole situation to her in a few words. I was placed in one of the rooms on the second floor. There was a smell of smoke - I think the fireplace was constantly lit. The toilet was outside. Actually, it was more like a toilet, shared by several houses, but it was relatively clean. Apparently the sewage system was working as it should.

There was no electricity, as I soon discovered. There was no question of television or telephone. People had to go back to the simplest solutions. And they coped by making the best of what their environment had to offer. I saw fireplaces, hearths and oil lamps. With a liquid inside and a wick made of string.

I didn't feel tired and I didn't feel like staying inside. I decided to walk around the neighborhood. Machdik accompanied me. I didn't care whether he was ordered by the elders or of his own free will. I was happy to have a companion, to whom I asked all sorts of questions about everything. Finally, we sat on the roof of a round metal silo, from which we could see a large part of the village.

- Everything is strange and new to me. I don't remember anything, and yet I have some knowledge. For example, I was surprised by the lack of electricity.

- The lights would work in the city center. - Machdik pointed his hand over the roofs of the houses. - At night, you can see a glow. Father says it is the moon witch who brings prosperity with her power. She does not reach us.

- Well, the moon witch. Who is she?

- It runs the city. It has its own police force and it makes the laws in the city. She can do whatever she wants because she is powerful and rich. I have heard that those who refuse to obey her are simply killed.

I frowned and looked at the boy with fear.

- Aren't you afraid?

Machdik shrugged his shoulders.

-We are just a poor clan on the edge of the city. What could she want from us? She is not interested in the periphery. She never seems to leave the Center.

- If your clan is on the outskirts, does that mean you are near the fence? The one who protects the City?

The boy looked at me warily.

- What are you getting at?

- Can you show me the fence? I would like to see what the outside world looks like.

- I don't think you want to leave...

- No, from where. What for? I just want to look. - I smiled quizzically. My guard squinted, as if trying to figure out a trick. In the end, he relaxed.

- All right, come on! Be quick. They'll be angry if they find out we came this close to the fence.

We jumped out of the silos and snuck through the bushes to the back of the village. Wild, dried turnips and blackberries clung to me, but I was excited about the conspiracy, so I didn't mind.

We ran through the tall grass and when Machdik gave the signal, we climbed a small embankment and then disappeared behind a hill. We stopped for a moment to breathe a little, smiling at each other like seven-year-olds eating cookies on the sly. Then I saw the fence.

It looked disappointingly normal. A double grid of two centimeter high mesh topped with barbed wire. Every few meters, angular devices flashed on the posts, emitting a very soft scream every few seconds.

The area behind the fence was overgrown with grass and weeds, as was this plot. A lot of trash was also visible. In the distance, an old overgrown vine, a rusty car, a ruined building, basically a pile of bricks and hollow blocks. A pile of old corrugated iron sheets and sheets of tar paper.

- Is that all? Is that really a guarantee? - I was full of doubts, and then something caught my attention. In the distance there were some trees and a hill, behind which I noticed movement. A black streak that rose and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

- What is it? - I pointed, but no matter how hard we looked, we couldn't see anything. I was already starting to lose interest when I heard a distant sound. Something like a howl or a growl. Then the shadow reappeared. It plunged with a jerk, faster and more violently than a diving buzzard. The whistle grew louder, and after a moment the streak rose a second time, carrying some kind of weight. Certainly an animal, a deer, perhaps a wild goat or something with shorter legs. It was held by something that still looked like a cloud of black cloth. As if the animal had been attacked by a tattered coat of black powder. "The powder puff" hovered in the air for a moment, and I felt something like a look at me, then strangely it disappeared behind a hill.

Everything was happening maybe two hundred meters away from us, in a silence disturbed by our breathing, the creaking of the fence and the chirping of the crickets.

- What was it? - I asked in a whisper, frozen motionless and tense. I looked at my companion out of the corner of my eye. Mashdik had turned visibly pale.

- Dooies.

- What is it?

- The undead. We told you about them, they are a deformed remnant of humans.

- Was it a man? - The horror of this fact hit me. Machdik stepped back, pulling me by my jacket.

- An old memory of a man. Old and false. A curse has mercilessly afflicted humanity. Who actually turned into dooies is a mystery. But if it turned out they were resilient or God-fucked like us, the dooies probably devoured them anyway.

- Are they the ones who eat people? Have they not kept their conscience?

Machdik rolled his eyes. Of course, who would be stupid enough to test on such dangerous creatures.

- The Dooies drink their life energy from the creatures. You can't kill them, no one has, they are fast and only the fence keeps them at bay. Closer than you've seen them, they don't come, but it's best not to tempt them and sit too close to the fence.

I shivered and put my arms around him.

- I'm hiding. Don't come up... I won't. You know, maybe we should split up so we don't get caught wandering around here. I could get you in trouble.

- Not particularly. - Machdik had already regained the color of his face and was smiling wryly. But his mother's voice was immediately heard, causing him to bury his head in her arms.

- Maaaaachdiiiik!...

- Chicken, they call me.

- Fly. I'll go around.

As I watched the boy walk away, I wondered for the second time how old he might be. I forgot to ask. He looked to be about fifteen years old, yet he seemed to have a fair amount of supervision on him. Why? I didn't want to pry. I was slowly getting used to the idea that I was somehow in the future. Like I had moved to another country on the other side of the world and was getting used to being in a new place. I felt more psychological discomfort with the time I was in than with the place itself.

I passed the silos and walked along the back of the village along the line of houses. The back of the village, uniformly overgrown and barren, must have been unsuitable for cultivation. I scraped the ground with my boot. Crumbling concrete, some old tar. Maybe there was a parking lot here?

In the course of a somewhat abstract and dreamy meditation, I came upon a house, stripped of its back wall. The front still faced the street, but the side had completely collapsed. So the cottage looked a bit like a dollhouse. Useful equipment had been removed, but what remained was an old spring mattress in a rusty, decrepit bed. The frame creaked and bent under my weight as I tried to sit up. Eventually, the bed gave way and the mattress sank to the floor.

However, I was strangely comfortable. I settled down, putting my hands under my head and watching the creeper spill onto the ceiling. Without knowing when, I fell asleep.

CHAPTER 2 Awakening

I opened my eyes, numb and sleepy. It was still dark. I moved my hand, it met the wall and there was a metallic sound. "What's that?" I woke up with a start and stretched my arms out in front of me, walking blindly. Wall, wall, metal... I desperately push my arms forward. "What is this, I've been locked in? A coffin!" - I thought in horror. But the wall came back on its hinges and turned out to be a closet door. "What the hell am I doing in a closet? Is this some kind of joke?" I stepped out into a dimly lit hallway of a building. Maybe I'm still dreaming? Where am I? And where should I be?

My mind was surprised for good, bringing me back to reality. I had fallen asleep somewhere in the dog clan village. So what does this mean? Was it the dog clan that made me this way? I sighed, congratulating myself on having managed to remember at least the day before. Hurray! I already have a day's worth of memories. I looked around distressed. A hallway in two directions, a door somewhere in the distance. A dim gray light was coming in through a small rectangular window. Along the wall, behind my back, stretched a row of lockers, much like a locker room. The locker I came out of was almost empty. Old papers and a crumpled newspaper lay on the floor. I picked it up, shaking off the dirt. I had stood on it before.

"The year 2072, March. In State A, the stock market collapses. C build a new station on the planetoid W40. R refuses to abandon the city to K... A new species of clam is discovered, its soup is said to improve immunity and help in the treatment of blood diseases, Nicolas Renis won a world-class tennis tournament after a final that lasted nearly 10 hours in three sets: 7:6(4), 6:2, 7:6(6)..."

It feels closer. Maybe not specifically familiar, but familiar nonetheless. The other pages were covered in diagrams and calculations that I didn't understand.

He didn't say anything to me. I left the scrap paper in the closet and went to find the exit.

The only open door I found led to another hallway, then to a dark room where I tripped over cabinets, overturned chairs and various other objects. I scuffed my boots on the concrete and, guided by a little light, came to windows barricaded from the inside. Through the cracks I could see the darkening twilight sky and the lights. I tried to pull back the covers to brighten the interior. It worked well enough that I could walk across the room to the next door. For a moment, I felt a panic call as the door refused to give way. But I exerted more force and with a terrible noise, I managed to open it. With difficulty, because the way was blocked by garbage. I found myself in a dirty alley where it was almost dark. From there, I went out into the street and, stunned, I opened my eyes wider. This was not a dog clan village. It was still the city, but a completely different place. What the hell is this?

In front of me lay an empty street, a bit strewn and poorly lit, but I realized I was in the back of the main buildings. Something like warehouses, the back of stores. On the wall across the street was a rusty "F Street" sign. Above the roofs of the nearest buildings, I could see bands of lights and the sleek lines of skyscrapers. I could also hear the hubbub of machines, human voices, noises, thuds, a distant siren, music distorted by the distance... I walked towards this urban noise. I walked as if by magic, drawn closer and closer, like a moth to the light. I passed alleys and pedestrians, crossed street after street. The few people I passed paid me no particular attention. I tripped over a garbage can, scaring a bunch of rats and a big cat. Finally, I came out on a wide square that was shining with the evening life.

Most people were moving hurriedly in different directions, but here and there I saw groups of people squatting near fountains, on benches or in squares. There were some cars, but also bicycles and rickshaws. Despite the absence of typical street noise, I could hear the hubbub of music everywhere, and colored lights swirled over people's heads.

I put my hands behind me and started walking, trying to look bewildered and completely natural. But I was worrying unnecessarily, no one was paying any attention to me. It's just my inner feeling that I belong here like a flower in a sheepskin.

What I saw would probably make the people in the dog clan jealous. The stores and cafes glowed with the colorful glow of artificial lighting. People were wearing much better clothes, sometimes very extravagant. With a dumbfounded look, I followed two characters dressed in bright outfits, with funny pointy hats, buffets on their shoulders, exceeding reason and good taste. To top it off, one of them had a cape with colorful patches and various accessories. They looked like exaggerated wizards from fairy tales. I pressed my lips together trying not to laugh. At that moment, somewhere on the edge of visibility under the walls, I saw people who were quite different. "Ruffians," I thought. "So there are social classes here." I looked like something in between. In very average clothes, but not destroyed.

I wanted to get information, but in a way that didn't feel like I fell from space. Who should I turn to? To the filthy rich or to the poorer ones? I decided that the rich would get me out. Satisfied with the concept, I headed to the outskirts of the plaza, then down side streets, driven by curiosity. "I hope I don't get mugged here." - I reached into my thigh pocket. There was a heavy object, which I hoped was a pocketknife. I grabbed it with my hand and felt the bent blade. "This is a good one. I can still scare someone or open a box for them. "

I emerged into a larger space, where a lone lamp provided illumination. On my right, I could see the foundations of a building, a small wall, and piles of rubble with people in rags sitting on it. On the left, we were bounded by a low gray wall, near which grew a small old pear tree. It was intertwined with a fruit vine. The hooligans ignored me. Maybe even better, because they smoked something and behaved a little oddly. Maybe they were stoned? I

preferred to stay away from large groups. Meanwhile, I approached a tree. The pear tree was barren, but the vine turned out to be a vine. Although I wasn't hungry, I decided that the grapes would be perfect to fill my stomach a bit. I reached for the fruit, picked two and stuffed them in my mouth. A little sour, but good enough. Then I heard a rustling sound and a thin, dark-haired boy appeared on the wall behind the pear tree. And to my left, another, who also had white hair. "Albino?" I asked, freezing with a grape halfway to my lips. No, his eyes were dark, though his skin was also pale, very pale, almost translucent. They were both skinny and a little dirty. From their appearance, the dog clan's clothes could pass for festive.

The black-haired man at the top of the wall grabbed the highest fruit. I envied him, as these were redder and certainly sweeter. He picked them up in handfuls, scattering leaves and small twigs around. The white-haired man calmly grabbed a bunch of flowers.

- Are you from school? - he asked me casually.

- No... Do I look like a schoolgirl?

- Do you live nearby? - The boy looked at me as if he was paying more attention. Maybe it was a password? I felt exposed.

- No. Actually, no...

Then the boy jumped from the wall to the ground.

- There they are! - he cried in a strangled voice and fell to his knees, nervously picking up what had fallen out of his pockets during the jump. There were coins and various small objects. A thief? I looked away from him, curious as to what had caused such a commotion. The white-haired man also lost his cool, crouched down, as if he wanted to run away, but restrained himself. He just pulled his hood over his head and stuck to the wall. Several people dressed in those ridiculous theatrical costumes, looking like wizards and vigilantes, entered the alley from the opposite side. I give you my word, they looked like militiamen from old England, with high-domed caps, with capes, with long black boots and navy blue uniforms. They surrounded a small woman who stepped forward slightly. She had a frilly pink dress with a collar and pinkish-blond hair. She had painted her face like a harlequin and was holding a small dog on a leash. She looked absurd, weird and funny. But somehow, no one was laughing. They approached a group of hustlers and the woman pointed to a boy with long, limp hair who, like some of his companions, had cloudy eyes and slightly uncoordinated movements.

- What is it about? Can they catch us? - I leaned anxiously toward the white-haired man.

- If you have the documents, not so much.

I reached into the inside pocket, pulling out my ID badge.

- I did it," I announced triumphantly, but the boy did not respond. I remained silent, following the scene with tension. The militiamen and the "magicians" blocked the view, but I

saw the captured boy being held by the arms and legs, and the militiamen cutting him from the larynx to the stomach. Stunned and terrified, the hanged man did not bleed, but it was clear that he was in pain. Apparently, he can't make a sound. The pink woman grasps the edges of the wound and examines it, bending over carefully like a biologist on a frog. This happens for a short time, in silence. Everyone present either ignores the situation, immersed in a drug-induced stupor, or frowns at the effect the scene has had on them. I am one of them. A few heartbeats pass. The boy has apparently fainted. The magicians and militiamen wrap him in a large cloth like a bundle and take him away, leaving the square. The pink woman also leaves.

It was then that I felt my whole being come alive, and my fear was replaced by indignation, anger, and a sense of wanting to do something, to fix it. Before anyone could say a word, I ran after the whole grotesque bunch.

I ran across the square and into the opposite alley. Nothing. I slowed down for a moment, looking around, confused. I felt anger boiling inside me, demanding justice for an absurd injustice. I ran a little further on a hunch, but was forced to stop again. No one. Where had they gone?

Suddenly, someone grabbed my forearm. I jumped nervously, ready to fight, bite and wrestle.

- Take it easy. Don't struggle. You can't have it - I heard a female voice, slightly husky.

- Who? Who are you? Who are you? - I asked in a raised voice, but gradually the rage of the fight began to leave me. I was held by two girls wearing modest, tight-fitting clothes. Nearby, there were three other people dressed in the same way. Behind them, a few ragged people from the square appeared in the alley. The "clean" ones, as it reached me after a while.

- First of all, you introduce yourself. Where are you from, what do you want? - asked one of the girls. Older looking, with her hair tied in a ponytail.

- I am... a passerby? - I smiled shyly, wanting to look harmless and stupid. Heck. It's that moment when the truth seems more incredible than a lie. But hey. Let's stick to one version. - I got lost. I found myself there by accident. I don't even know what part of town I'm in now.

- Why did you run after them? - The girl pointed in an undefined direction with a shake of her head. I guessed she was talking about the militia, the pink woman and the magicians. She was staring at me as if she wanted to learn my face by heart.

- Because they tortured that poor boy... and that really... bothered me.

- And what did you want to do?

- I don't know... Hit them? - I said out loud what my agitated emotions had just dictated to me.

There was laughter and grunting all around. A tall girl with a ponytail raised her eyebrows and looked at me as if I were a monster. The other girl, thinner and probably younger, squinted her eyes suspiciously and squirmed, giving her face a rather repulsive look. She had two short, thin pigtails and a narrow, tight mouth.

- All right. Let's suppose I believe you. You're lost, you say? Someone will get you out of here. - The ponytailed "boss" looked over her shoulder, searching her eyes for the right person, but I quickly protested.

- Wait a minute. Who was that? That pink woman? I need to know.

- Who was it? You ask me, little girl, who was that? Wait, where did you come from? - Open reluctance replaced disbelief in the boss's voice.

- I am... from the outskirts of the City. From the dog clan - I took a chance. The dog clan, after all, seemed to have limited contact with the rest of the city.

The prolonged silence did not bode well for me. Finally, the boss said, weighing her words slowly:

- People from other regions rarely venture into the center. You don't look deformed either. Unless your handicap is stupidity.

- Leave me alone. Did I do something to you to make you come after me like that? I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Is it written anywhere that I should stay away? - I started to get angry. The girls exchanged a few words in low voices, without taking their eyes off me. I waited without saying a word. Finally, the tall girl said briefly:

- Very good. You go ahead. But we will keep an eye on you.

The boss and her companions disappeared like smoke. The hooligans dispersed, losing interest in the incident. Only the white-haired man and his swarthy colleague remained in the alley.

- Ransom, come," insisted the white-haired "thief" as I had called him in my mind earlier. But the latter, with a wave of his hand, signaled him to wait.

- What is your name?

- Aia - I replied, moving my uncertain eyes from one to the other. The thief had a flamboyant face, a beard a few days old, a pronounced jaw and dark eyes with long lashes. Ransom was of a slimmer build. He had a triangular face, with several narrow scars, and reminded me a bit of a watchful white rat, but paradoxically he inspired more confidence in me. Both wore gray clothes, layered on top of each other, and shoes with holes. They looked older and more decrepit than Machdik.

- And I am Ransom. Ransom Saphed. Is it true that you are not from the Center?

- That's right," I replied wearily.

- And do you have a place to stay, do you have friends?

On the one hand, I was eager to answer that I lived nearby and that my family was certainly waiting for me. Unfortunately, I had nowhere else to go, so I decided to take a chance. I shook my head negatively in response.

- All right. Come on, I'll take you to us.

- Ransom, are you sure? - The dark-haired man looked a little surprised.

- Yes, Karan. I think she's fine. Go ahead, make sure it's clear.

Karan shrugged and moved with a clear step, disappearing into the darkness of one of the streets.

- What makes you think I'm okay?

- Because you ate grapes.

- Ee?

Ransom smiled.

- You looked hungry and didn't approach the munchkins at all, just giggled at the fruit. Plus, you asked if the Moon Witch and her entourage could catch us.

- That's all. Look, please explain to me what really happened. Who is this woman, why... Why did they do this to this poor guy? What did he do to them?

- No kidding, you've probably heard of the moon witch.

- Something. Not much. That she has power. That she is rich and has no mercy for those who do not obey her.

- It all adds up. A lot of money, power and authority over everything. Over the city, over the people, over the law. Drugs are banned. The treachery is that we know that she is the one who produces them and distributes them unofficially. People who fall for it can then be caught like flies. And why? For various reasons. For entertainment, for example.

- Was it entertainment? - I was puzzled.

- Absolutely. And the fun part is sending such a wretch to the Land of Games.

I made a face that was supposed to express my doubt about whether Game Land was such a terrible equivalent of prison. Ransom read my irony well and was quick to explain.

- Game Land is an obstacle course, or rather a torture course, that people have to go through, often drugged. The end is bloody and usually fatal. The elites consider it great entertainment. The victims, unaware of the danger and devoid of any fear, die in wolf holes often made by themselves.

- Where is it? Here at the Center?

Ransom refused.

- Once upon a time, just outside the Center, there was a band of misfits who looked a lot like animals. They had fur, sometimes claws and horns. When they started to get close to the Center, they started to steal, to ransack the garbage cans and, in time, to appear in the streets

during the day. The witch exterminated them all. She slaughtered a whole bunch of misfits, then turned the area where they lived into a huge arena for the Land of Games.

- I like it less and less here.

- You are not the only one. But at least you're healthy... At first glance, all is well with you.

- I don't think so. I mean, I recently fell from a great height and... And I have memory loss.

- Any deficiencies?

- If memory were a colorful fabric, mine would look like a fishing net.

I was silent for a moment, weighing the whole incident in my mind.

- And that girl? The one who apparently suspected me of having bad intentions towards the whole neighborhood.

Ransam smiled, shaking his head.

- You mean Johtaja. No, it's just a misunderstanding. She and her... group don't particularly like the Moon Witch. They are watching her, and you just happened to be there, and you went after the witch.

We walked in silence for a while. Ransam led me through a veritable maze of streets and passages. And those that didn't look like human roads. More like cats and rats. How Karan found us remains a mystery.

- Everything is clear," he reported. - Hey, you. You're Aia, aren't you? - Karan said happily.

- We had a girl in the group we called Aia.

- It was just a nickname," Ransam crossed.

- What happened to him? - I felt uncomfortable, thinking the answer would be Game Land. Maybe you shouldn't have asked at all...

- She got sick and moved to another area. Well, we are almost there. This is the school. - Karan proudly presented the building, which was probably once a shopping mall. Now most of the storefronts were covered with metal shutters. The boys looked around carefully and pushed open one of the side doors, which was probably the staff entrance. We descended the stairs into the darkness of the basement and wandered in the dark until the dim fluorescent lights pointed the way. Once again, I lost my orientation as we turned several times. If someone, on pain of death, had told me to go back to the square we started from, I would probably be dead. Finally, we entered an equally dimly lit room. The candles helped a little, but they were placed very sparingly. It was very crowded in here, which was accompanied by a stuffy, not-so-pleasant smell. Many people were lying on the floor. The entire space was occupied by primitive beds.

- Ransam. How was the day? Did you see the resistance? - A very tall, barefoot young man approached us. He smelled of fried food and held a small black notebook in his hand.

- Mhm. But without meaning to. They took the lucky one again.

- Oh, crap. Not good.

- What is it, what happened? - Nearby, a group of girls were sitting on a blanket, one of them approached with curiosity. The tall one looked at her.

- The witch took the lucky one.

- Oh no, one of ours?

- No, but it was close. They saw us, we shouldn't venture into that area for a while," Ransam replied.

- This is the third person this week. The witch is going strong. It won't be long before we're shot like pigeons.

- Fourth. They still took the old woman from the residence," Karan interjected.

- Really? - The girl looked shocked.

- Didn't you know that?

- I heard something there, but I thought it was... Oh, my God! - The girl's eyes widened as if she had just noticed me. It must have been like that. - And who was that?

- This is Aia. She is homeless and wanted to hunt the witch and her entourage today.

- What?!

I stood silently, horrified and a little embarrassed, as the boys summarized the previous incident. Several people approached us. Some of them seemed very suspicious, but they introduced themselves one by one. Because I was nervous, all the names escaped me immediately. I only remembered that the very tall one was called Ove.

- Make yourself comfortable - he greeted me somewhat ironically.

Ransam explained that the name "school" came mainly from the fact that the age of those gathered was in the teens. Most of them were sick or very weak, poor, homeless or outlaws. The place was a bit damp and cold, like a basement, but apparently safe. I found a not-so-comfortable corner, where the pipes are low. However, it was pretty isolated and I was pretty sure I wouldn't disturb anyone.

Ransam left me for a while because he had to go around the "school" to check on his charges. From the spot I had chosen for the night, I could see his white hair flashing here and there, bent over the beds. Ransam was attentive to everyone, reassuring and supportive. I assumed that some of the people there had stolen a little or fed on the garbage dumps. The people gathered here in the underground looked extremely pitiful. The closest to me was a man whose lungs wheezed with each breath, like an old car. He appeared to be older than the average resident of the "school." He had sunken eyes, a blue, overgrown face and was as thin as a skeleton.

- New? - he asked suddenly, without looking up from the bed. I nodded my head. - This boy took another stray to feed on his head again. - He stretched his lips into a toothless smile. - Soon there would be no place to put his foot.

- Ransam is extremely protective," I remarked cautiously, sliding in to hear him better. The man waved a weakened hand.

- He should leave us there, on the surface. What does he want with such a small outcry? It is unlikely that I will go back. - He tried to laugh, but it immediately turned into a loud cough.

- Ransam brings you food?

- All of them. Every day we get something in our mouths. Sometimes medicine. But rarely. It's hard to get any of it. Almost nobody wants to sell us anything. The witch is on the lookout.

- Prohibits sales to the homeless?

- If you don't have an ID card, it's like you don't exist. But even with one, it's hard to survive on the street without stealing. And for stealing, you lose your card. It's a joke.

I looked at him silently, thinking wistfully about this vicious circle. And he, in turn, looked at me.

- You are not from here. You are healthy and have new clothes. First time at the Center?

- Mhm. I've been on the periphery until now.

I don't know what he thought, but he didn't say anything else. I think he was tired. He coughed again, and I retreated to my seat.

After a while, Ransam found me, bringing a moldy blanket.

- Here. You'd better not lie on the bare floor.

- Thank you. - I unfolded the gift we were both sitting on. - You take care of these people... Why do you do it?

Ransam shrugged and remained silent for a moment. It was getting quieter and quieter all around. Even the whispered conversations fell silent. Only the irregular breathing of the people lying down could be heard.

- No one else will," Ransam replied in a whisper when I already thought he had ignored me. - The elites don't see us. They don't want to. In the middle are a handful of ordinary, busy people who fear the witch no less than we do. And they are even more afraid to be in our shoes. They'd be happier if we just vanished.

- Is that why you're harboring a strange, homeless girl from who knows where? - I smiled, adding: - I wouldn't want you to feel responsible for me.

- I misspoke. Everyone is responsible for their own actions, and I am responsible for mine. I don't want to be the last survivor of the moon witches. I want to be one of many.

- You work with a girl I've already dubbed "The Boss" in my head?

Ransom parried with an amused look.

- With Johtaja? Not exactly. We have slightly different goals. I'm too busy providing for those who are here. - He was silent for a moment, distracted by a thought. - Aio... so in the square you asked me if... - he stammered. - No, it doesn't matter. Go to sleep. Maybe we'll talk in the morning. Good night.

I didn't push. I ducked under a tangle of pipes from which I could feel a hint of warmth. My thoughts revolved around what I had seen and learned today.

And so I fell asleep on a musty blanket in the city subway.

CHAPTER 3 Trees

The mattress rubbed my back with howling springs, and dew dripped down my nose, tickling me and waking me from the remnants of sleep. The dawn draped in a fine mist was probably one of the last such serene ones. The insects in the meadow were awake and buzzing at their best.

I sat up abruptly with a groan of amazement. Oh no! Again? Before my eyes stretched the same view I had under my eyelids when I had last fallen asleep in the ruined cottage on the dog clan's land. I sucked in the air with a gasp, feeling my own galloping thoughts leave me somewhere behind.

"Machdik! I have to find it!" - I finally thought and broke off, scattering the burdocks and jumping over the bushes. I stepped out onto the main path that runs through the entire village and rushed to the Majtrej house. Inside, I got a little lost, looking for Machdik's room. When I finally found it, the boy was still sound asleep. I began to shake him unmercifully.

- Machdik! Wake up, you won't believe it! Get up quickly!

The boy waved his hands in sleep and yelled something unintelligible, without opening his eyes.

- Get up! - I hissed, sitting on the sleeping man, patting his face and pulling his nose. He gasped and hit the cast, hitting me in the zygomatic bone.

- Sssoo up... What, Aia? Mom, what are you doing?

- Machdik! Listen to what happened to me. I travel in dreams! I went to the Center! I saw the Moon Witch! Because, you know, she's actually a bit abnormal, so some people want to fight her. And I met some different people...

- Wait, wait, wait, wait. You woke me up so early to tell me what you dreamt?

- What? No! I... - My enthusiasm died down and I thought for a moment. What if this really is a dream? Wait, I think I can tell the difference between a dream and a reality. - It was real! I'm telling the truth. Maybe that's where I came from! I move around in my dreams. That's how I got here.

- I want to remind you that we found you in an old factory.

- Where did I *sleep*?

- I think you fell...

- You don't know that. I slept on a pile of rubble! You just woke me up. I wasn't even hurt!

- Well, yes... But that doesn't prove anything.

- Oh, yeah? And do you know what Game Land is?

- I don't know. A kind of playground?

- This is the place of execution, where the moon witch sends her prisoners to die in a bloody game of life and death - I lowered my voice dramatically. - And how do I know that? Ha!

- Because you made it up?

- Ransom told me! A boy who lives in the Center. He saw it! They take away the unfortunate ones under stupid pretexts. That's how the witch gets rid of people. It happens to you too!

- Who is it? We? The dog clan? You must be dreaming again. Aio, let go of me first. Second, take a deep breath...

Seeing that he thought I had lost my mind, I took pity on myself. I curled my lips into a horseshoe and climbed out of bed, throwing up with displeasure.

- Yes, of course! And go ahead and call me crazy! But you know what, if the militia comes and kills you here, don't say I didn't warn you. - My voice trembled treacherously until the boy looked at me more gently.

- Aio, calm down. Nobody's going to kill anybody here. Wait, sit down. Tell me everything, one by one - saying this, he folded his legs and pointed to the seat next to him on the bed. I was silent for a moment, offended, but my emotions calmed a bit and I noticed the hysterical nature of my actions. I sat up, folding my legs in a Turkish fashion and rubbing the bed sheets with embarrassment. I actually took a deeper breath and in a calmer tone, I began the story, describing in detail everything that had happened to me. Machdik listened to me with a stony face, but when I got into the details, his face brightened.

- ... and when I opened my eyes, it was already morning, and I was back where I had fallen asleep.

- We looked for you all night last night. But Daddy said you couldn't have gone far and maybe you wanted to be alone for a while.

- Ha! And I was actually in the middle of the city!

- I don't know... It sounds great, but a dream trip... Is it possible?

I shrugged. Given everything I had learned in the last twenty-four hours, the concept seemed reasonable enough.

- Look, don't mind me, but if what I heard is even partially true, then the dog clan is in danger. Even if no one comes here, you will be cut off! What about heating, food, when the frost comes...

- Aio. - Machdik tried to be serious but couldn't hide his amusement. - But we've been cut off for years. Except maybe the sewer system, but that's a little less of a problem.

- What do you mean?

- This happened a few decades ago. In fact, shortly afterwards, a curse fell on the city and the dog clan disobeyed the authorities. The powerful, long before the Moon Witch, wanted us to put all the land under cultivation and feed the city. The elders of the time objected, just as they did when they refused to allow the trees in the forest next to the factory to be cut down. The City, in the sense of the leaders, was furious, blocking our access to energy, light, water. We would have died, but the tree clan came to our rescue. We formed a special alliance and it continues to this day.

- I don't really understand, but I guess that means you are safe?

- Noo... - Machdik nods hesitantly. - Let us say that we have our protections.

I was silent for quite a while, thinking about it all.

- Come and have breakfast, I have an idea, but you have to ask my father.

Bahija, Machdika's mother, prepared roasted sweet potatoes and a handful of seeds for everyone. I imitated the housewives, who mashed the soft vegetable and sprinkled the seeds on top, then drank diluted milk. Good, although it takes some getting used to.

- Dad, can we introduce Aia to the tree clan? - Machdik started directly. Mr. Majtrey choked on his portion of potatoes.

- Well, you know, what an idea... No way.

- Dad, wait. Aia is worried. She thinks we won't survive the winter because we are disconnected from the city.

Majtrey looked at his son menacingly, but Machdik bravely resisted his gaze. - Dad, I didn't tell her anything. She guessed it herself.

Mrs. Bahija holds her breath and looks apprehensively at her husband, who runs a hand over his face in exhaustion.

- It's true," he resumed, giving me an arrogant and threatening look. - We are outcasts.

- I understand, though, since you're getting away with it... But the problem is what happens when the Moon Witch decides to exterminate you for good. What if she comes here with the militia and the army?

- She's not coming here. And certainly not in person.

- Are you so sure?

- Yes, it is true. The Moon Witch never leaves the Center. Besides, no one has been interested in us for years.

- That's what you think. - I stood up, leaning over the table with emotion. - And the Witch has already occupied one of the side regions. I don't know where it is, but she has exterminated its inhabitants and set up her hunting ground there...

- How do you know these things? Is your memory coming back to you? - Mr. Majtrey's voice had a kind of dangerous tone, but I ignored it in my agitation.

- My memory has not come back, but something extraordinary has happened to me and you have to believe me, for your own good! In other areas...

- You have never been to other regions, as you yourself testified to the Elders. Or do you deny it?

- I... no... I haven't been here, yes. And if it's different, I can't confirm because - I don't remember!

- Hola, my lady! Don't get carried away, because the problem is not with us.

- I have an ID card, you can check where it was made and what area I was assigned to, there you go!

- Your card is useless in the land of the dog clan!

We were both standing face to face, talking louder and louder, almost screaming now. Mrs. Bahija covered her mouth with her hand, looking with wide eyes, Mashdik clenched his jaws and wandered with a troubled look between our faces.

- Your identity card is working against you. None of us have it anymore. The city does not issue documents to outcasts.

I kept quiet, not knowing what to say. Mr. Majtrej let out a heavy sigh and sat down, burying his face in his hands for a moment.

- But I don't consider you to be outcasts... - I started timidly, feeling ashamed of my outburst. I sat down slowly, looking at my plate.

- Aio, understand. Your appearance is a great unknown. Don't blame us for being suspicious," Majtrej said more calmly. I thought to myself that in principle, the dog clan had every right to be suspicious of me. Living on the sidelines, silent, perhaps even considered dead. In their minds, a person with an ID card becomes an ally of the authorities. This, however, led me to another conclusion.

- You don't like the Moon Witch, do you? - I made an assumption.

Ms. Bahija spoke for the first time throughout the discussion.

- The Moon Witch is far away from us. We have never seen her, and she has never seen us. She might as well not have existed. But the fact is that we have been forgotten. It is best to keep it that way. - Mrs. Bahija leaned toward me, gently placing her hand on mine.

There was nothing more to say. I thanked them for the meal and went out. After a while, Machdik caught up with me.

- Sorry, I think we've put a stick in an anthill," he began, putting a hand on my shoulder.

- No, don't worry. I am the one who is too impulsive. I get emotional easily. Maybe you're okay. It's just that what I saw... I got scared. I don't want them to turn the dog clan into a bloody entertainment camp for witches.

Machdik smiled warmly. And I thought about it.

- Why did you want us to go to the Tree Clan? And why is it dangerous?

Machdik stretched and looked at the sky, gathering his thoughts.

- You were worried, so I wanted you to see for yourself how we were doing. But maybe that wasn't the best idea. The tree clan is the closest to our area. We can go there despite the curse, but it's still risky.

- How exactly does this curse work? I know you're being chased by demons, but what does it look like from your perspective?

- We don't usually talk about it... - He croaked as if at the mention of something unpleasant, but before I could speak, he picked up the thread on his own. - Probably because it is an individual and unpleasant experience. Like a nightmare in a dream or a painful illness. When we leave the purified earth, the demons seem to be waiting on board to catch us. At first they lurk within sight, one, two. Before you know it, you are surrounded by a swarm of them. You have a panic attack. The only solution is to run away.

- And have the demons ever reached anyone? - I asked with devoted fear.

- Oh yes. At best, these people are so neurotic that they are no longer able to leave the safe zone. In the worst case, the demons enter the person. The horror of such an unhappy person leads to death.

- Oh no - it slipped my mind as I listened anxiously, imagining such a situation. - It is quite amazing that you can leave your premises.

- You have to be quick and not look around too much. If you see dogs, you may not be able to escape.

- Dogs?

- They are what we call demons. If their appearance can be compared to anything, it is to a pack of stray dogs. Although they are hellhounds.

- Ahaaaand that's why the name of your clan? That's why the tree clan is... - I couldn't hold back a sudden fit of hilarity as I imagined ghost trees chasing members of the neighboring clan.

- Well, no, come on. Their expertise is far more useful than ours. Maybe we should just... Let's go. Father doesn't need to know. - The boy lit up at the thought.

- Machdik, are you crazy? From what you say, I also think it's just dangerous. You may think you're fast, but you'll stumble and be finished. If anything happened to you, your dad would kill me, and that's not a figurative statement. - I paled at the thought. Who would care about a dead alien. They wouldn't even have to bury the body. They'd just throw me over the fence and goodbye! I shook my head, trying to make myself relive such thoughts. It wasn't going anywhere. - You know, maybe it will be easier if you show me the way and I go by myself.

But the boy shook his head.

- You won't make it. There is a special passage...

"Sure. And probably a secret password" - I thought with irritation.

- So we don't go. Why are you so willing to take that risk? For the sport? I think it's childish and stupid...

You'd expect him to chat with me or make a joke, but he just looked at me with an inscrutable face and turned away without a word.

- Hey. Machdik... Wait! - He didn't even react, so I ran to him. - Don't get offended and don't get angry. You meant well, I know. But I'm not going to risk your life for my own whim.

He remained silent for a while.

- You won't understand.

- What?

A shrug. I'm about to finger him and pull his ears. I took a deeper breath.

- Boy, this whole curse thing seems scary to me and also pretty abstract. But I don't want anyone on my conscience...

- That's because... I'm probably the chosen one. - In turn, I kept quiet, waiting for the next part. We arrived at "my" ruined cottage, where we could hide and talk in peace. We sat down on an old mattress. Machdik looked at the ground for a long time until he picked up a thought:

- The Book announced a chosen one who would save us. As my mother said, it's pretty vague and in fact, it could even be considered a poetic paragraph for the betterment of hearts. But my birth came with a few things that made the village recognize me as the chosen one. First of all, people were saying that dogs were rumored to gather at the edge of the village. It was without that, no. Prede... sense.

- Unprecedented?

- That's right. We see them leaving a safe, open area. And then several people testified that they saw dogs at the border. They may have thought so, or maybe someone saw a real dog and so the rumors started. You know, here a birth is a big event, the whole village is concerned. Well, but less about the dogs. Apparently, in the main street of our house, almost all the village lights were turned on. The poles of the old lighting are still there, no one dared to take them down, even long after they were disconnected from the city. How did they catch fire? A mistake by those at the Center who control the distribution of energy? Perhaps.

In any case, all this already seems strange, but nevertheless explicable. But when I was four years old, I went out for the first time. I had to escape from my mother and I went too far. People who witnessed the incident testified that I was not at all frightened, although I obviously noticed *something*. Demir ran for me and took me away. My grandmother cleaned me up, but it didn't seem to be necessary at all. After that, throughout my childhood years,

they looked after me a lot. When I was older and under escort, I started going out, I saw demons as much as anyone in the dog clan.

- Hey, this is indeed a good sign. Maybe *you are* the one! - However, my enthusiasm seemed to depress the boy even more.

- That's all. Maybe I am. I mean everyone expects me to, and on the other hand, how am I supposed to fulfill the words of the prophecy? I volunteer for all the expeditions out there, but I'm still... we're trapped here.

I remained silent, pondering my response. A thought came to my lips, "Well, do something," but after all, I myself resisted the idea of him exposing himself. And besides, what was he supposed to do? Run up to the moon witch and yell at her? On the other hand, saying "don't put so much pressure on yourself, no pressure" was also out of line.

- So everyone wants miracles from you and you don't know how to go about it? - I finally put my thoughts into words. - This is not good. You should be freeing everyone right now and preaching wise words worth noting - I joked to cheer him up. He gave a short, contained laugh, so I continued, catching my breath. - Where are these spectacular lightning bolts and whirlwinds capable of washing away all the sorrows of the dog clan? Or even the whole city? Totally, you should be throwing lightning bolts. You're such a loser. - I grinned mischievously, and Machdik responded in kind.

- You have convinced me. I promise to start studying diligently from today to educate myself in the art of throwing lightning. What an oversight on my part.

- I'm glad you realized your mistake.

We giggled like idiots for a good 15 minutes, feeding each other's fits of stupidity. Finally, we decided to leave our hiding place, in fact, we drove around like drunks, still laughing at every silly thing. That's how we came across Jaras.

- Hi, I was walking towards you. What about you? - He asked, causing another wave of laughter. - I'm glad to see you too, but pull yourself together because you look like you've been drugged and you, Machdik, have a mouth as red as a madman.

We got a little under control, and Machdik sold his friend a puckishness to avenge the insult.

- What did you want?

- And we had the idea to make a big bonfire in the evening.

Machdik gave a whisper of praise for the idea.

- Excellent. It's been a long time since we've had a party.

- Demir and the elders promised to carry the wood. We must help prepare something to eat. Father said he would roll a barrel of wine.

- Wait... Demir and the others are going to get wood? Why don't I know anything about this?

- Now you know.

Machdik sent me a look full of fire. His coal-black eyes sparkled in a frame of dark eyebrows and long lashes.

- Aio, this is our chance!

- I don't know... - I remembered our recent conversation, but the excitement of seeing something new was also rising in me.

- I can see that you are up to something. But it may not work. We are really affected...

- We will ask if we can join the group! - called Machdik in flight. My legs reacted before I had time to think and I was already running with him. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jaras roll his eyes and run after us with a slight delay.

The group preparing for the crossing is getting ready in the square in front of grandmother Szechna's house. It was all about the bustle of particular machines. They looked like bulky motorcycles. The wheels were thicker, in fact as massive as those of a car. Each vehicle was a two-seater. The second person sat a little higher above the saddlebags, which were attached to the sides. I liked these unattractive machines.

- What kind of bikes are these? Did you make them yourself? - I approached one of the men who was attaching the straps to the saddlebags. The man looked at me a little surprised, but the genuine enthusiasm in my voice must have made him look at me more favorably.

- It's rocky. Our own version, of course. They're not very fast, but they can traverse any terrain, which is most important. On a relatively flat surface, they can grow to the size of a sprinting man. And that's what we need to escape the curse.

- And what motivates them?

- Oil... Something like that. We don't know the exact composition. We buy it from the people of the tree clan. We exchange it for vegetables and meat.

- And how does it light up? - My curiosity grew and I almost forgot why we were in such a hurry. At that moment, I wanted to get on that beautiful thing and ride over the hills. Meanwhile, Machdik and Jaras, who accompanied him, caught up with Demir and tried to convince him to join the group. There were three Rokons and four riders. If we were stubborn, we could sit at the back.

- Let us go, it's important. I want to introduce Aia to the tree clan. Maybe they will know something about her? Besides, if Aia is going to stay with us, she needs to know how this all works.

- What does your father say about this?

- Come on, you know very well that I have to negotiate every trip with him and he is never satisfied.

- He is concerned about you.

- He exaggerates. But I can't help it. He has to live with his bitterness.

- Machdiiik... - Demir suspended his voice as a warning.

- God, I'm sixteen now, I'm out. I don't need to be coddled. I can take care of myself.

- I have no doubt about that. But your father decides anyway. Oh, please. I see it seems to be coming to us. You want to go, go. Discuss...

At this point, one of the expedition members started his motorcycle to check that the engine was running and I did not hear the rest of the conversation. Mr. Majtrej argued with Machdik for a long time, they were waving their hands and apparently yelling at each other, and Demir was pinching the tip of his nose as if he was trying to control a growing migraine. Finally, Mr. Majtrej gave me a disapproving look, as if I were responsible for everything, and turned away, visibly displeased. Machdik, on the other hand, was full of humor.

- Aio, it worked, I convinced my dad!

I decided not to pursue the matter, so I simply spread my arms.

- Bravo, you see, you are already starting to do miracles.

As soon as the rokons were packed and the inspection was done, we could leave. We carefully sat on the packages. Inside were various products to exchange with the Tree Clan. Finally, Grandmother Szechna blessed us with her staff and we were ready to leave. We took off, circling out of the depths of the colony, so that we already had considerable speed on the way out. I rode in the lead behind the man I had spoken to earlier, with Machdik behind Demir as my second. The other two closed the column.

We set off at a brisk pace on a cracked road, interspersed with plant roots and piercing grasses. The road climbed gently and after the summit, we turned right onto a simple sandy road. I tried to judge if we were taking a similar route to the day before, when we had come running from the old factory, but no. Now we were heading more to the east.

The trees began to grow and the road became more difficult to cross, but the rokons were well behaved. During this time, I also watched my fellow travelers. I could feel the nervousness in the air. They were trying not to look around too much, but I could see that each of them was holding back from looking back. Finally, we crossed a small bridge over a shallow ditch and entered a thicket of vines. I felt a little disappointed. The entire mystery passage was a curtain of vines and hanging branches.

We went back on a path that widened a bit and I soon saw buildings. Nevertheless, my driver did not slow down. At full speed, we drove into the middle of the village, honking our

horns loudly. I thought we were going to get off, unpack... No. The rococos began to circle, creating a commotion and attracting more and more residents.

"How will they unpack the bags?" - I was surprised. They weren't going to do it. Meanwhile, the Tree Clan people began to surround us and I could see the unusual appearance of them. Many were covered in moss. Or mushrooms. Some had no hair, only strange growths.

- Hello, hello, Demir, Piran... Exchange?

- Yes. Zerahu. Sorry, you know we're always short on time.

Zerah, a man whose left cheek was overgrown with a strange woody huba-like tissue and white gelatinous fungi, wore a long, multicolored robe. He was slim and tall, and at first glance that was probably the second common characteristic of the people living here.

At Zerah's signal, several people rushed to the huts and brought saddlebags similar to ours. The houses, as I noticed, were quite picturesque and largely covered with something like bark. Trees grew all around, creating a shady atmosphere of elven idyll. But instead of beautiful elves, there were people disfigured by lichen. They seemed to be infected by the vegetation of the forest.

The contents of the packs were quickly disposed of. This was the only time we stopped and the packs were exchanged in an express. We had to dismount for a while. I took advantage of this moment to get Zerah's attention.

- Hello, Miss. I don't think we've met. Are you from the dog clan?

- No... not really. They welcomed me. - I said uncertainly. Zerah responded with a warm smile, slightly crooked from the growth, though it didn't seem to bother him in any way. There was something about him that made me like him immediately. He seemed to be a refuge of peace and gentleness.

Demir, a little green in the face, entered our remarks.

- Zerahu, can we get someone from your house to drop off some wood for our campfire?

- Naturally. And is the young lady in such a hurry? - he asked tactfully as his men strapped on their saddlebags and someone was already running ahead to clear the rokons' path of any obstacles.

- The girl decides for herself. Aio, are you able to go home by yourself?

I nodded vigorously.

- A roll of the dice. It's actually very close.

- But, he can get on the wagon when we bring the wood to you.

- Great. Aio, be reasonable and... see you later. - Demir threatened me with his finger like an older brother. And I gave a big smile, waving Machdik off. He sent me a slightly jealous and slightly panicked look. I wondered if they had already started to notice the demons

chasing them. Not playing with excessive convention, they left, led by the friendly cheers of the colony's inhabitants.

- You are Aia, yes? My name is Zerah, I am the leader of the tree clan," the man introduced himself formally, bowing gently to me. - Would you like to take a look at our clan? I don't suppose you've been here before?

I felt like being honest with this man.

- It was only yesterday that I remembered something from my life. Machdik, Demir and Jaras from the dog clan found me in an old power station. I don't know how I got there. But if any of you remember my face, I would be grateful for any information.

Zerah looked at me with distress.

- I'll ask around, although I know everyone here and don't recognize your friendly face at all. Come with me, I'll show you around a bit. What do you know about our clan?

- Not much. Only that you have made an alliance with the dog clan and are helping each other. And while I've been continually surprised by things since yesterday, I think I'm starting to get used to it.

Zerah laughed briefly.

- You are an interesting person, Aio. Good. You're probably curious about our appearance. Ha! Wait until you see the rest. The tree clan received an extraordinary gift after the second explosion. Yes, that's right," confirmed Zerah, seeing my disbelief, "our case is much more useful than what happened to the dog clan.

I didn't comment, obediently following Zerah and watching the people. Peculiar, strange, surprising. That's how I would describe them. The growths sometimes extended considerably, but no one seemed to be in pain or uncomfortable. It is true that some people had difficulty moving if the growth was on a leg, preventing the muscles from working freely, or on a shoulder, forcing them to bend over. However, these cases were rather isolated. It was found that, for the most part, the plant elements developed in harmony with the human body.

Vegetation was clearly glorified here. Weeds were not pulled, they were replanted. Everything grew freely, sometimes only supported, protected and pruned when a branch dried out. Vines climbed on trees (mostly oaks) and on the walls of houses. The surroundings seemed even stranger than in the dog clan village, where old residential buildings had been adopted. Here, I think most of them had been torn down and rebuilt. I asked a question about this.

- You have a keen eye. It's true, the entire space of the Tree Clan was rebuilt this way. This is what our fathers of the previous generation did. As soon as the clan communicated with the trees, we made the unnatural architecture match the natural architecture. You are about to see this for yourself.

I saw it and was speechless. We walked to the edge of the buildings. There were many more trees growing here, if there were any trees at all. It looked like someone had planted people here. The terrible ordeal of tying a captive man to the ground with bamboo shoots sticking out of his body flashed through my mind. I shivered reflexively.

- Aio, it's okay, they're fine. They have fallen into a torpor, adjusting their metabolic rate to the woody tissue. The accompanying sensation is not unlike that experienced during bone growth in adolescence. In addition, plants secrete a specificity against pain.

I approached, curiosity overcoming reluctance. Some were already so overgrown that only their faces were visible. Sometimes they lay on the ground, as if they were snoozing. Once in the vineyards, I noticed a woman with long shoots sticking out of her sitting in a chair. I pointed it out with a silly expression on my face. Zerah smiled affectionately.

- This is Raja. My wife. She was not very comfortable in a weak human body, and to improve her health, she decided to grow up early.

- Grow up? - My voice trembled, struggling to get out of my tight throat.

- Yes. We are not dying. That is, not soon. We are living on the scale of the life of trees. Our population is not large, but it is long-lived. When the time comes, the buds of our plant symbionts spread and take root. From time to time, we lie on the ground or sit down like Raja. A little patience and it falls into lethargy. In a word, of course. In the beginning, we sweat the ones that are growing. In time, they will connect with the root system to the rest, which will support and feed them. Later, they will develop enough leaves to feed themselves.

- Leaves," I repeated, stunned.

- For photosynthesis. Those here eat like plants. However, although the difference between a human body and a plant body is somewhat blurred, the cultivators also have other abilities. We can always contact them.

- How does it happen? Can we wake them up?

- No, not exactly. We call it lethargy to simplify. They are conscious, they only receive signals through internal connections. To contact them, we put ourselves in a trance and use the mycelium that lives on our body. This is a completely different dimension of conversation.

I looked at the forest of people with new eyes. Then I gathered some facts.

- From this point of view, I understand how important trees are to you... But after all, the dog clan is asking you for wood. It seems drastic.

Zerah burst out laughing.

- Hence, by no means. We grow wood almost pure. It is a kind of waste. It's made of wood pulp and supplemented with compounds that prolong the burning. Because of our proximity to the land, we can do some really wonderful things. Our farmers extract heat oil from the soil for us, which we trade with the dog clan. They in turn provide us with food. We don't have

much space for regular crops, so we don't keep animals for fear that they will interfere with our growling.

- It's a good deal," I said. - That sounds very reassuring. So I expect the dog clan to take refuge in your home for the winter. They can burn your wood and don't need contact with the City.... What about you? Are you that cut off from the world?

Zerah was silent for quite a while and I already thought he wouldn't answer at all.

- No. And yes. The city didn't manage to cut us off. We did it ourselves. Everything we need, we are able to provide ourselves. So you were concerned about the situation of the Dog Clan?

- Oh yes. I thought the moon witch would want to have them and turn the area into her playground.

- You're sweet to worry about them," Zerah said warmly, although for the second time I wondered how old they were. Since he was treating me like a child, I decided to take advantage of the opportunity to give free rein to my curiosity. I asked everything I wanted, sticking my nose into everything I could. Until I felt I was pushing the limits. But what to do, the Tree Clan was amazing. I stayed with them for a while, until it got dark and I saw that the trees were giving off a soft glow.

- They also make us grow. In cooperation with the trees, they draw the necessary elements from the ground and light up our nights. We can't even fully determine the composition of most of the products they make. They work intuitively, by trial and error.

It was only now that I realized it was time to go home. People had prepared a deep wagon full of wood for the fire. A tricycle was used as a horse, but otherwise it was like an old postcard. The tree man (as I called the tree clan man in my mind) sat behind the wheel and I sat on the goat, enjoying the smell of the wood. I said my goodbyes enthusiastically, and the people I spoke to that day smiled and waved.

CHAPTER 4 Identity

We arrived just after dark. The sun had set and almost obliterated all the gold in the sky. The dog clan came to meet me. What a journey. Three whole kilometers. Maybe four... That was the limit for these people. I first met Jaras, who told me that Mashdik had been in bed all this time anyway, weakened by the trip. I was worried, so I caught up with Demir to ask him.

- He'll be fine. He had a headache. There was no problem today. But I would appreciate it if you didn't encourage him to leave the village - he scolded me, and I decided once again that he was indeed like a big brother to Mashdik.

- I didn't want him to leave. And, in fact, do the rokons help with the curse at all? - I asked without thinking.

- They help. They move slowly, at a human pace, but they allow us to carry something heavier.

- And the demons don't catch up with you so quickly? - I asked relentlessly.

- They gather as usual, but move around, we are a little protected. - Demir squirmed as if something was hurting him, but I couldn't help but ask him one last question.

- What if you went just a little bit, like half a meter over the edge and stayed there, could that be dangerous too? What about driving very fast in another vehicle? What about, say, a helicopter...

- Aio. Enough of this. No one does dangerous experiments like this. If you were raising snakes, would you put your hand in a terrarium to see if one or five of them would bite you?

- But...

- I don't know. I just don't know and I don't intend to find out. The curse has an indecipherable form and is beyond our sphere of understanding.

Demir spoke patiently, but he made it clear that I should not pester him any longer about the curse. I had to curb my curiosity until I found a suitable victim. I felt the spark of experimenter and explorer in me. Especially after my day at the tree clan, where my imagination was greatly stimulated.

Meanwhile, the dog clan was making final preparations for the bonfire. It looked like an ordinary gathering of friends. But almost the entire clan was in attendance, and you could feel the excitement in the air, as if a feast was approaching. It was a feast.

- Aio, take this tray and put it on the table. - One of the housewives handed me an oblong tray with a potato cake. By the way, I think I've become a bit of a celebrity. Two days and already people know my name. I guess that's the charm of a finder.

Wood was laid out in a square surrounded by stones, and around it stood tables, on which food was brought. There were some cakes, mainly yeast cakes, meat and potato cakes,

shashliks, a bowl of semolina with omelets, pancakes, sour wine and malt beer. People were sitting with tables behind them, someone even brought a very old guitar. It didn't have a single string, but it was still possible to play something on it.

Machdik also arrived in a very good mood. He asked me about my impressions of the day spent outside. I told him with enthusiasm and excitement until Jaras and some of the younger children joined us. The members of the dog clan spent too little time outside their land to waste it on sightseeing, so my story caught the attention of the older residents.

- I didn't even know Zerah's wife was growing up now. We haven't seen her in a long time, but we never asked," Demir interjected thoughtfully. I jumped when he spoke behind me, I didn't think he was listening.

- But it was actually weak. They visited us only once, but that was before Machdik was born - added Mr. Majtrej, who seems to have already stopped being angry with us.

- It was also later, when Mashdik was about four years old. Then, supposedly, something strange happened to the land. All the trees and all those that grow are stirring.

- And what happened next? - I was interested.

- No. Actually, nothing, I think. It just rained a little bit. The trees are excited about completely different things.

- Do you remember how Grandpa Babur used to uncork old bottles and thought there was wine inside, but there was vinegar and claimed it was because of the sun? - Somebody got hold of it, as usual, and the memories and stories started, which I sometimes didn't understand, but sometimes I laughed with the boys.

I sipped malt beer and danced around the campfire, despite my total lack of ability to do so. Later, leaning against the crate I had sat on earlier, I stretched my legs toward the fire, not knowing when, I fell asleep.

When I woke up, I was cold, hard and uncomfortable. There was a musty smell from a long unventilated room in the air. Also, somewhere the sewage system must have failed. I opened my eyes and from under half-closed eyelids, leaning on my elbow, I looked around. Someone had covered me with a smelly blanket. It was dusk.

I momentarily woke up realizing that this was not the place I had fallen asleep last time. I hesitantly stood up, expecting to feel dizzy, but I felt nothing of the sort. Instead, there was a commotion all around. Someone screamed, someone got up and ran. There were murmurs and whispers.

- She woke up.

- Raaansaaam! - a girl screamed.

I walked slowly, past the ragged people lying everywhere.

"I know where I am," I realized belatedly. I was here. A white-haired man emerged from behind a column supporting the ceiling.

- Aia - he sighed more than he said. - Are you okay?

- What about me? - I asked, surprised. - I just woke up. Is something wrong?

People started coming to us. And also the big... I concentrated... Ot... Ota, Ote?

- Ove," the big man said to me, and I was embarrassed when I realized I was syllabifying out loud.

-Aio, you slept all day and two nights.

- Aaaaa? Really? - I thought and announced triumphantly: - Indeed! Yesterday I spent the whole day with the people of the Tree Clan. - They all looked at me as if I had lost my mind.

- No kidding, we were worried. It was impossible to wake you up. Nothing, completely, no reaction at all! - Ransam looked irritated now.

- So I've been lying here the whole time? Because... I just... - I had a stutter. - I have this thing. I fall asleep for a really long time. It's like a curse, a radiation curse. - I didn't sound credible, but I didn't want to explain everything. I didn't really know what it was about. My theory about dream travel probably had a flaw. - It didn't matter. Was something going on at that moment?

- Maybe," Ransam replied mysteriously. - Can we talk? Let's go outside. I wanted to take a little walk anyway. Louise was supposed to go with me, but since you're awake, it might be you. Louise, are you going to distribute the medicine to everyone then? Thank you.

A slightly plump blonde with a pretty face nodded vigorously. Ove approached us with a large wooden box.

- I will help Louise. However, it would be helpful if someone could go get some water.

- Give the medicine first, then take some boys and leave. We will be back soon.

- Okay.

I watched in awe as everyone listened to Ransam and submitted to him naturally.

- Where do you get your medication?

The white-haired man didn't answer, he just started down the hallway that I remembered led outside. I stumbled after him.

- Ransam... Ransam, wait.

He slowed down a bit, glancing to see if I was walking, but he didn't stop. We got out. The sky got overcast and the rain started to fall. I thought to myself that if it was raining on the tree clan too, the cultivators must be enjoying it. I wonder what Machdik and the others are doing. Am I lying like a log right now too and not waking up? Or maybe only one of these realities is real? Maybe I'm just dreaming now. So how can I prove that this is a dream? I involuntarily followed Ransam, who was searching the aisles. I reached into my pants pocket

and made a cross on the top of my hand. Not very deep, but it hurt. I only cut the skin gently. I didn't even bleed.

- What are you doing? - We stopped in front of a high wall with a fire escape and Ransam turned to me just as I looked critically at my own hand.

- Nothing. - I put my hand behind my back. - I check to make sure it's not a dream.

He made no comment, but resumed climbing the ladder. The alley was blind. Rusty, tin garbage containers stood here. The building was built of red brick and was getting old. I was afraid the ladder steps would come off the wall, but when Ransam was halfway up, I followed him.

At the top, we walked sideways across the roof and found ourselves on a flat terrace walled in to waist height. There were a few aerial flights here. Traces of pigeons were also visible.

Ransam, leaning against the wall, looked at me with a slight cross-eye.

- What? Did I do something wrong?

He shrugged his shoulders.

- Not much. But I would like you to say something about yourself. We took you in because we understand the difficult situation. The stories can be complicated. But it's also a risk for us. Introduce yourself and make sure it sounds realistic.

I remained silent, wondering what I should say and whether I should lie instead.

- The more you make this story up, the more you lose credibility," Ransam reminded me bluntly. I gave him a bull's-eye look.

- I wonder, because I don't know how to say it myself. Did I mention that I live with the dog clan? - The boy nodded. - This is my third day since they found me. And the third day I can remember. I have no family, I had no idea where I was, what this place was, why the town was fenced off, why there was no electricity, why everything looked like it was after the apocalypse.

- So where are you from at the Center? Why aren't you sitting with your new compatriots?

I spread my hands in a gesture of resignation.

- I don't know. I was still sitting around the fire with everyone last night.

Ransam rubbed his temples, exhausted.

- You're not helping me, Aio. That wasn't realistic at all. Your story is so bizarre that I think it must be true.

- Do you believe me?

He smiled.

- Not exactly. But I'm glad you didn't try to bullshit me unlike what you said last time. Or just to gain an ally.

- I need allies - I answered honestly. - I don't know anyone here except you. I don't really know what's going on. I have an ID card, even though I shouldn't have one. I have knowledge of a world that existed before... long before that "kiss of the god," as we say in the dog clan.

- Of what? - Ransom raised his eyebrows.

- Long before the event, the curse or whatever, that irradiated people so that they now have various defects and abilities.

- You mean the big dust explosion?

- And what is it?

- Are you talking about the dust itself or the explosion?

- About everything. Tell me about it.

The boy was silent for a while, piercing me with his gaze as if he were a lie detector. Finally, he picked up the story.

- There used to be a power plant in the center, which provided energy to the whole city and probably even to the surrounding area. The source of this energy was dust. It was mined locally and was probably inexhaustible. That was many, many years ago...

- And what exactly is dust? Where does it come from, an element or a mechanical result?

- I have no idea. I don't know anything about it. What difference does it make? In any case, something went wrong at the end. Maybe they accumulated too much dust, or maybe the machinery in the plant was damaged, or maybe someone did it on purpose because some people managed to hide for a while. The city has its shelters and the elite were allowed in, of course. In any case, there was a massive explosion. It did not destroy any buildings and did not kill anyone directly. But the people in the center got weaker, they started to get sick, and those who lived farther away suffered all kinds of deformities and changes. Those who lived further out, outside the fence, died. Or they turned into creatures without humanity, which could not be killed.

- Dooies. I saw them," I whispered fearfully.

- When the plant was de-powered, the Witch took it over.

- A power plant?

- The power! The moon witch can control energy, disappear from our sight, hurt and drive people crazy.

I digested this information in silence.

- You mean the moon witch wields some kind of magic?

- The dust has made her very powerful. It can do terrible and cruel things. It doesn't matter if it's called magic or something else.

I did not respond, partly agreeing with such a statement, and also thinking that it was not necessary to have supernatural powers to be cruel. But I preferred not to upset Ransam with such remarks.

- Listen, Aio - my thoughts were interrupted by the white-haired man. - I would like to... What are your plans? Are you staying at the Center?

I shrugged my shoulders.

- Wanting, not wanting. But I think that's the case. This is a good place for me to find out. Other than memory loss, I have nothing. Maybe I'm really from here? Why you ask.

- Well... You know, it's very possible that you are from the Center.

- Why?

- Because you have an ID card. Only full citizens, so to speak, get one. So, I found it hard to believe that you came from a dog clan. People on the periphery don't have citizen status. They are aberrations, mutants.

I didn't really like the comment. But I nodded, seeming to understand the situation.

- You're right, I hadn't thought of that. It's a good lead. And is it possible to check a card like that somewhere in an office? I mean, as the owner, they'll probably give me more information. Maybe even an address?

- Rightly so... Yes, it is indeed possible to check such things. At the bank, for example.

- In a bank? What do you mean?

- Well, quite simply. The bank has all the data, and it can also inform you of the balance of your account.

I laughed, but Ransam was clearly very serious.

- Do you think I could get money? I don't think so.

He smiled.

- Check it out. This information is very useful. At one time, you will know your address, name, medical history and links to other users. If you have any. If I lost my memory and had my personal information encoded on my ID card with me, the bank would be the first place I would go.

- Will you take me there?

- Sure. Come on, let's go this way.

We walked along the rooftops along another of Ransam's cat paths. The route wasn't the safest, but we were out of sight of passersby. The view from the top was impressive. The sloping angles of the rooftops, the forest of vertical antennas, and the slender silhouettes of skyscrapers soaring into the sky. The center looked like the crown of a tree. Like the thickest branches or the main trunk, the most massive and tallest buildings climb towards the sky. The further away from the center, the lower and more welcoming the buildings. A string of

buildings connected by roofs or located fairly close together. This certainly made it easier for Ransam, Karan and the others to get around. But the proximity of these buildings also had its drawbacks. Interestingly, there was no fear of fire. I thought they simply used every bit of land here.

Finally, we descended another ladder into a similar narrow alley. We stood at the edge of a busy street. Ransam hugged the wall and pointed to the front of a large gray building. The first floor was crowded with people. That's where they received customers, above that were probably the offices.

- I'll wait for you here, I get too noticeable in this neighborhood," he said as he put on his hood and hid deeper in the alley. I didn't feel safe without him, but I took a deep breath, adjusted my leather jacket, brushed the dirt off my shoes and joined the foot traffic. I tried to project an aura of confidence, which was unfortunately completely stifled as soon as I crossed the threshold of the bank. I misrepresented myself. Men and women in elegant jackets and shoes greeted me with smiles, while I walked on mats where, instead of being comfortable, I felt like an intruder.

- Excuse me, I would like to talk to a representative of the bank... My father transferred something to my account, but I don't really know how much money I have and I feel a bit lost in this whole system - I asked one of the employees, saying in one breath the formula I had invented in my head. I had to repeat it at least two more times as I passed from hand to hand.

I stopped in line where a slightly obese woman stood before me, dressed in a fur collar and an extravagant striped suit. She looked a bit like an animated armchair with retro upholstery. While waiting, I couldn't help but look around. The interior was very modern and impressive. I was amazed to see people carrying interesting devices that looked like two plastic tubes with aluminum foil stretched between them. They could be folded - one part fitting into the other - into the shape of a small cylinder about twenty centimeters long and two centimeters in diameter. A text was displayed on the film, but it could only be seen from a certain angle. From the side, it faded and was completely unreadable.

Finally, a pretty woman with black hair in a beam greeted me at her window. She listened to my story with professional interest.

- No problem, dear lady. Show me the document and I will make a file with all the data. Do you want a detailed report or just the balance?

- I will ask for a detailed report - I was happy.

I had to wait a while. It was incredibly long, as I stared tensely at the terminal that had swallowed my ID card. I was afraid that the alarms would go off, that the police would burst in and someone would say that the card was fake and that I was guilty of a crime. But none of that happened. I was only asked to activate access to information by reading my fingerprints. I

was informed that, for procedural reasons, the bank does not keep any information other than my account balance at its disposal. All data remains secure at the user's preference, which may change if the user states that he/she wants to participate in the personal tracking of the user... blah, blah....

- Can I ask you for your holo?

- Please?

- Your holo-reader. So I can pull out the information you wanted.

- Yes, I am. I am such a wimp. I left it at home... - I suspended my voice, insolently waiting for the bank employee to solve this problem for me. She frowned slightly, but after a moment, with studied calm, she offered:

- We have some holo-readers in stock on special offer for the sub-account. Perhaps you would like to purchase them at market price?

- I'm not sure I can afford it...

A glance at the terminal and a smile at the corner of my lips made me assume she had, even before I heard her mouth:

- Of course, it's a small amount. Do you decide or will you come another time?

- I'll ask.

The formalities were not long. Another bank employee, instructed by the employee, brought a discreet device. The woman smiled, handed it to me, scrolled through the relevant information, and asked if she could help me with anything else. I was getting up when something else came to mind. I pulled a small black square out of my pocket, which I thought was a token. I showed it to the woman.

- And is it possible to verify this in a nearby location as well?

The bank employee frowns, turning the black coin in her hand.

- I'm sorry, but I have no idea what that is. It looks a little bit like old technology to me. In our country, unfortunately, we don't have the means to do that.

I accepted the apology, said goodbye and left.

Already heading for the door, I hastily flipped through the holo. It was intuitive and easy to use. The amount in my account was quite impressive. That's what I thought, although I wasn't sure of the monetary rate. However, the other information breaking through the clerical gibberish was confusing.

Aia Ring; Authorized Account Number 1000878778; Date Established: year -1; Interest - 5%; Accrued Time: 82 years; Residence Unassigned; Registered Address: District 12 - 2 F. Street, City - Downtown; Citizen; Affiliation: A. T. Ring (base and inactive account) hospitalizations/injuries/illnesses: 0.

The rest was about purchase history and was completely blank. Then there were the bank's charts and offers on account forecasts and growth. I walked out into the street, squinting. I approached the alley where Ransam was waiting.

- And what did you do?

And I slapped my forehead.

- I forgot to withdraw money. Let the wind blow.

- And why do you need cash? Only poor people pay with cash. If you have an ID card, you can pay anywhere with it.

- The same card? - I was beginning to realize what a valuable acquisition this badge was.

- Yes. And what about your data? Did it suggest anything to you? An address?

- That's strange - I replied evasively. I didn't want to brag that my address was, as I guessed, the same power station where I woke up. - Aren't you going to ask me how much I have in my bank account?

Ransam was trying to sound indifferent, but the more he tried, the more I understood what he meant. - Enough for bread - I added. A smile involuntarily appeared on my face.

The white-haired man let out the breath he had been holding. He looked relieved.

We headed back up the roof road to set up shop near an isolated bakery. Ransam gave me instructions on what to do and how to do it.

- There, you see? Where there is a wooden structure with a colored awning. Buy bread, let it be the cheapest. Whatever you can get. And some of those flat pancakes. They are very filling. Take the ones from yesterday...

I walked in and said hello, and a thin, friendly middle-aged lady greeted me nicely.

- Can I have some bread?

- Of course. Light, dark? With cereals?

I asked for regular large loaves of bread, cakes, and took a jar of white dough as a spread. I also had to buy two large bags to carry all the purchases.

- Will there be a party? - the saleswoman asked me.

- Oh yes, I invited quite a few people. There will be sandwiches, toast and nibbles.

- How nice. They will certainly benefit from it. I would like a card, please.

The reader turned out to be a cloud... a spherical hologram into which the saleswoman placed the card. The sphere glowed green and spat out my card. I was afraid it had failed, but the lady wrapped it up for me and handed it to me with a smile.

I left, walking down the street for a while as Ransam had instructed, then, looking around to make sure no one saw me, I hid behind a nearby warehouse. Ransam brought a boy and two girls I didn't know, who took the bread from me and dispersed each in a different direction. Ransam and I also took a loaf each. I carried my portion simply in my bag, while

Ransam hid his behind his chest. The boy explained to me that they wanted to avoid discovering the hiding place. A person with large bags hanging around the "school" might reveal its location.

- Also, there is less risk of being attacked by a rival gang. A lot of people are starving here. Okay, I think they're ahead of us enough.

But before we could resume our run across the rooftops, Ransam grabbed me in his arms, holding me tight.

- Thank you, Aio. Meeting you is probably the best thing that has happened to us recently.

I let out an inarticulate sound as the force of the embrace squeezed the air out of my body.

- I'm glad I could be of service. You see? Karma comes back.

- What?

- It's a saying.

We arrived safely at the place. Nobody attacked us, only the people of the "school" threw themselves on us in gang.

- Where did you find so much bread? - Ove also broke off a piece and put it in his mouth.

- Aia is sponsored," Ransam answered briefly. - Where is Karan?

- He left. I think he went to see his mother.

- Let them, his mother will be happy. Aio, will you help me? We will distribute to everyone.

I helped with a tight throat. And this time, not because the dark basement reeked of mold and people. I saw genuine joy in a piece of bread. There were no very young children here, but even so, it was mostly the "school" that welcomed young people in its difficult conditions. Some adults were too weak to get out of bed.

- How do you manage your daily life? - I whispered in Ransam's ear.

- Weakly. Although there is no problem with the water. We get it from several taps still connected to the water network. Mostly, we have to stand in line, and there is no way to take more, for example, to take a bath. When the Witch's people observe a considerable water leak, they go to these places and shut them off completely, so that there is not even a possibility to connect to the pipes somewhere nearby. With food, it's worse. Sometimes we steal something, sometimes we make a drop with the money we earn. Often we go without food for a few days.

- What about medication?

- Medications are dropped off for us by good people. We have some good souls who help us. But it is still not enough. They are lying here on concrete, in a cold and moldy cellar... It's not very good for the health. But we have nowhere to go. The moon witch sniffs around.

- When I talked to the shopkeeper, she seemed like a normal, nice lady. Some people live very well.

Ransam muttered an expletive under his breath.

- And that's what worries me the most. If you fall into the clutches of the witch and her militia, a nice normal life ends. Not everyone can be an ordinary citizen.

It took us a while, because there were a dozen people who were immobile and we had to help them, support them in a sitting position so they wouldn't choke, give them water, put them back. Break the bread into small pieces.

We sat against the wall and chewed our allowance. Ransam let out a gasp of satisfaction.

- Karan will be happy. And especially his mother. She always gets angry when Karan brings stolen money or buys with stolen money. There is a problem because then his mother does not want to eat these things.....

It was suddenly silent when Louise, the girl I had seen in the morning, rushed into the underground. She was out of breath and scared.

- What happened? - Ransam jumped off the ground and grabbed the girl by the arm.

- Karan... The militia took Karan away.

CHAPTER 5 - FOR THE FIELD G G

- How did they take it, when? What had he done? - Ransam squeezed Louise's elbow so hard that she screamed in pain.

- They caught him stealing.

We fell silent in a moment full of tension. Ransam grabbed her head with his hands, let go, grabbed her belly, took a few hesitant steps like a tiger in a too narrow cage. All this in total silence. I stood as if paralyzed, waiting for the explosion. But the boy controlled himself. He discreetly apologized to Louise and headed for the exit. He bent over and looked smaller.

It was clear that he wanted to be alone.

"What should I do, what should I do, what should I do.... !"? Only this phrase rolled around in my head like an inscription on an electronic sign. Beyond that, the emptiness and the growing fear. Does this mean that Karan will end up in Game Land? Will death await him for theft?

- Ove, what will happen to Karan? - I asked the boy standing behind me.

- I don't know... I think they've closed it for now.

- Where? Do people get out of there after serving their sentences?

Ove hesitated.

- I'm not sure. I don't think they let anyone go. But I have no idea what's going on there.

- So you didn't see them die? Is this playground macabre to watch, or is it a public spectacle, or just...

- Aio. - Ove had a pained look on his face. - I don't know, I have no idea. I've never seen Game Land. Of all of us, I think only Ransam was there, maybe Johtaja.....

- And do you know where they keep the captured? Do you have a prison here?

- There is a building that the good citizens call the punishment cellar, and that we affectionately call the morgue.

I shivered.

- Show it to me.

A few minutes later, me and Ove were looking at the wall surrounding the punishment cell and the guards changing at the entrance. We were lying on our stomachs, watching from the roof of the hangar, which gave the best view of the punishment cell. Below us, machines were humming quietly.

- What's next? What do you want to do?

- I haven't quite figured it out yet," I admitted thoughtfully. - He looks a little more serious than I imagined.

Ove snorted, discouraged.

- Well, good luck with that. I'll leave before we get caught. - I mumbled something vague in response. Ove elbowed me on the shoulder. - Get over it, you can't help it. Once someone has fallen into the clutches of the Eco Witch, she doesn't let them go so easily.

- Eco ?

- That's her name. After all, no one normally calls her the Witch. I'll be right down.

Ove escaped by jumping across the roof, and I allowed myself all the most absurd visions, as long as one of them led me to a good idea...

I jumped off the roof, trying not to make any noise or draw attention to myself. The piles of garbage I jumped into muffled any noise. I skirted around the complex of sheds and warehouses to exit like a polite citizen from the main road, straight into the guard booth. I ignored the sentries, figuring they probably wouldn't be able to talk to me.

I knocked on a glass booth where a man in uniform was sitting and writing something down in a reader on a holo keyboard screen.

- Hello! Excuse me... Hello ! - I nodded to the man, who opened the door and looked at me a little surprised. - Will there be... Where can I find the date of the next performance?

- On the playground? - I nodded. - I'm sure they'll put the information on the news, and in a few days there will be a replay of the entire last season.

- And live?

- I don't know. Please watch the news.

- Aaa... because it's not until tonight, and I heard that it could already be today, because a lot of new people got caught... - I stammered. The guard looked annoyed now.

- Madam, I do not have this information. You will be kind enough not to disturb me.

He closed the door to the guardhouse in front of my nose and I, having no other idea, stepped back a decent distance and looked at the punishment building from the corner of one of the aisles, still thinking frantically.

- What are you doing? - A hissing sound in my back and an unpleasant pressure under my left shoulder blade. A girl's voice.

- I'm just standing in the aisle and watching," I replied politely, trying to convince myself that I was blameless.

- You talk to these guys. You're selling, aren't you? Admit it! - My interlocutor was pushing an object more and more painfully under my shoulder blade.

- I just wanted to know when the show in the Land of Games will be organized.

- What for? Tell me, what for? Now!

- Go to hell! - I turned around to see who I was chatting with so nicely. A girl a little shorter than me had, if not more strength, at least a lot of skill. She twisted my arm and pushed me against the wall, pointing a small gun at my face.

- Oh, I've seen you before," I said with satisfaction, taking pleasure in every thing I remembered. The skinny little girl with ponytails was the right-hand man of "boss" Johtai. They both threatened me when I ran after the angry moon witch.

- And what do you put under the nose of the police? What is the point of Game Land, you help to go there? Ha!?" - she threatened me with a threatening look.

- Yes," I said happily. - Yes!" I repeated to myself in a daze as I finally came up with a diabolical plan. - Come on dear, help me, will you?

- Have you gone mad? - She wriggled away from me as if I were a hairy caterpillar. However, she continued to point her gun at me.

- No, no, no. Here's the thing: they caught one of the boys from "the school." And is it still possible to find someone who was caught by the Witch?

- No, you can't. You can. If you go to the show.

- Bingo my dear. But can you just get started?

- Citizens can, they have free entry. Are you a citizen?

I smiled, remembering the bank account printout.

- Well," I mumbled laconically.

She looked at me, serving up twisted face number two.

- Do you get off on watching the murders? I don't enjoy it, you know?

- My dear, I am far from getting satisfaction from such amusements, believe me. Look, they certainly told you to keep me busy and disciplined. You are already like a soldier, you don't need such exercise, but so be it. Keep an eye on me. You can always say that you made the decision to control me because I looked like I was out of my mind and could, if left to my own devices, impede the execution... What are you playing at?

I explained the concept to the bewildered girl in a very convincing tone, expressively analyzing the situation and desperately improvising. "As long as she agrees. She shouldn't have too much time to think, then she'll agree." - I thought. But I could already see she was hesitating. I decided to play it differently.

- Either you come with me or I do what I want anyway. It's better if someone keeps an eye on me, right? - I added mischievously and turned toward the street. I only heard light footsteps. He was walking. "That's it! Half success!"

Action made me happy. I thought it was always better than doing nothing.

It started to rain again. As we walked away from the punishment room, I asked him:

- How to get to Games Land? In the direction of the stands or otherwise?

- It is outside the Center. You must go or drive there.

- To go there?

- There is a train. It goes around the Center and a route bounces back to the Land of Games. But the train is driven by the elite. An ordinary citizen must have an invitation.

- Ah, that's a bit of a problem. But we'll manage. Are you a citizen?

- I was. My ID card expired.

- Well, and the elites... where do they live?

- In decent neighborhoods. I don't know what you're planning, but I can see you're rambling on unnecessarily. I'm not going to waste my time on you. But if you try to hide, I swear you'll end up in Gambling Land before you can say a word.

- Okay, don't quibble. The plan is to get references.

- Refe... what?

- Well, let's get into the expensive elite.

- You must be out of your mind. And for God's sake, stop calling me that! My name is Hiiri.

I smiled happily.

- Lady friend, show the way to a rich neighborhood! ... And no, no no no... Wait. You have to make a fool of yourself first. We're going to the store.

I left in the direction where I thought I would find the mall. Hiiri followed me, very unhappy, complaining all the time.

We arrived without a hitch, though I did some maneuvering around the streets, following only my questionable sense of direction. Looking through the windows, I found a rather large store. It was an establishment offering the absurd fashion of the elite. The colors appealed to the psychopath's eye, and the shape to the cubist's followers. I entered, putting my pride in my pocket and dragging Hiiri behind me like a piglet to the slaughterhouse. She resisted bravely, but I proved myself stronger. I chose outfits that, even for me, cut my sanity in half. I wore white striped pants with holes and elegant chains, an iridescent shirt and angry pink vest with buffets that would make the witch Eco herself proud, and a hat with a brim the size of an umbrella. Looking for the positives, I decided it wouldn't rain on me. Perhaps that was the designer's intention?

Hiiri received a dress that would have been even more interesting if it weren't for the gray plastic circles that prevented anyone from getting close to her. They surrounded her waist and shoulders and covered her skirt. I also gave her vindictive, disgusting white shoes that were supposed to be comfortable and pretty ugly at the same time. I kept mine on my feet. And so they hid under the long leg. The girl was extremely unhappy, but I think she started to understand.

I paid by card, filling a huge bag (another nightmare) in which I buried our stuff. We looked and felt awful, but I didn't lose heart.

- Now we will, dear Eliza, make a visit.
- What did you call me? - she growled angrily.
- An artistic pseudonym," I smiled insincerely.

As we made our way to the rich neighborhood, I felt that time was running out, but I had no other idea and hoped that it would be a while before Karan entered the arena of the Land of Games.

I looked at the houses critically and chose the one with the least vitriolic garden. It was difficult. People decorated their gardens with sculptures and concrete, hugging the plants in shapes that prohibited reasonable development. I rushed to the counter. Despite the absurdity of the situation, I felt like I was going back in time.

- Excuse me? - A woman emerged wearing makeup that was a cross between a cybernetic geisha's nightmare and a dance queen. The paint on her face distorted the perception of age. She was slim, of average height, in something silver that could be part costume, part robe, part dress, and part failed disguise of an aluminum robot.

- Hello, I wanted to say hello. I'm Sydonia, the neighbor. I mean I'm moving in next door,
 - Oh my, what a surprise. Well, well, well. I don't often get visitors. - The woman gave the irrational impression of being genuinely happy. I gave Hiiri a slightly surprised look. I didn't think it would go so smoothly.

- We don't want to disturb you," I replied reflexively.

- But what do you say, at least have a cup of tea. I have some delicious butter cookies.

We went in a little bit panicked. I was trying to take it easy, but I was also starting to feel a little panicked. The woman opened the door and ushered us into the living room. It was comfortable. I don't know what I expected, but the couches, armchairs, and cuddly ottomans made me want to sit there. The walls were gray, speckled with colorful paint. The colored glass, garlands and curtain pendants glistened in the candlelight. The usual light was also on in the room, as the overcast sky outside the window caused a twilight inside.

- Please, please, sit down. I'll be right there to make something hot. Jacqueline! Some tea!

In the adjacent room, a creature cowered. I only showed a skirt. The servant.

- My name is Jaana Polishenko. I live here alone. Where do you come from?

Ms. Polishenko was probably middle-aged and made a good impression. Apart from her appearance, of course. Does such a person even visit the playground?

- I just moved here a few days ago. I'm still looking for a good place to live, but this neighborhood looks promising. I wanted to make friends right away. Forgive me for not inviting you...

- Not at all, I must admit that I was surprised to see such a young lady, but it is a great pleasure for me. Are you here with your family?

- No. We have a house near the Center area, but my father prefers a quieter place with more trees. I was attracted to the Center, so he sent me here. I still feel a little lost, I used to go to the Center when I was little. I don't remember much of anything.

- Seriously? Well, this is a surprise. But it's definitely worth taking a look at the city from the inside. Still, I understand your father, Ms. Sidonia, the hustle and bustle of the clubs here, the skyscrapers, it can be overwhelming. But our neighborhood is very welcoming. He should visit you here, maybe consider moving. I can't imagine living outside the Center.

- Everything is close, just a few steps away and you have a store within reach - I went to find it.

- Exactly. Sometimes I go, I don't even buy anything. I just follow the news. Or I go out with friends. It's really my biggest hobby.

- By the way, I've heard that people sometimes go to see... this... Mmm... Playland?

Ms. Polishenko frowns slightly.

- Playground. Yes, it's true. It is popular entertainment. Ms. Eco regularly invites you to the show, but I'm not enthusiastic. It's a little too strong for me. I don't want to go. It's for young people... But you know, if you want to go... I'm sorry to be so informal. May I? ...

- No problem, really, it will be a pleasure.

The maid - an ordinary woman in a gray skirt - brought tea and cookies. The drink was bitter and left a strange aftertaste on the tongue. I preferred the tea that Grandma Szechna served in the dog clan. But the hot drink still melted pleasantly on the body. Hiiri also got one, but she didn't touch her cup. The cookies were good. Mrs. Polishenko resumed:

- So allow me. Sidonie, my neighbors go there regularly. If you feel like it, I'll introduce you. They are a young couple, I think you will get along.

- Oh yes! I would be grateful! - I was happy and Mrs. Polishenko smiled with a little pity, but kindly. We talked for a while. Hiiri was silent and played the role of a servant accompanying her mistress. Perfectly invisible.

We exchanged a few comments about the organization of the city, about technology, about the good things Ms. Eco brings to the city, a little about the neighbors. The conversation was easy and natural, I almost stopped paying attention to the hostess's makeup and strange outfit. Finally, I decided it was time to say goodbye.

- Mrs. Polishenko, it is time for us to leave. Thank you very much for the tea. May I visit you again?

- But, if you can't get enough of the old lady's company, I'll be happy to welcome you, Sidonie. And please, if you have a moment to spare, let me introduce you to Valentini.

I accepted as if with hesitation and we followed her to the next door. We were opened by a young woman with platinum blonde hair and a large purple orifice around her neck.

- Ah, Ms. Jaana. What a nice surprise. And Frank and I are going to see the play right now. Will you come with us?

- Oh my goodness, you know I'm not used to being here. Instead, I wanted to introduce you to a lovely young lady. Sidonie, this is Caelia Valentini. Caelio, Sidonie is about to move into the neighborhood, she recently arrived at the Center.

- Really? Why don't you come in? I think Frank is still upstairs.

We entered a modern apartment filled with glass and metal furniture. Ms. Caelia was wearing green pants, similar to mine, and a fur coat - a cape thrown over her orifice.

- It's a divine blouse, where did you buy it? - she was thrilled with my outfit and unfortunately it wasn't just politeness. This woman was really impressed.

I gave the name of the store and we took a moment to talk about fashion, where my improvisation and creativity reached the heights and limits of a deep lie. I was proud of myself, just trying not to look at Hiiri, who was standing modestly on the side and probably wondering how it happened that she ended up in this place and in such company.

After a while, Mr. Frank came down to see us. A quick presentation was made. We were still standing in the lobby. Mr. Frank was attaching a wide bracelet to the banded sleeves of a cut-out shirt that might be appropriate for a dance revue, but certainly not for everyday wear.

- Hello, it's a pleasure to meet you. Frank Valentini. - We shook hands. - I'm sorry to be at your door, but we're about to go to Game Land for a show... We would like to welcome...

- Don't worry. I've already taken up enough of Ms. Polishenko's time.

- Frank, what if Sydonia came with us? - Ms. Caelia suggested, and her spouse applauded the idea.

- I'd love to, but I don't know if it's the right outfit," I stammered coquettishly.

- Are you kidding? - Ms. Caelia seems to have taken a liking to me. - You look sensational. You look like you just walked into a store. Come along with us. Have you ever seen the show?

- No, I haven't had the opportunity. I've only heard stories.

- In that case, I won't keep you busy anymore. - Mrs. Polishenko smiled. - Sidonia, I'll leave you to the care of your friends. Have fun and see you soon, I hope.

I smiled, nodding my head in agreement. The lady from the cottage next door went to her seat, waving goodbye, and I moved with Mr. and Mrs. Valentini and Hiiri, who grabbed my elbow and whispered when the young couple turned their backs to us:

- Not bad. You're crazy. - She tried to keep her previous sulky tone, but I could also sense the admiration in her voice.

- Ha! You know it! We're going on a trip. - I rubbed my hands together, happy that my plan was going smoothly.

We walked for a while until we reached the train station. We chatted freely, and I let my imagination run wild, lying gently about my invented father, our previous place of residence and my life so far. Some ideas were suggested to me by Mr. and Mrs. Valentini, not knowing that I was carefully following each of their reactions and the questions in which the clues were contained. When I felt cornered, I pretended that the subject was difficult for me and that I did not want to talk about it. This was actually true, but in a different context.

Hiiri fortunately found herself in the role of a silent servant who was easy to ignore. She also managed to keep a stone face. Mr. and Mrs. Valentini did not seem to notice her. I was pleased that my hypothesis proved correct.

The train came to a quick stop. It was small - an oblong capsule on rails, with large windows and lots of glass. Inside, there were fairly comfortable seats, more in the style of a living room than a train. There weren't many people, and they all looked elite, because, I guess, the richest people dress the best. Three more people came up with us, and several were already sitting inside, chatting quietly.

"Nothing like a tour," I declared in my mind. "They look like they're going to the theater, for a nice cultural *tête-à-tête* with art."

Although the train was going quite slowly, we quickly got out of the central districts and through the border bushes of the central districts. There wasn't much to see, as the railroad embankment was separated by hills on both sides. Finally, the train turned slightly and we arrived at a station. Next to it, we could see the high walls of an amphitheater or stadium. We moved with the crowd, walking towards the entrance. There was a policeman or a security guard... In any case, someone in charge of controlling the tickets. Mr. and Mrs. Valentini told me that I could buy them on the spot, on their recommendation. So I did.

- Does the department offer a discount? - I asked when a man in uniform handed me a piece of paper.

- Yes, but only one person. If someone wants to bring other members of their household, they must pay the full fare.

- And, it's lucky that only Eliza is with me.

- Do you still have other household members in the house? - Caelia asked. I understood from the context that household members did not include family, but maids, chaperones, and others working in the house.

- There are two left at home. But their father needs them. I'm glad to have Eliza with me. It's always better together.

- I'm glad I have Frank, a single woman has the worst. But sometimes a companion would be helpful, lately the neighborhoods are not very safe. I'm especially afraid of thieves. We

only hire temporary servants, to work around the house and so on. But we are trying to have a baby and eventually we may need someone to help us.

We chatted with Ms. Caelia while Mr. Frank looked for a suitable seat for us. They were not numbered. Inside, we climbed the stairs to the top and only from there did the guests descend. We were up high and the stands stretched across the entire arena space. Only one specially fenced area looked like a VIP area. The wall that separated us from the ground was probably the height of the second floor. Safe enough that, by chance, none of the spectators were hurt.

The arena looked innocent and more like an obstacle course. Various wooden constructions were built and the whole thing was covered with sand. We sat in the middle, as the edges of the railing were already occupied. Because of the cool autumn weather, it was unpleasant to sit on the cold benches. But Mr. Valentini gave us prepared blankets for the comfort of the audience.

- Sit back, this time of year is probably one of the last shows. Good thing it stopped raining.

Indeed. The skies cleared a bit and the sun occasionally broke through. The stadium was not overcast, so on rainy days only the most stubborn devotees of the macabre had to come here.

- Is it always like this? - I asked, pointing to the arena.

- Oh no," said Mr. Frank, leaning behind his wife. - There's usually a lot more construction and I see they've leveled the field this time. The arena changes completely, but I assure you it is never boring. Ms. Eco is very resourceful in this regard.

- Is there blood flowing? - I asked cautiously, and Mr. Frank wondered.

- It depends - Ms. Caelia backed him up. - They recently did a cabaret scene. It was pretty bloody, but it fit in very well with the scenery. The scenery was fe-no-me-nal - she pointed out expertly.

- There will be competitions today. I wonder what the participants will look like.

As if in response, a gong sounded and the announcer's voice floated towards us.

- Welcome to the fall show of the Land of Games, initiated and funded by the gracious lady Eco Moonlight! - Thunderous cheers rang out.

"Gee, the elite really do have a lot to like about him." - I thought in my mind. Despite the light tone with which I had tried to talk to Mr. and Mrs. Valentini so far, I was feeling increasingly tense. I was nervous. I didn't want to see the macabre. I just hoped Karan wouldn't show up at all. Or maybe he could still be saved somehow. Maybe I'll find out where they keep the prisoners or... The applause died down and the announcer took over:

- Today, ladies and gentlemen, we are proud to present you with a competition in a free convention where participants fight each other. All tricks are arbitrary. We will introduce you to able-bodied young men whose task is simply to win. Here they are!

I got up from my seat, wanting to get a closer look at those entering. My hopes were immediately dashed when Karan appeared first at the arena doors. He was dressed in light gray pants and had his bare chest buffed with something for effect. He was followed by several others. There were eight in all.

- E, not much today - says Mr. Frank with some disappointment. - I like shows where there are a lot of actors. When they are few, they get visually lost in the landscape.

And not just visually. "Wait, what actors? They're the ones who think everything is fake?"

- And it's not real? - I asked in a naive tone. Mr. and Mrs. Valentini looked at me with surprise.

- Oh, sure, it really is. But, you know. Well, it's an act. They make so many sacrifices. It's for the art. You'll understand. - Ms. Caelia patted my leg with a confident look.

Of course. For the art. Maybe Eco makes such propaganda and makes the whole show morally justifiable. It's strange.

- It's a different matter when, instead of actors, they let misfits enter the arena," Cealia remarked after a moment. - But, you know, they're not people.

- Really? And who shows up, for example? - My thoughts were racing like crazy. It was obvious that he was talking about deformed people from other clans. From the outskirts of the city. The vision of a member of the dog clan gone mad made me shake my head.

- The season for that is over," Frank interjected. - Although it was pretty interesting to watch the skirmishes in the raw. What do they call them? The rhino-skinned tribe. What a power he had!

I didn't bring it up, focusing on the arena.

The young men were walking upright, with long strides, their faces tense... At least, that's what it looked like to me from this distance. They lined up in the middle for the moment and looked at each other blankly. Also strange. None of them looked scared. No one chased them or pushed them. They didn't look like prisoners at all. On the contrary. A shiver went through me. The announcer said something else, but I didn't focus on it. I stretched my eyes to be sure of what I was seeing. Then the gong sounded again. The participants dispersed, taking up convenient positions. One of them stood on a wooden pedestal, another broke off a piece of the pole and took it in his hand, obviously to use it as a weapon. Karan remained on the ground, close to one of the young men, who did not take his eyes off him. Something didn't sit right with me here. I was expecting all sorts of things, but why did he look so... aggressive?

Another gong sounded and all hell broke loose. The young people threw themselves at each other as if they were impatient. None of them showed any hesitation and they were really merciless to each other. I felt Hiiri digging her nails into my shoulder. I gave her a sideways glance. She was scared, even though she was trying to hide it. I flinched again and again and sucked in air violently several times, plugging my mouth with my hand and praying in my mind that it would go unnoticed.

The fighters attacked without any plan. In the frenzy of battle, with captured weapons or bare fists, they pitted themselves against each other. I don't think any alliances or agreements were made. Karan became agitated, raising clouds of sand. He didn't fight well, but he was agile and fast, so at least he was less injured. Soon, several bodies lay on the ground. Although it should be noted that when someone landed with his back in the sand and was able to fight, despite the injuries, he got up just as quickly... They bled little, but I felt that it was not natural. Only the wounds on his head were oozing in drops. It reminded me of a slashed junkie recently caught by the militia.

"It's not their real emotions, it's not a real fight," I realized.

- The one in the middle, which is a little darker skinned, is very beautiful - I risked a comment.

- Do you like it? I'm the one with the stick. What a strong boy! - Mr. Frank expressed it with satisfaction. He was obviously having a good time. Mrs. Caelia leaned over to me and whispered:

- You're right Gold, brown is very cool. - She smiled coquettishly. Well, yes. She's not going to praise young men in front of her husband. How tactful.

- The one with the stick is good too, oh and the one on the side... But my money's on the black-haired one," I replied, wanting to draw Valentini's attention to Karan.

- Would you like to buy it? - suggested Ms. Caelia. - I'm referring to the earlier conversation about heads of household. If you live alone in the city, you might need someone like that.

- Can we buy them? - I asked in a hushed voice, feeling the adrenaline emanating from the arena wash over me.

- I think so. But I don't know where to report it...

- You can tell the guard. He will go and let the organizers know," Mr. Frank gently suggested.

I stood up, perhaps a little too abruptly, and gestured to a man in uniform standing nearby.

- Can I help you? - he asked in an official capacity.

- Can I buy one of the participants?

The guard is a little taken aback, but after a moment's reflection, he decides that the matter is manageable.

- I'll see what I can do right away. Please wait a moment.

He disappeared from my sight, and I shifted my feet nervously, glancing obliquely at the arena, where the fighters were visibly beginning to weaken and fall from above. Hiiri was standing next to me, clinging to the hem of my jacket, watching the situation with wide eyes. I guess what was happening was beginning to overwhelm her considerably.

The guard returned and humbly announced:

- I contacted my superiors. They agreed to buy, if of course the fighter survives to the end. If he wins, no problem, if he loses... Well, the winner often kills the others.

- And does he have such an obligation?

- Not necessarily. It depends on his or her will. Have you decided on a particular person?

- I don't know yet... - I pretended to hesitate. - But probably the one in the middle, with darker skin and black hair.

- I understand. Come down after the performance and I will show you the way. Then you indicate who you have chosen. We'll try to arrange it.

- And will I be able to get it back immediately?

The man bowed and apologized.

- Unfortunately not. Please inquire about the details of the transaction. A representative will be waiting for you.

- Thank you.

I tried to control the nervous reflex to clench my jaw.

- Hey, what if they overflow? They already look like the undead," Hiiri hissed in my ear. I shrugged. What else was I supposed to do? Throw myself into the arena? Start a riot? Break into the VIP box? I glanced in that direction. The glass limited visibility, but I thought I saw a pink spot, indicating the presence of the moon witch.

Until the end of the performance, I remained motionless like a statue, stiff and silent. Bodies litter the sand of the arena. The structures during the fights were somewhat demolished. One individual with a wooden mace, staggering on his feet, Karan and another youth were circling each other. Karan finally got to his knees, then to all fours, unable to get up. The one who had the piece of wood, which he wielded with efficiency, wanted to throw himself on him, but the third one knocked him down with a frantic attack. They collapsed in the sand, tumbling, disguising their limbs furiously. One hit the other with wood, while the other tried to drive his fist into his stomach. In the end, the one being hit knocked out, perhaps even dead. The one who seemed more aggressive from the beginning tried to get up victorious, but I think he suddenly felt the effects of a bruised stomach. He collapsed under

his own feet, shaken by torpor. He fell, stretched out bending his spine in an arc and also became immobile. The arena was quickly emptied and not a single competitor was left.

The crowd roared and burst into applause. I clapped mechanically, trying to smile forcibly, but I was unable to.

- Honey, are you okay? - Ms. Caelia became concerned and put her hand on my forehead.

- I felt a little dizzy. I don't know why," I lied, blinking intensely.

The Valentinis led me out of the stands graciously. I walked, leaning on Mr. Frank's shoulder, while Ms. Caelia patted me comfortably on the back. When we got off, I stopped.

- I'm better now, thanks. I think it's the altitude. But everything is fine now. I still have to go up, watch the actors. Will you wait for me?

- It can take a while, the presenter always says something at the end," Frank noted.

- We'll wait, Sidonie, we'll be near the entrance. You'll find us when you've done your business, yes?

We parted ways with a friendly couple and found a side door guarded by a tall, strong female guard.

- I had to come here somewhere and ask to be let into a room with fighters. I want to buy one.

- Oh, it's you, please. A colleague will guide you.

I was handed off to the next person and we moved along the corridor under the stands around the arena. From above, you could hear the stomping of the spectators and the ovations. It didn't smell very good in here. Musty and sweaty. And maybe something else.

It took a while before we reached a row of semi-circular barred cells. Most were empty. In a few sat the captives, leading me with indifferent or disdainful eyes. We passed them, and next to them a door opened and we let the orderlies through, carrying someone on a stretcher. Little effort was made to get him into a comfortable position. The beaten man was lying flat on his back and it was virtually impossible to tell if he was alive. The flailing arm was in such a position that it must have been broken in several places. Behind him, another victim was brought in. We let them pass and walked a little further.

- Hello. Are you the one who will be buying one of our heroes today? - The person who greeted me with these words was of a somewhat indeterminate type. Thin, tall, with an angular face, a colorful outfit, with a long cape... It was not the cubist outfit of the elite. It was the disguise of a mage," I assessed, remembering my first encounter with such a gang when they accompanied the moon witch on our first meeting.

- That's me. Is there anything left? - I joked, trying to counteract my unwillingness to smile. "The magician" stood in front of the gate that separated us from the next part of the back room.

- Please look around. This is where we put them for now.

I looked into the cell, and something tightened in my throat. The ones lying there had almost no life. They were more bruised than apples falling from a tree onto a concrete sidewalk. It was heartbreaking. After a longer examination, I found Karan. He was probably unconscious, but it seemed to me that his chest was heaving in shallow breaths. His face was beginning to swell, and large bruises were also appearing on his arms, chest, and under his ribs. I feared that, even if he lived, the internal blows would finish him off.

- Is this one right? I need a bodyguard, and he's fine with me in that regard," I asked sullenly. Hiiri stood behind my back and stared at the ground.

- This one? Are you sure? Okay, no problem. Just give us the address, and we'll send you a notice of where and when to pick it up.

- Oh... and do you... Because I'm moving. Can I leave a friend's address? Will they forward my mail?

- Of course. I don't think there will be a problem.

I gave the address and name of the Valentinis, relying somewhat on Hiiri's memory, as I had not remembered the house number myself. "The magician" informed me that I could pay when it was convenient for me. We said our goodbyes and followed the guide to the exit.

CHAPTER 6 Attachments and Contacts

The train ride home went quickly. It was already getting dark and I was confused. I thanked Valentini for the company and the opportunity to go together. Hiiri and I left in the direction of our district. The girl made up for the time of silence with an avalanche of complaints and excuses.

- What were you thinking? You've really lost your mind. Do you know how much danger we put ourselves in? What was that for? To save a half-dead guy, now completely incapable of... well, of anything. If anyone recognized us, we'd join the ranks of the dead. I'm glad you're doing so well with the elite and I think you'd do well there. You were whispering at the top of your lungs, it was impossible to listen to it anymore. And just so you know, I'm definitely going to report you to Jo...the chief. Apart from the humiliation I suffered... I've been through the nose... And don't count on it anymore... There are more important things than saving every junkie and thief.....

And so on from the moment we left the rich neighborhood. I felt really relieved when we changed in an alley, putting our old clothes on our backs. Hiiri said goodbye to me again.

- Be on your guard. Do something stupid and we will take you down.

Then she left with a quick step, and I dragged myself to the "school".

I walked down the stairs, wondering from one end of my mind to the other how I could make my way through this tangle of corridors, but I came across Louise.

- Oh, my God! Aia, you came! Everyone was wondering where you had died. We already thought you had been picked up by the lot.

- Nooo... Is Ransam here?

- Yes. Distribute the water.

Seeing my confusion, she pointed me to the right hallway and I continued.

I frantically wondered what I should say to him. I began to fear that it was all a ruse. Maybe I wouldn't be able to tell Karan and I would get a message: "We regret to inform you...". I didn't want to raise unnecessary hopes. I should have asked Hiiri earlier so that the news would not spread. At least until we know where we stand.

I walked between the dens carefully, trying not to step on anyone.

- Aio, where have you been?

Shit, he got me. And I already thought I'd managed to go unnoticed in my corner. I stiffened, turning theatrically slowly to buy time.

- Nowhere? - I suggested. However, Ransam looked so pathetic that I refused to joke. Even in this light, I could see that his face had such an unhealthy color, his features were drawn. He

stood hunched over as if he had a stomachache. - I can't tell you where I was. But don't worry, everything is fine...

He gave me a thoughtful look in response and went back to his charges, so I found my blanket and settled into a more secluded spot, right on the edge, near the hot pipes. I figured if I fell asleep again for a while, at least I wouldn't bother anyone.

I sat down, resting my head on my hand, and from under my half-closed eyelids, I looked ahead, thinking about what had happened to me recently. I couldn't come to any conclusions, only images of past events flashed before my eyes. I thought that Ransom would leave me alone for that evening, but I was wrong. He came some time later.

- Are you sure you won't tell me? - He asked again, but without sounding insistent. I shook my head resolutely.

- What about you?

He shrugged his shoulders.

- I walk around the streets. When I'm tired of something, I can't just sit in one place.

- I guess you never can - I remarked, making him smile slightly. - Are you and Karan close?

He thought for a moment.

- It's hard to say. You know, it's the kind of acquaintance that you don't think about every day, because this man is just always with you. In a way, he went everywhere with me. Sometimes he would disappear... He had a particular tendency to steal from the rich. That was his habit, he never missed an opportunity. But apart from that, he was a very good friend.

I did not fail to notice that he used the past tense. So he had already written off Karan. I could hardly blame him. The Land of Games seemed much darker to me now. Especially when I realized, from what Mr. and Mrs. Valentini had told me, that the plays usually play out even more violently.

I wanted to talk about what I had seen, or at least ask questions about Game Land. However, I decided that wasn't a good idea. I didn't want to kill Ransom yet.

- You know, in a way, it affected me so much... I didn't think it would be like this. We are supposed to know that someone close to us might be captured. Every day we hear that someone has been taken. But I don't think it's fair. It's a stupid and perverse system, people are suffering, they are treated like objects. I would love it if it would finally end.

- What was it like before? I know Eco has been in charge for a short time.

- Before that, we had the city council. The Council was formed some time after the explosion. The very beginning was supposed to be total chaos. Many people tried to get into power, various groups formed, for a while we had extremists at the helm, but also people who

made a coup and became leaders among themselves. Don't ask me for details, when my grandfather told me about it, I never bothered to listen.

- Do you have any regrets? - I asked mischievously. Ransom sold me a side-kick.

- Silent. Come on, who cares what happened thirty or fifty years ago?

- Sixty-somethings, I think," I said seriously, and in my mind I volunteered, "Me! I care! I don't know anything, I want to understand everything!". I felt like the questions were just multiplying. The explosion itself, or as we used to say in the dog clan - "God's kiss", what was that? Are there people still alive who remember that time? What was it like at the Center? Why don't people here have any faults?

- Hey, that's right - I started thinking out loud. - Why don't people at the Center have any flaws?

- They did. A little bit. - Ransom showed her hair. - My whole family has bleached their hair. Others are less healthy. Some don't live to be thirty. Some vary. The richer ones are the healthier ones. Then they went down into the shelters and basements.

- Well, yes, you mentioned that. And didn't the clans get citizenship from the beginning, or were they just stripped of it?

Ransom scratched his occipital bone in dismay.

- You know... I won't tell you exactly, because I don't know. If you want to know those details, talk to someone older.

- With whom?

- I'll take you to Grandpa's if you really need it.

- What's yours?

- No, I don't. Mine died a long time ago. "Grandpa" is kind of a nickname because he's the oldest person I know. He's a little hard to talk to, but he remembers a lot if you have the patience to listen. One of the few that are left. Because when someone is too old to work, they have nothing to live for.

I made a face. I need to talk to Ms. Jaana Polishenko one of these days. She's not old, just middle-aged, but I'd like to know her opinion on benefits in the city. Because it seems to me that they may not be there at all. And does the elite have any other funds? This disconnect between people is fractured and disconcerting. To what extent is the elite blind? Do they not know, do they not want to know? Or maybe if I did a campaign on stratification, I could make them a little more aware?

I liked the idea. After all, I have plenty of money. I've already entered the upper class anyway. It's worth doing something about it. It would be nice to have more support for the cause. Eco may have its merits, but the flaws in the system are painful.

Ransom pushed me, pulling me out of my reverie.

- You know what, thanks," he said sincerely. I raised my eyebrows in surprise. - After talking to you for a while like that, I feel better right away. Maybe because I don't feel like I have to take care of you and I don't... Well, I mean it in a good way.....

- What did you say? - I smiled with amusement.

- What I mean," he said, lowering his voice to almost a whisper, "is that I am responsible for them, I feel obliged to comfort them, I don't want to complain, to blame them.

- You're great, Ransom. - I picked him up reflexively, hugging him. - I hope everything works out somehow. Keep your head up.

- Because someone will see it. - He slipped out of my embrace, embarrassed. I raised my hands in a gesture of innocence.

- So what? I can be your big sister.

- Come on, how old are you?

- I don't know. How about you?

- Eighteen.

- I am certainly older.

- Probably not necessarily.

- I'm telling you.

We chatted for a while, talking quietly. Eventually, my eyelids started to droop and my head got heavier.

- Okay, go to sleep. Will you wake up tomorrow?

- I don't know... But I'm going to lie here, if anything... I'll be in the dog clan," I mumbled half-consciously and slipped into the darkness.

I opened my eyes. I stared at the glittering glass above my head. I don't remember falling asleep in a place with such a view. I slowly associated the facts, as I always do in the morning. I tried to get up and hit my head on the glass.

- Hey... That wasn't in the plan. - I was more annoyed than worried. I did a quick survey of the situation.

I was lying on what looked like a bed, covered with an angular glass shade. I tried to lift it up. It turned out not to be very heavy. I don't think it was glass, but some kind of plastic. Nevertheless, I lifted it gently, trying not to drop it. Someone would later accuse me of damaging property. The room, which looked like a barn, was oblong. In the distance were rows of benches. I looked at my "glass coffin."

- Snow White normally - I enjoyed the joke. Right across from my bed, a rise had been built. I took a few steps away to the benches, casting a critical eye over the landscape.

"Am I dead?"

Then the barn door opened.

- For pity! So it's true! - the woman shouted. She disappeared into the doorway for a moment, but I heard screams, calls, and soon after, people began to enter the building. I stood humbly on the steps near the rise, anxious to know if what was happening would be safe for me or not necessarily.

People came down, staring at me and occupying the spaces between the benches and in the aisle. They looked normal, with no visible flaws. So maybe I was somewhere near the Center. Some were dressed in long white and navy blue dresses with decorations on the sleeves and a belt down the torso. One of the women dressed in white like that was half screaming at the people and holding her arm out to me.

- Here it comes! The Keeper's awakening! Bow down. Cover your eyes and discover your hearts that are guilty of sin. Lady! - Here the woman looked at me. - Speak, what will your words be for us who await your return?

The words "hello, what's up?" were out of the question, even though I really wanted to say hello that way. Apparently, I had inadvertently become some sort of cult object. Not good. But until I find out more or manage to get back to the dog clan, I'll try to play my part.

I held out my hand in an authoritative manner, cutting off all whispers, although everyone was watching my every move with suspense anyway. I moved closer, trying to gain time.

- How long did I sleep? - I asked, proud of my ingenuity.

- Madam - a man in a navy blue robe and a small navy blue embroidered cap bowed slightly to me, putting his hand on his chest - you have been dreaming for as long as we can remember. The oldest Vigilants left us years ago. They say you came, Lady, in a nimbus of splendor, to light the darkness of our hearts, and conferred upon us the Holy Link. Then you fell asleep, dedicating your life to the Eternal Vigil.

Aha. And then what? You have to improvise.

- So how many winters do you think the Dark Ages are? - I bit my tongue before I could even say "the dark ages". I think I got carried away by my imagination.

- Eighty-two, ma'am.

And eighty-two years after the explosion. We are moving forward. They talked about the sacred bond, I wonder what that is.

- Everything is clear. - I have made a wise face. - So, my darlings, how do you nurture the sacred bond?

People murmured, obviously disturbed. A woman in a white dress let out a tearful moan.

- O woe is us! Kneel down, unworthy ones, the time of judgment has come!

His voice was loud, pathetic. The crowd threw themselves to the floor, covering their heads with their hands. It was beautiful.

- Get up, my children, because ... For I have not come to punish you...

- The merciful Guardian has shown mercy! - shouted a man in a navy blue suit, clearly not wanting to lag behind my predecessor's pathetic song.

- Please don't interrupt me," I said angrily. Who would have thought it. Such adoration, but in reality pure rudeness. - I'm not going to punish anyone right now, until I see a reason to do so. However, I do want to know if anything has changed since...my last visit. - I wasn't sure how well my plan was received, I guess they were a little confused. That's fine, after all why should I be the only one confused. - I'd like to talk... in private. Not all at once. Any volunteers?

I saw that those who wore long robes, probably priests, were eager to nominate themselves. Nevertheless, I think they tried to show restraint and let the ordinary people through.

- What about you? - I pointed to a little freckled girl standing in the middle.

- And to be together with my heart of links?

- Oh, well... Yes, of course, of course - I stuttered, but I got through it. What is a heart on a lanyard?

The crowd was reluctant to leave. Clearly they were expecting miracles and fireworks, and here was the unknown. Welcome to the club. The girl shyly approached, holding out her hand to a boy who was weaving through the crowd. He was much taller than her, but just as soft and with the same dreamy gray eyes. But a couple.

I walked up the hill, as there was a carpet laid there, and sat on one of the steps. Make it less official.

- Come closer, sit down. Please, I don't bite - I encouraged them when they tried to keep a respectful distance. - Tell me something about yourself. What is your name?

- I'm Eilís Finnegan and this is Enna Hayden," said the girl, also introducing her companion. - We have felt the bond of the heart already as children. Enna is my distant cousin.

- And... how did that connection manifest itself? - I asked seriously, and the girl got a little scared. Apparently, I asked why the sun was shining...

- Just normal... as usual. I began to hear Enna's thoughts more clearly.

Hyyy... I understand everything. I mean, I don't understand anything. Telepaths?

- And you, Enno?

- T... The same," he answered laconically, betraying a tendency to stammer.

- And how do you live your daily life? I mean, are you compatible? Anything you would change about your relationship?

- What, for example? - took Eilís by surprise.

- I'm asking you.

- No, we don't. Our bond is perfect. Sometimes we disagree on things, we argue a little bit, but we love each other very much and we don't feel that it negatively affects the bond. We clearly understand each other.

- So... Good. - I smiled, wanting to show that I felt satisfied with such an answer. - Then I won't bother you anymore. You can go back to your business. Send another... another person.

The couple left and another entered. This time, two adult women entered.

- Blamid.

- Darina.

They introduced themselves by bowing their heads. Blamid had neatly pinned gray hair and was a bit chubby, while Darina looked younger and her red locks framed a not-so-pretty oblong face. But she had a beautiful melodious voice.

- Blamid, Darina. How long have you known about your connection?

- I was thirteen, Darina was nine. We didn't have close contact with each other before. That's probably why we are late teenagers. It's because our homes were far apart," Blamid confessed.

- Blamid is very close to me. I can't imagine life without her," Darina added when I asked her about the nature of their bond.

Next.

And the next, and the next. The same thing. There were mostly bi-sexual couples, but there were others too. Everyone was unanimous and happy. That is, I learned that the colony was in a perpetual food shortage. In fact, they had too little of everything. But when it came to close relationships with the outside world, everyone had their half. Mainly, as I had guessed, it was the fact that they felt each other. A maximum deepening of empathy. They could distinguish each other's thoughts based on their emotions, and to some extent that applied to each person. That's what I concluded. Finally, the time came for the priests. The women were dressed in white, the men in navy blue. If someone felt called to dedicate themselves to the vigil - this included the ritual guard in front of my glass coffin - their other half, the heart of the bond, had to agree and participate as well. That's why there were so many priests. They were simply duplicated.

I couldn't find out more, and I had many questions. Siobhan, one of the priestesses, however, led me to an interesting clue.

- It is an honor for us, oh lady, that you deign to ask us about our relationship, but of course everyone is happy. The grace of the sacred bond is a true gift," said Siobhan in response to my earlier question.

- Is everyone really happy? - I doubted such a utopia.

- Well... except for those who have lost the ties of the heart. Often, as we grow older, we die together. However, there are exceptions. - Siobhan looked at Phelan, her heart of ties, who nodded.

- Take Wynn, for example. His heart connections are dead. Do you want to talk to him?

- Please.

- But he is old enough, he won't have the strength to come here.

- It is nothing. Take me to him.

We left the building. It was drizzling again and the clouds were completely hiding the sun. The surroundings were not very interesting. Just ordinary houses, far from the extraordinary and beautiful houses of the Tree Clan. Simple white houses, modestly but neatly furnished. There was no garbage or wasteland like in the Doges clan, where disorder reigned and everything was patched up in a haphazard manner. Here, the houses looked identical. Whitewashed, low, one-story. Streets paved with sand, swept. Almost no trees. Empty, white and clean. Wynn lived in one of these houses.

Siobhan respectfully pointed to the entrance, staying outside herself. I crossed the high threshold and walked through a short hallway and into a kitchen-dining room, where a wrinkled man was lying deeply on a bed.

- Excuse me, are you Mr. Wynn? - I knocked on the doorframe of the door that had no doors, dividing the kitchen in two. The man was awake. He turned bright, watery eyes toward me and smiled weakly.

- Hello, Guardian. Don't be afraid. Please sit down and take a chair in the kitchen.

There was no servility in his tone as there was in the voices of many others. And that comforted me, I concluded that I had found the perfect man to share my little secret with.

- Mr. Wynn, I'm here to ask you a few questions. Can I have a moment of your time?

- I know why you came, Guardian.

- Yes? So, what for?

- You came here because you feel like a lost little girl and you bow to the responsibility that people easily place on your shoulders.

- Ooo! - I said with admiration. - You are a good man. I have to admit... may I ask for discretion?

- There is no longer a link in my heart for me to share my thoughts. Be still, then, Keeper. Your secrets will not leave this bed.

- Mr. Wynn, I'm not who you think I am. It's a little complicated, but I ended up here by accident. I thought I was going to be in a completely different place. I have no idea what's going on here or what the sacred bond is. I understood that it was a kind of connection between two people, but...

- You want to ask me what connection two people share, right? And I would also say it's complicated. In our part of town, people feel more. We are all close to each other. Even right now, I feel like a lot of people are warming up to me with their hearts and supporting me. Although it is only the warmth of the ashes of an extinguished bonfire, compared to the burning heat of the flames. That warmth is the connection to another person. My wife was the closest person to me. I knew when she was grieving and when she was rejoicing, and I shared each of those emotions with her. I also understood what she loved, what she hated and what she feared. And perhaps better than she did herself. We begin to feel the gentle warmth of another person at an early age, when someone close to us suddenly becomes closer and closer. Later on, this feeling only intensifies, and the initial outline of the person becomes more and more detailed. I can't explain it better, Guardian, because you have to feel it for yourself. But perhaps you yourself already know what I am talking about. This is the gift that came with the limitations brought on by the explosion, the closing of the City and the poverty we face. I was still a child when my father told me about the man who brought the Keeper here. You. He promised that if anything happened, she would protect us. And he left you dreaming.

- So really... I've been here before? I've slept here all the time?

- For as long as anyone can remember, you have been sleeping in the temple and the priests have been listening to your eternal sleep. Recently they have felt a change. They felt a warmth. It heralded your awakening. And here you are.

- Oh, my God... But I don't know why... Can I help you?

Wynn smiled again, placing his rough, wrinkled hand on mine.

- Good child. I think you've already taken care of something, haven't you? You're already helping us. Isn't that what you were going to say? That there's hope?

I froze, staring into good gray eyes. Machdik. Ransom...they're probably worried I won't wake up. I have so much to tell. About what's going on at the Center, about the elite, about the fighting... there are a few people I need to talk to.

- I have to go back," I announced suddenly. The old man nodded. I took his hand and pressed my forehead against it for a moment. - Thank you.

He slipped out of my embrace and stroked my hair.

- Sleep, Guardian.

I closed my eyes, my head resting against the striped blanket.

"The dog clan," I thought. "Machdik. "

And I sank for a moment into unconsciousness.

When I opened my eyes again, I felt like I was immersed in something soft. I moved. Soft bedding. I floated in the down of the quilt. Someone sucked the air in violently.

- Ah! Aia. Can you hear me? Are you alright? How are you feeling? - Mrs. Bahija walked over to the bed I was lying on and looked me in the eye.

- Good. It's all right. I must have frightened you, I'm sorry.

Ms. Bahija made a threatening face to prove that she was very worried. It was heartwarming.

- By the demons, you slept two nights and a day and a half! You have given no sign of life! You are in a kind of coma, my dear. This could be dangerous. Zerah should see you.

- No, no. Mrs. Bahijo, it's okay. I think I got it - I repeated as I got out of bed. I was undressed and put in a white nightgown. I searched the room with my eyes, trying to locate my things. They were lying folded, on a chair next to the bed. I reached into my pocket to find my couch, card and chip, intact. In a fit of ingenuity, I looked at my hands. I made a delicate knife mark on my hand at the Center. Even at night, a red stripe was still visible. Now it was gone without a trace.

I dressed quickly and Mrs. Bahija looked at me carefully.

- Where is Machdik? - I asked.

- He's sleeping it off. He stayed up half the night watching over you.

I let out a grateful sigh. How nice!

Mrs. Bahija decided that I was probably fine and that I could go back to my chores with peace of mind. Not wanting to wake up Mashdik, I decided to find something to do. But nothing came to mind. Mrs. Bahija said that I didn't need to help her and that I should get some fresh air. I went outside and started thinking out loud.

- The most mysterious thing is that I dream in one place and act in another. The Maytres will confirm that I was here. Ransom who at the "school" and the telepathic twins who on the catafalque. If, of course, they have already moved me from Wynn's cabin. That's three places at once at the moment. At first I thought I was traveling in a dream. But it must be more than that. Maybe I'm leaving behind something like a material specter, a hologram... No, that's out of the question. The empaths claim I've always been here. I'm at a dead end here. The next question is: where can I go?

My legs carried me to a hiding place where there was an old mattress. It was getting colder and colder outside. The sun was still shining and the wind was starting to blow. People were hiding in their houses, but I didn't mind the weather at all. I lay down on the slightly damp mattress and closed my eyelids, directing my thoughts to the unknown. Although I didn't feel tired at all, my consciousness started to drift and before I knew it...

I woke up in the dark, feeling something heavy crush me.

- Uh... - I tried to lift the objects placed on me. I couldn't. The room smelled musty, dusty and wooden. When I tried to move, I heard the rustling of wood. It had to be a pile of boards. "How come?" I shuddered. I started to call out.

- Help me! Help me! Help me! Is there anyone here? I'm stuck! Help me! Help me! Heeey!

I was tearing my throat out, making up different screams as I went along. It was good that I could breathe. The pile was extremely heavy and forced me to lie down in a terribly uncomfortable position. Then I heard someone trying to reach me. A small light came into the room. So I guess I was stuck in some kind of cell or storage room.

- Help, I'm here. I was tricked - I tried to guide my savior with my voice.

- It's a whole mountain of wood. How did you get in there? - a deep male voice answered me.

- I don't know. He just rushed me. I was already so awake.

- What is your name?

- Aia.

- We'll get you out, Aio, just be patient. Are you hurt?

- No, not really. I can't move.

The man walked away for a moment, called his companions and together they began to break me down. They mumbled in a playful, melodious way. This surprised me, but I remained silent. Finally, I felt the weight drop considerably and managed to crawl out. I was gray with dust and slightly scratched, but otherwise I felt fine. I wasn't even numb. Although I took my first few steps like a paralytic. The man who found me gave me his arm to help me out of the crib. In the sun, I looked at them with wonder. The whole gang, and there were five of them, had pink skin. Pink like a freshly healed wound or a burn mark. However, they did not look sore or sick. They were uniformly pink, with light, almost white hair. Though this was not the rule. One was spiky, much like Demir, and the other had uniformly gray hair. So was the frame of their eyes. The eyes themselves were mostly dark or gray, somewhat hazy. And excessively flared foreheads.

- Thank you for the rescue. I could never have made it on my own. - I held out my hand to thank him, but the man who had helped me ignored it. Instead, he reached out and ran his hand over my face, as if assessing the position of my eyes, nose and mouth. I stood still as a statue, surprised by this behavior.

- That's what I thought," he said. - You're not from here, are you?

At that moment, I realized that these people were blind. Their cloudy eyes were staring into the void, somewhere beside me or above my head.

- I am a... wanderer. I do inventory and characterization of all the clans. I got here early in the morning and took shelter in this shed to take a nap. But the boards slipped on me and I couldn't get out. I am very grateful for your help. However, can I make another request?

- Please, how can we help you? - said the second man, a little younger, with silver-black hair.

- Tell me about your clan... I mean your area. How do you live here, what do you do?

They obviously relaxed. Maybe they were afraid that I belonged to the witch's militia?

- Come with us, we will take you to our family. We are also curious about other areas, maybe you can tell us a story?

I nodded reflexively, forgetting that they can't see me after all.

- Yes, of course. It will be a pleasure.

- How long do you intend to stay? - asked the one who looked younger to me.

- Not for long. Maybe just today. I don't want to bother you.

We walked through a patch of dry grass, accompanied by those low sounds made from time to time by each of my five companions. I was amazed by the fluidity of their movement. The tall grass made them walk a bit stiffly, as if with some apprehension, but they kept a fairly steady pace. Once we were on the path, they started walking with much more confidence.

We soon entered between the houses. They were pavilions like in the Dog Clan, but more dilapidated, in some places patched up like patchwork. But the paths were very well maintained. One could see that the care taken of the road made it easy to get around. The people going about their business were of an identical pink. The considerably arched skull is also characteristic. The frontal parts extended beyond the norm, even in small children. The whole village buzzed like a beehive, creating a peculiar harmony and monotonous bustle. How do they find themselves here, in such a noise? Then one of the men called out:

- Darling! Come quickly. We have a visitor!

As if on command, they began to approach and reach for me. I let it happen, patiently enduring the inspection. This was accompanied by many enthusiastic adult voices and excited child screams. I bent over so the little ones could "see" my face as well.

- Let's go to the circle!

- To the circle, yes!

- Yes, yes! - they rejoiced, assessing my identity as a foreigner.

- It is cold. We will sit in the big room - my guide decided.

The men escorted me to an oblong, flat building with wide doors. "A party room," I assessed in my mind. Inside were a few chairs, mattresses and cushions. The kids ran in, finding seats for themselves and buzzing like bumblebees. The adults sat more quietly and I

was assigned one of the more comfortable chairs. When all the interested people arrived, I briefly introduced myself and explained the purpose of my visit.

- We are happy to have you here, Aio," my savior began. - My name is Anaru and this is the Singing Family. We are curious about the world we hope you will show us. History tells us that there was a time when another sense was available to us. It is hard for us to imagine. But we understand that the other families in the city are different from us. Flat heads don't allow them to purr, so they must perceive the world in a different way.

- I see, so you hum to get a picture of the objects around you?

- That's right. Our eyes are only an ornament. The song allows us to see. Only details allow us to judge by touch. Don't people in the City do that?

I wondered.

- It varies. There is a clan, which I met recently, where people don't hum, but by knowing the warmth of the other person's heart, they are able to determine what they are thinking.

There were murmurs of approval. I began to talk about the Twin Hearts Clan, then the Dog Clan and the Tree Clan. The Singing Family listened to me, commenting on my words with shouts, sighs and murmurs. At the same time, their faces remained somewhat inexpressive. What good are facial expressions if you can't see them? All emotions were conveyed by sound.

I was a little tired and eagerly drank the plate of hot, sweet drink that was handed to me.

- Aio, the amazing stories you bring with you. We want to give back to you. In return, listen to the song of your family," says Manaia, one of the women sitting on my left.

Manaia intoned a short phrase which was then taken up by all, spreading out in voice like a peacock spreading its tail. I was flooded with a wave of colorful sounds. The singing family produced the sound with their expansive sinuses, making it carry and vibrate in the air with a clear and warm tone.

I listened, enchanted, and the melody seemed to grow and fill every corner of my heart. It was so beautiful and heartfelt that I soon envied the blind for their ability.

- Wonderful! - I whispered respectfully as the final tones fell silent. I even felt moved. - I wish others could hear you too.

Even the children sang. Everyone here was gifted with great talent and the ability to produce a beautiful sound. It was getting a little late. I decided to hide somewhere and go back to the dog clan in my sleep. I said goodbye to everyone and headed out to the crib in the field. It was quite a distance. I was lucky that Mr. Anaru heard me from so far away. In any other place, I could have been in trouble.

I went back inside and crouched in a corner, leaning my back against the wall. To be safe, I put some boards up so the Family wouldn't accidentally find me dreaming in here. I wondered

why they had left those boards. Wood was, after all, a very valuable commodity. But I didn't think about it any longer, thinking intensely about the dog clan and momentarily falling into a dream.

- Machdik! Machdik, you won't believe it! - I ran into the Maytres' house, as proud of myself as if I had just conquered the Mont Blanc. I had so much to tell. Machdik rubbed his eyes, sitting over a bowl of porridge. Or something that looks like porridge.

- Ooo... Aia. It's cool that you're awake," he replied dryly, glaring at me.

- Machdis, I'll tell you everything. Eat quickly. - I couldn't sit still. I walked around the kitchen, pushing the chosen one of the dog clan to irritation.

- You can talk now," he reflected, fumbling with the spoon in his bowl.

- No, because your mother might be here somewhere.

- Mom went to the neighbors' house. They are pickling vegetables together for the winter. And Dad is working in the fields. They are sowing winter crops.

- So, listen.

I told the story one by one. How I woke up in the Center, waking up from lethargy and scaring the inhabitants of the "school." How the militia captured Karan, how Hiiri and I pretended to be elites and went to see the playground with our own eyes. How I woke up somewhere else and met two other clans.

Machdik almost forgot about the food, making big eyes and a bit in disbelief. But my story was so long and detailed that it was hard to see it as a lie.

- You know what I think? That you should tell the others.

I was horrified.

- Are you sure? Is this a good idea? I know how it sounds. I myself think the whole thing is crazy... Although exciting....

- I think it's important. If we could figure out how to do that, maybe we could also dream from place to place.

I thought about it. It would be an opportunity for the dog clan.

- Very good. But maybe not all at once. Let's check the reaction first... Who do we tell first?

- Demir... and Jaras. They were also present when you were found. I think they might be the first to know.

As we decided, it happened. We found Jaras first. Demir was working in the fields and refused to give us any time until he finished digging the field for planting. He and a few other men from the dog clan were pulling the radles in pairs.

- Why don't you use rokons? It would be easier to hang a harrow or another small plow like this.....

- Fuel is too precious. We save it so that we can leave the clan's land if necessary," Demir said seriously. I felt like a scolded girl. I wanted Demir to be free as soon as possible, so we also set to work (literally). One time I was pulling the radle, and one time Machdik. But I think it went better for me. They even complimented us. When we finished, the sun was almost down. We still had to wash after our work, and our clothes were a little dirty too. I had all my stuff on my back, so Demir gave me something of himself. I looked funny, even though I was only a little bit smaller than him.

- What did you want to tell me? - asked the gray-haired man, lighting the fireplace. He put in special briquettes, which burned for a long time. It was wood soaked with substances taken from the soil by the farmers. Jaras lay down comfortably, stretching his legs towards the embers. I noticed that the boys felt at home in Demir's house. They obviously liked the man, almost twenty years their senior, who was always lecturing them and rarely smiled.

I also had the feeling from the beginning that I could trust him and that he was someone who would decide everything and tell me what to do. So I resumed my story, stopping only to take a sip of the tea that Machdik had brought me.

CHAPTER 7 Resistance

Demir listened attentively, with an inscrutable face, to my whole story. Jaras sometimes gets involved. At first he tried to joke, but Demir put him off and in the end the boy just parted his lips and stared.

- ... Finally, I decided it was late. I went back to the shed where I had woken up before and I was there again. I told Machdik everything first and we decided that I couldn't keep it to myself. That was it.

Demir still said nothing, piercing us both with his eyes. Machdik couldn't stand it.

- If only we could do what Aia did... Maybe it would be a chance.....

- I don't think you can learn that," Demir said calmly. - Just as none of us will become a tree. But your story is interesting.

- Curious! - Jaras grabbed his hair. - This is absolutely crazy! I've never heard such a crazy adventure in my life!

- What now? - I asked uncertainly.

- I'm glad you told us about it. It sheds light on your case," Demir said. - In the factory where we found you, you must have been asleep, like this clan of empaths.

- You mean Aia has always been there? - Machdik wonders.

- And no one has found it yet? - Jaras didn't look convinced.

- It is indeed confusing. Maybe the elders know something. The empath clan has kept the most information about you. I'll look into it. Aio, what about you? What are you doing?

- I would like to see more. How many places I could reach. And I would like to do something for the sick and the poor who are condemned to be locked up underground," I said thoughtfully. And in my mind, I also thought of Eco's Moon Witch. So far, I have gathered a lot of conflicting information about her. But because of what I had seen in the land of games, I felt a growing dislike for the city manager. Demir, however, was thinking of something completely different.

- You could... - Demir hesitated.

- Excuse me?

- You have access to many clans. You could be our ambassador.

- Brilliant! - Machdik was delighted with the idea. - If we join forces...

Demir nodded, weighing his words.

- Take it easy. It's just an idea, let's not rush it. But from Aia's stories, it seems that many clans, for one reason or another, are isolated, just like ours. Clans do not mix with each other. Regions remain isolated. But when it comes to the Moon Witch. Aio, we live without

electricity, but maybe not all clans can make it. Consider this. When you visit different people, be careful, but take a look at their lives.

I promised to be careful. We also agreed that I would try to get a map of the city, on which I would note where I would be. Machdik and Jaras were enthusiastic, especially about participating in the secret themselves. I asked them not to share my story with anyone for now, or at least not until Demir knew more. I could only play open cards if I was sure that the Council of Elders was not hiding important information. I didn't want them to think I was dangerous. I could be a spy.

Finally, the three of us left. Jaras, went to his house and we headed to the Majtrej house. It was already dark enough. We had dinner and I apologized again to Machdik's parents for having worried them.

- I think it will be repeated. But don't worry, really. Maybe I come from a clan where we sleep for a long time? - I tried to make a joke. But Mr. Majtrej started to think seriously about it.

- I've never heard of such a clan, but maybe it's a clue?

- ...maybe? - I stammered.

We talked a bit more with Machdik, sitting in his room. The room was empty, uncomfortable, too big for a few pieces of makeshift furniture: a bed, a wardrobe and some shelves.

- I would also like to be able to see the rest of the town. The farthest I've been able to go outside the village is to the Tree Clan. The rest is too far away.

- I wonder if you were put out while you were sleeping, would you be attacked by demons too?

Machdik shivered.

- Nah, come on, that sounds even more terrifying.

- How about digging a tunnel?

- It is probably independent. Demons are immaterial. They don't care where they are.

- Have you not tried to fight them?

- With what, a broom?

I laughed.

- No. I don't know. I don't know. Grandma Szechna has a purification spell. Doesn't she have any others?

Machdik hung his head for a moment, looking as if through me.

- And you know," he finally said, "I never thought about it. I have no idea how it works. The grandmother was trained by the previous whisperer. And now she's teaching one of the girls herself. It's a pretty closed knowledge.

- You have to look at it from time to time. - We yawned at each other.
- Time for another expedition? - Machdik smiled. I responded in kind, feeling the warmth in my heart.

- Maybe I can jump somewhere else before I go back to the Center. Besides, it's time for me to start training.

- Also see if this boy has ever been released.

- Punished?

- Yes. I'll ask Grandma Szechna. Take care of yourself. - He wrapped an arm around me.

- You too. Good night. See you soon.

I walked to an adjacent room, also empty, and dressed in Mrs. Bahija's nightgown.

"Let's see where I haven't gone yet." - I thought, as I realized that I had never woken up anywhere in the middle of the night. Let's try it, maybe by the glow of the lights it would be possible to determine how far I was from the center.

I closed my eyes.

I opened it. Darkness. That's typical of me. I always end up in a hole. I looked around. This time I had to be somewhere underground. I couldn't see much, but there must have been a faint light coming from somewhere, because I could see the outline of bricks. The basement. I was in a small dungeon with a vaulted ceiling. I had to stand, leaning forward. My cell was small and overlooked a hallway that divided into different rooms and went in circles. Light came from the bars above my head. A narrow cast-iron grate, like a drain, gave off a yellowish glow from a lamp or other light source.

Searching patiently, I found a narrow staircase leading upstairs. But the exit was walled off. It was a solid slab of cement.

- Great," I hissed through my teeth. I tried to see if I could push it back or lift it. Nothing could be done. Either it was too heavy for me or it was permanently glued down with mortar. The hair on my head turned white. Was I stuck here underground the whole time? In this gloomy basement, with rats and spiders? It made me uncomfortable. But I wouldn't give up. I resumed my tour. I went through the rooms and corridors. Unfortunately, I found absolutely nothing. It was empty. No extra exits. I could have started calling, but then how to explain that I was locked in here? Who could decide to let such an apparition out? Like a nightmare. I could also fall asleep and leave this place. But I really wanted to see what was up there. Where did I go?

What to do?

Maybe I could get out through the grate? If I could loosen it... But it was too high, I couldn't reach it. I went back to the walled exit. I took out my knife and started pawing at the

bricks. Maybe I could crush the mortar? Then something clicked and when I pushed, the slab jumped. I managed to lift it. It was hinged, which I hadn't noticed before. It turned out that I had undermined the locking mechanism with a knife. I walked out, carefully closing the entrance behind me. A regular light bulb was burning in the room. So this place must have some connection to the Center. Even though I was higher up, it was still the basement. Or some kind of bunker. There were no windows. There was only artificial light.

There was no doubt that someone was living here. There was bedding, everyday items, toys, tools, dishes. But there was no one inside. So there was a way out somewhere. I was happy. Being locked in that space was disturbing.

Then I heard footsteps. I hid behind a corner. If they found me now, I'd still have a hard time explaining myself. Someone is stirring, you can hear the sound of dishes being picked up, then the footsteps start to move away. I followed the one who was walking away. Following him, I easily reached the exit. We climbed the stairs one more level. At the top, a wide exit was built, leading to a peculiar-looking subdivision. Most of the aisles were covered with a roof, and long tables with many pieces of equipment stood between them. There were millstones, looms, spindles, pistons, drills, potter's wheels, and much more. I peered cautiously from behind the wall, observing the beautiful phenomenon. Everything that people were working on was shining, glistening and glowing with its own light. Work was in full swing and no one seemed to want to fall asleep. Further away were the houses, with large windows, also lit up like lanterns. They were built in a circle, close to each other, and the cellar exit was in the middle.

- Hey! Who's there? - One of the workers apparently spotted me. The people reacted immediately. They straightened up from their machines with surprise. Eyes fixed on me, they held their previously harmless work tools within reach.

- Come out with your hands up and don't try to escape. You are surrounded!

I obediently walked out, burying my head in my arms. I stayed at a distance, the corner of my eye desperately searching for an escape route. If they come at me with a few peasants, I won't stand a chance.

- Closer!

I took a small step. I didn't want to go near the hemlock or the pots.

The man who spoke to me was standing closer, a hammer in his hand. Next to him appeared a woman wearing a necklace of phosphorescent beads. She whispered something in a low voice to her companion and stepped forward slightly.

- How did you get here, how did you find out about us, what do you want?

She looked like a boss.

- I come as an ambassador of the dog clan. I travel through the regions, shu... Mmm, contacting different clans. Actually, I came here by accident. I have no bad intentions.

- Is this Clan of Dogs, as you said, with you?

- Some... there are some... they're not far away, I mean... - Damn, I look unreliable. - I'm alone, but if I don't come back in a while, they'll be looking for me...

From the words of the person I was talking to, it seemed that they had no idea about the Dog Clan, so maybe they didn't know about their curse either. Meanwhile, she turned around to chat with the people behind her. After a moment, she looked at me carefully.

- Very good. My name is Sovanna. President of the Night Walkers. What would the dog clan want with us?

I only realized that despite her bossy attitude, she was mostly tense. Hola, these people are afraid of me! Why? I extended my hands, gaining confidence, and moved a little closer. Several of them took a reflexive step back.

- Do not be afraid. My name is Aia. I collect information about the different clans I can work with. The dog clan and the tree clan are thriving because of this. The dog clan had the idea to reach out to the other clans. Many of them are struggling with different problems, and we know very little about each other. We should help each other. Don't you have... any problems with the light, for example?

Sovanna was clearly surprised. The man who had noticed me earlier whispered something in her ear.

- Okay, Chendo... Ambassador, the light has special favors with us and it's the only thing we lack. Fortunately, we are getting there. We are making crafts. Does the dog clan offer anything for such a gift?

- Certainly. All of this remains to be determined. However, if not the Dog Clan, perhaps other clans would be willing to undertake such an exchange. I intend to set up a network. Please tell me where we are in relation to the Center?

A silence disturbed by murmurs answered me. The man called Chenda finally pointed behind him. I looked in that direction. In the space between the roofs, I could see the distant glow of the city center, and small glimmers here and there.

- It's a bit of a revelation. Forgive me, my orientation is pretty bad. I travel by chance and luck. I'm just slowly creating a map of the area. Can you tell me the approximate distance?

I don't know if I won the favor of these people, but they calmed down and stopped treating me like a rabid stray dog. Sovanna walked up and looked in the same direction, saying:

- That's our only clue. We don't stray far from our facility.

- Why? Is reason the curse of the explosion?

- A curse, you say? You could say that. We can't function during the day... - She looked at me uncertainly. From this distance, she looked younger than I thought she would. - I don't suppose you know what the problem with the Night Walkers is?

- Do you drink the blood of virgins? - I joked cautiously, but I don't think she understood me.

- The sun causes us considerable damage. Even when protected by suits and clothes, we suffer from burns. The sun literally burns unprotected skin. We only go out at night and only after sunset.

They are really vampires.

- Isn't the term "Night Walkers" a bit... ironic?

- That's the main thing. - Chenda replied, and the woman smiled slightly for the first time.

- And how do you see the night?

- Weakly.

- What do you mean? - I was stunned. - So how do you deal with it?

- The lamps in the bunker where we sleep are permanently on. We assume that this is a gift from the city. Sometimes we use torches, but we are also very sensitive to fire. We just use it to fire the pottery and to heat ourselves. We use shiny shells when we work. They make, as you may have noticed, the objects glow with their own light.

- Where do you find such shells?

Sovanna let me approach the tables. People were slowly returning to work. I watched, enchanted by the beautiful phosphorescent patterns.

- There is a species of snail that our grandparents discovered. They live underground and feed on mushrooms that grow underneath, away from the light. These mushrooms actually glow. The snails eat them and this glowing compound is deposited in their shells. We grind them up, add them to clay or decorate objects with shell fragments. If we sprinkle our linen and hemp with the decoction of these shells, they also start to glow softly.

I looked at Sovanna's necklace. A glamour loving people of the night. How ironic.

- So I understand that you do not leave this place for fear that the day will find you too far from a safe haven? Have you not tried to build shelters and contact others?

- Aio, we know that ordinary people sleep at night. Someone could mistake us for thieves or see our visit as an attack. On the other hand, the fact that we sleep when others are awake makes us vulnerable to attack during the day. We just wanted to live safely.

Sovanna guided me around the tables. I greeted people who work nicely. I was even allowed to look into the houses. Large windows caught the moonlight. Today obscured by autumn clouds. At least it wasn't raining. Now the nights are much longer, but cooler. In the summer, when everyone spends more time at work, the Night Walkers have to hide from the

day. Besides, their eyesight and other senses were quite ordinary. They paid a rather unfair price for their sun intolerance, with nothing in return.

I decided to assess the location of the village by foot. Equipped with a lantern and in the company of Chenda, who was able to point out at least the paths in the area, I assessed the size and proximity of the area. On a piece of parchment, I noted by eye where we might be. Chenda helped me tremendously in assessing the directions of the world. That night, the stars, which the Night Walkers used to follow, were not visible, but Chenda remembered roughly the directions of the world.

He also pointed out to me where there are old wells and caves where they collect phosphorescent snails. He warned me that these are dangerous places and that there are times when the ground slips in this area.

I promised a response from the dog clan and apologized for disturbing them with a sudden visit. I moved around in the dark, simulating a trip. In reality, I needed to find a safe place to sleep. I thought a cave might be a good idea. I passed the Nightwalker colony in a wide arc and began my careful search for caves. Once, I almost fell into a hole. For a moment, my fear made me think of a broken skull dozens of feet below. Fortunately, it was only a watery bowl, whose slope slipped when I stepped on it. I was only in danger of wetting my pants.

Finally, almost losing all hope in the meaning of this crazy night search, I found a rift where there was a wide crack and it was possible to safely descend into a fairly spacious and reasonably dry cave. There was a dearth of glowing mushrooms and snails, so I decided to wait here until next time, and during the day, when the Night Walkers couldn't meet me, I would look for something safer.

I fell asleep immediately, snuggling up against a rock wall,

and wake up in an underground "school".

"Underground to underground," I say wryly and look around, searching for Ransam.

- Aio, you are lucky to be awake! - Ransam caught up with me before I could say "Good morning." - I met Johtai's assistant. I don't really know why, but the resistance wants to see you.

Resistance movement? Aha. Certainly the people allied against the Moon Witch. This means that Hiiri, Chief Johtaja and a whole bunch of his subordinates have the witch in their sights.

Then I thought the call had something to do with my trip with Hiiri to the Land of Games. Oh, not good. I could be hurt.

- When?

- Preferably as soon as possible. I said I would take you to see them as soon as I met you.

- Didn't you say I was sleeping?
- No, I didn't. In a way, I'd rather not say. - He smiled.
- Thank you.

We went back up to the surface and, unusually, took the usual streets instead of the rooftops. When I asked Ransam about this, he pointed to the black spire of one of the tallest skyscrapers in the center.

- Do you see it? It's most likely the house of the moon witch. We call it the Castle.
- But you're not sure?
- No. The Moon Witch uses her power to make sure no one sees her when they don't want to. Every appearance before our eyes is a deliberate display of power. She wants us to fear her.

- And she's doing great," I mumbled wryly.

- Perhaps. In any case, the headquarters of the resistance is relatively close. They concluded that there was no point in taking cover on the outskirts. First, any action would be delayed and there would be less control. Second, it is darkest under the lamp. More people take cover on the outskirts, so that's where the militia is most likely to circulate.

We didn't go to the castle itself, but close by. Between the tall buildings, in one place, was a square - the remains of a building that may have collapsed or been demolished. A foundation remained, with vegetation running through it. Ransam sat on the concrete foundation for a moment, asking me to do the same.

- What is it? - I asked in a low voice, leaning in.

- If someone is following us, I don't want to give away their hiding place - he replied half-heartedly, adjusting the laces of his ratty shoes. - We're pretending to have a date," Ransam thought and put his arm around me, blowing a warm breath into my ear. But there was no indication that anyone was watching us. We sat there for a while, listening and surreptitiously looking over each other's shoulders.

- Everything is clear," he said with satisfaction and stood up, walking to the middle of the foundation. I did the same, feeling a little uneasy. Obscured by a vine, covered by a cover painted the color of the surrounding concrete in the floor, there was a passageway. Another cellar. Hooray," I thought reluctantly. But where else could they be hiding? The basement is the basement.

We descended, covering the entrance behind us and disappearing into total darkness. We descended into the darkness. I stumbled a few times.

- Aio. Give me your hand. - Ransam grabbed me and helped me regain my balance. His hand was thin and warm. After a while, we saw the outlines of walls and a soft light seeping into the depths, and we heard the echo of distant voices. Finally, we entered a small room

where three people were sitting at a long table. I recognized Johtaja, the leader of the movement. Next to her sat two middle-aged adults - a dark-skinned woman and a bald man. I thought about the phenomenon of having such young people as leaders. Although in Ransam's case, it probably had a different basis. Ransam was mainly involved with young people his own age or younger. Johtaja must have been in her early twenties and was clearly respected. Behind them, somewhat in the shadows, were two other young men, and Hiiri.

- I'm glad you arrived. Hopefully no one was following you. Hello, Aio, we meet again. Ransam, you will wait in the next room. You refused to join the resistance, so you shouldn't participate.

A figure dressed in a gray similar to Hiiri and the others emerged from the indicated room. Ransam allowed himself to be led away.

Johtaja waved me over and ordered me to sit at the table. The others did the same. I waited in silence.

- Hiiri told me the whole incident," the boss begins bluntly. - So you are a citizen?

I nodded my head.

- Why do you live in a "school"?

- Because I haven't taken care of better housing yet," I replied cautiously.

- This is not the answer! - Johtai's eyes narrowed dangerously. - You know very well what I am asking. Why is a citizen, in possession of a large sum of money, hiding in a cellar? Why this idea of a trip to the land of the macabre? Besides, you take my help with you. You also buy a prisoner. Do you know how that sounds to me?

- As an act of goodwill? - I took a chance.

- Like a lie and a ruse! - she raised her voice, hitting the table with her open palm. - In my opinion, you are a spy of the Moon Witch. You wanted to buy your way into our good graces and then deliver the entire resistance movement to us on a platter.

What now? I looked at Hiiri nervously. Her face didn't express much. I think she was also trying to avoid looking me straight in the eye. Heck. But I let it happen. I got ahead of the line, and so they considered me dangerous. They're not going to let me out of this underworld like that. I wonder what will happen to Ransam. Will they let him go? Maybe the fact that he can't hear all this will save him.

What should I do? The more I defend myself and prove my innocence, the worse it gets for me.

So...

- Bravo - I spread my arms with a nonchalant smile - you've got us surrounded. It was a set-up. I'm Ms. Eco's agent. We didn't know where you were hiding. You were precocious, elusive and smart. But now everything has become clear. We know your location. You lost.

Johtaja raised her eyebrows. The woman sitting next to her straightened up and wrinkled her brow angrily. The others stared at me with stony faces.

- You won't leave here alive," Johtaja hisses, searching for words.

I shrugged, adopting an indifferent expression.

- My bad luck. But the objective has been achieved. The "school" and your underground base will soon be emptied. If you don't let me go, they will launch an assault. I am being watched.

There was a silence as thick as marmalade.

- And how will we let you go? - asked Johtaja.

- Then... You will gain more time to evacuate.

- No. We'll have more time to evacuate if we keep you here a while.

- Oh - it slipped my mind. - But... It's too late anyway. The moon witch is following me with a transmitter I have with me, and she can see and hear everything. And soon her militia will probably show up here.

- Aha," Johtaja said, crossing her arms in a gesture of doubt. - And she doesn't mind if you call her the Witch instead of Mrs. Eco? And that you tell us the plan for the ambush? - She nodded, and one of the young men pointed the barrel of his gun at me.

At that moment, Ransom burst into the room, dodging his guard and running to the table.

- She's lying! This is bullshit!

One guard jumped after him, grabbing him from behind by the shoulders. The other came out a moment later with a split lip and pinned Ransom in the stomach. The boy folded in half with a gasp.

- No!" I shouted, standing up abruptly and knocking over a chair.

- Enough - said the older man and also stood up. He was shaved all over and very wrinkled. The left side of his face seemed to be hanging down. When he spoke, he seemed to be inactive.

- She's lying," Ransom moans, "she's not a spy.

- What proof do you have of this? - The dark-skinned woman pointed her finger at him. - She admitted it herself.

- It's okay, Zyanyo. It's clear, the man reassures her, that's not the reaction of the witch agent. After all, she shouldn't care about him at all.

Johtaja pinched the root of his nose as if to avoid an impending migraine.

- Right. So, from the beginning. Who are you, girl? And why are you trying so hard to lie?

- What do you mean by "clumsy"? After all, I thought of it brilliantly! - I took his words as an insult to my creative skills.

- Aio. Don't make it difficult for us. Why did you go to Game Land?

I lowered my head.

- Because they caught Ransam's friend and I wanted to do something to get him out.

I didn't look at Ransam, but I heard him gasp in surprise.

- Where do you live? Did you run away from home? - the bald man made an assumption.

- I don't know. I don't know. I have lost my memory. I don't know where I come from.

There's a fake address written on my ID card.

- How do you know it's a fake?

- Because it's a power plant. Nobody lives there. But then I woke up.

- At the power plant? How did you wake up?

- She falls asleep. She falls into lethargy. Then she gives no sign of life and even sleeps for days," Ransam cut in.

- You are a very mysterious person," the dark-skinned Zyanya said dryly.

- It bothers me a little bit. It's easy to accuse me of lying because it's so strange. So I didn't even bother to explain it to her," I replied with resignation.

- We have judged you unfavorably, and you could be our chance, Aio. - Johtaja dismissed the young man with the gun and told me to sit back down. Ransam was also given a chair, on which he rested with relief, holding his stomach. - Whether your ID was real or fake, it worked. You were free to use it. You also got some contacts among the elite. You have immense possibilities. You could really become a spy. But ours.

I weighed the words carefully. I didn't like the idea much, but I listened patiently.

- The Moon Witch is a cruel dictator. You have seen only a fragment of her abilities.

- Game Land was enough for me...

Johtaja shook her head, not letting me get a word in.

- No, you don't. You don't understand. The moon witch is the culmination of the highest caste. And the elite are not just rich people. They are the people who are descended from the healthy survivors of the explosion. And the poor are the people who have been affected by the radiation of the explosion. They are people who are sick, weak, unable to work from the beginning. And there is no hope for them. Nothing at all. These are the people to shoot. The Eco Witch of the Moon will not stop exterminating all those who are not the pillars of a strong society. There are still the outcasts from the outskirts of the city center. Deformed, ugly, crippled... The Witch catches them and throws them into the arena for the pleasure of the crowd, but the time will come, perhaps soon, when she will get rid of them all at once. We think her power could wipe out an entire village of misfits. What will stop her? We are getting weaker and weaker. What about her? The power will give her eternity.

- Impossible - I questioned that last point. - Nevertheless, the rest sounds horrible.

- You have yet to see what the moon witch is capable of. Fortunately, we have people on our side who are competent in various useful fields. - Johthaya glances at the bald man, who bows his head slightly. - Join us - continue to be the leader of the resistance. - You will help us and we will do our best to find out something about your past. We will also provide you with proper training so that you can defend yourself and handle firearms. If you agree, this will allow us to track the activities of the witch on the elite side. Information is vital, and in our situation it is quite difficult to get it.

- We really need you, Aio. - Zyanya intertwined her hands and looked at me pleadingly. - We've been trying to do something about the Moon Witch's aggression for a long time, but the result is that we are just staying afloat.

I felt the stares as if they were something tangible. I remembered the despised clans I had encountered. Essentially cut off from the Center, exposed to the pity and disfavor of the Moon Witch. I remembered the Land of Games and the encounter with the Eco Witch when, in the square, she wanted to look at a person from the inside. I remembered that "school" full of weak, sick, helpless people. And the splendor of the Center. The stores, the colorful shop windows, the carelessness and ignorance of the elite. The anger gave me confidence.

- Okay. I will help you.

Voices of approval were raised.

Hiiri, led me into a room where a storage room had been set up. The collection was not impressive, but there was always something. Hiiri advised me to look around and pick something. There were a few firearms, bulletproof vests, police batons, knives as big as meat cleavers, mostly used equipment apparently stolen from the city's militia resources.

I walked over to one of the shelves to look at the weapons... I don't know what they were exactly. I don't know about the guns. To me, they were all pistols. I weighed a few in my hand. Heavy. Holy shit! Am I supposed to use this? "Piece of cake," I thought wryly. Even worse if I were to hurt or kill someone with it!

I didn't want to take anyone's life at all. If possible, I want to avoid that.

Hiiri finally got impatient.

- What's up? Have you decided on something? Can you shoot?

I denied it fervently.

- Take this one. It's lighter, simpler. Chances are you won't shoot anyone.

I went back to all the people gathered, carrying my gun like it was a hot potato. Johtaja kept a stone face.

- Good, so you're going to practice shooting and hand-to-hand combat. We'll have to do it out of the way so that the clatter of gunfire doesn't bring the militia down on our heads. I think we'll leave the Center for that purpose. It will also be a regular meeting place, Aio. You will

appear there every day at dawn. Hiiri and Valko will accompany you. - The chubby little boy nodded. - Both are good shots. And we will meet again in a while. I'll send for you. Go ahead.

- Good luck," the bald man said, and Zyanya nodded gravely.

Ransam and I exited the bunker, carefully opening the hatch to see if anyone was there. We wandered off into an adjacent alley to wait for Hiiri and Valek. Only then did I catch my breath, having realized how nervous I was.

- Ransam, are you okay? He's beating you to the punch. How did you know I was faking? How did you know what was going on? - I asked.

- Aio, you are a hopeless liar. The adjacent room had a ventilation grid through which everything could be heard. When I saw you getting ready, I hit one of the guards and had to interrupt you.

- Yes?

- Yes. Resistance is sometimes quite tough. If they think you are too dangerous, it can cost you.

- Is that why you didn't want to join them? - I guessed. He nodded his head.

- I don't entirely agree with their methods. Although we share a common hatred of the moon witch.

- Thank you. - I shook his hand. He looked to the side.

- Aio... is it true that you went to Game Land to save Karan?

- Yeah. But I don't know if he's going to make it. He was...very beat up. - Ransam swore.

Then Hiiri and Valko joined us. Behind them, a small van approached us. Behind the wheel sat another boy, silently listening to the conversation at the table.

- Let's go," ordered Hiiri. - We'll leave the Center by car. Pack your bags inside.

We got there in twenty minutes. We passed old apartment buildings and the industrial part, where I woke up for the first time. The edge of the center was crossed by a railroad embankment. The track of the train I was on - I guessed. There was a small square where grass and small trees peeked through the cracked concrete. At one time, it must have been a parking lot. Today it has become a dumping ground for useless building materials.

The driver stayed in the car while we crossed the square and stopped at the edge where there were taller bushes and a stretch of wall. Hiiri and Ransam kept a safe distance. I was handed over to Valk, a boy who was supposedly good with guns. He must have reintroduced himself to me, because he was so unobtrusive that I didn't remember him by name at all. The superficiality, however, had nothing to do with his skills. We drew shields in paint on one of the buildings. Different sizes, in several places. The boy could reach any point almost without aiming.

It was my turn. I must say I was proud of myself. I didn't shoot anyone, I didn't damage the gun or the target I drew. The last thing I could really count as a success. In fact, I shot everywhere but the target. Valko was patient and careful and I was desperate. Hiiri was staggering with laughter. Even Ransam laughed. After one time, they joked out loud about my accuracy. I felt stupid, but I couldn't be angry.

Next, Hiiri showed me some useful holds for hand-to-hand combat. This is where the humor took over, because despite the fact that I patiently laid on the ground when she demonstrated a given grip on my skin, I didn't improve at all. In fact, the shooting was going better for me because I had at least learned to reload the gun myself.

My only advantage was that I didn't tire so quickly. I was pretty resilient and it was my tired teachers who asked for a rest. Maybe it was more a matter of mental rest.

- That's enough for today, at least we know what your skill level is.
- You should have asked, I would have said none," I joked annoyedly.
- Be ready first thing in the morning at the same location each day. Once you have mastered the basics of hand-to-hand combat, we will add an object attack. You must be effective, we are not talking about fair fighting. We will not teach you martial arts. We will teach you to fight economically and win. Do you understand?

- Unfortunately.
- Please?
- I meant, yes sir, I understand! - I straightened up as if for an exercise, to which Hiiri only wriggled in her own way.

We returned to the Center in a van. They dropped Ransam and me off at a secluded spot where we climbed onto the roofs. We found a secluded terrace with an abandoned pigeon house and sat there.

- All right, Aio. Enough with the secrets. I want you to tell me everything you've been keeping secret.

I looked at it carefully. It wasn't an order, it was a request from a friend.

So I told how Demir, Machdik and Jaras had found me, how I had moved to the Center in a dream, rather laconically how Hiiri and I had played our imaginary roles and gone to the Land of Games, and of course, all the clans I had met. Ransam listened to this as if he were petrified. He didn't even flinch, just fixed his strange black eyes on me. When I finished, he remained silent for a while longer.

- So what? It's crazy, isn't it? - I pushed it amused.
- Complete. I didn't even know that so many outcasts lived on the outskirts of the city.

- Not at all queer. The explosion caused strange changes, but they are still humans... Maybe the Tree Clan is introducing some doubt here. But apart from all these mutations, deformations, abilities... They are people like me or you.

Ransam squirmed in disbelief.

- And perhaps even more normal in some ways. They are not affected by such diseases as the poor at the Center. No one lives in such poverty as those here. They may be modest, but they are a close-knit society. You should see them.

- I used to see it. I once snuck into the booths at Games Land. Back then, they didn't check who was coming in as much. There were changelings fighting in the arena. They were strange, some horribly deformed. They killed each other there like wild beasts.

- This is what the Moon Witch wants to achieve," I replied firmly. - The elite who watch the fights are convinced that there is nothing wrong. That they are dedicated actors. And the fighters behave strangely. I think they're given a kind of stun, which increases the level of aggression and adrenaline. It looks like they don't feel any pain, only hatred for anything that moves.

Ransam thought about it.

- That would be correct. The witch produces drugs, we have seen all the evidence.

- That's right. And clan communities are often very gentle and friendly people. To be honest, no one frightened me more than Johtaja and his entourage.

We remained silent for a while, contemplating the roofs.

- Ransam: You know, something occurred to me. After all, you don't have to be poor anymore. We'll buy a house.

Ransam laughed as if I had told the joke of the year. He chuckled for a while, unable to contain himself. Until he caught his stomach, still sore from the impact.

- Have mercy, Aio," he said at last, rubbing his wet eyes with laughter. - Do you have any idea how much money you should have?

I pulled my reader from my inside jacket pocket and displayed the description of my account to Ransam. The boy took the document and stood still for a moment, only involuntarily opening his mouth... Then he slowly looked up at me.

- And what, are we enough? - I asked, concerned.

- That's... that's enough," he mumbled. He was completely stunned. - Look, you've been accumulating interest for over eighty years. Does that mean...?

- That I use an account launched just after the explosion?

- Before - corrected Ransam. - The date is minus one. That is, one year before the explosion.

- Not bad," I commented, impressed myself. - I wonder who else has used this account so far. There's nothing on the printout. Maybe nobody?

- Impossible," Ransam retorted. - All this time, someone with access to your account and whoever then linked the ID to that account must have used it... You know, who wouldn't?

- Maybe he's dead? - I made a guess.

- Maybe. Maybe it's a legacy? You were automatically linked to the account of one of your parents or guardians.

- Probably the grandparents. Given the date.

We talked for a while longer, making various assumptions. We came down from the rooftops in the afternoon, repeating the bakery shopping maneuver. This time I went to three different places, so that I could buy a little bread here and there and not have to explain myself to the party again. The bags containing the bread were picked up by thugs who disappeared from view on the cat track - as I called the rooftop roads in my mind. Despite the early hour, I said goodbye to Ransam and went to my corner to move on to the dog clan later in the day.

Before I started looking for Machdik, I decided to visit someone. I knocked on the door of grandmother Szechna's house. She opened it with a little surprise, which she tried to hide by grumbling.

- Well, what about here? I'm busy.

- Grandma Szechno, I wanted to ask you something.

- I don't have time to argue. I'm training a youngster. Don't bother.

- Please. I think you can shed some light on my case. At least let me know when you have time for me.

The grandmother gritted her teeth like a horse.

- So be it. If you're going to pester me and harass me, you might as well get it over with.

She let me in. The cottage was empty. The young whisperer was probably working in the fields like the others, and the grandmother just wanted to get rid of me.

- Some tea? - she whispered hospitably. - And what do you want to know? - She asked a little more politely as we sat down at the table with mugs of hot brew.

- Grandma Szecho, when we first met, you mentioned that there is still dust in the air. How do you know that?

- It's written in the Book of Memories," she answered evasively.

- What is the book, can I see it?

The grandmother glared at me with her pale eyes, but just as I thought she was going to chase me out of the cabin, she stood up and brought a small coffin from the next room.

Opening it, she pulled a folder of pages stapled together from inside. Real, slightly yellowed pages. I never thought I'd see paper all over town. Until now, I had only seen text in electronic form, like on the holo drive I had purchased. Although... I remembered - at the Center in the old power plant, I had newspapers in my hand. Another testament to how old they were. They must have been from before the explosion. I grabbed the pages, carefully laid them on the table and opened them to the first page.

Dear citizens of the city. We are responsible for the tragedy that has occurred. But let our intentions be understood as pure. I hope you will survive the difficult times and find your way in this new world. The dust still swirls in the air. This is a truth you must know. But do not fear it, for it remains the source from which the City draws. We are condemned to dust and that is our salvation. And also the prototype I have chosen. I hope it will appear at the right time. My unique work should help. Let this booklet be a guide for you. This is all the knowledge I have gathered, which I put on safe paper. The rest is lost.

A.T. Ring

Then it was filled with rows of numbers and calculations. Unfortunately, they weren't clear to me at all.

- Is that all?

- Yes. When the curse was upon us, a prophet came and gave us these words. This is what those who met him told us years ago.

I read the short introduction twice more.

- Ring - I repeated out loud. - Grandma Szechno, I have that name too. It was written like that on the bank statement. I think the prophet could be my grandfather. And I'll give my head that I've seen that name somewhere else. Do you know anything about this... prophet?

- No, child. Only what has been handed down to us. No one alive remembers the prophet.

- And what is dust? What does it mean to be the source from which the city draws?

- The nature of dust is not fully understood. Just as we don't fully know the secrets of the Sun or the Earth. But what we do know is that it is energy. People have exploited this characteristic of dust without knowing it better. And this is still the case.

- What do you mean, it's not the witch of the moon who distributes the energy? Lights, appliances, hot water...

Grandma Szechna fell silent and looked at me sharply.

- So, is its power a rapture?

- The power of the moon witch is that people believe. Nothing else matters.

This time, it was I who kept quiet. I assumed that the stories about the power of the ecological witch were greatly exaggerated, but I nevertheless succumbed to the aura and myth she was spreading. I was also convinced by Ransam and others at the Center. So the moon witch must have restarted some kind of power plant. She probably also has some efficient physicists and programmers behind her...

My reveries were unexpectedly interrupted by a whisper.

- But it's not just about energy. The dust connects us all. It surrounds us, and if we can open ourselves to it, we will get what the prophet wanted.

- Which one?

- The room.

- Will Mashdik bring peace to the city?

- The chosen one will appear when he is needed. This is what the Book of Memories says.

I didn't know how the dog clan had managed to interpret this short text in this way. My questions were replaced by a row of others, but I knew that, for the time being, I would not find answers to these questions.

- One last question. Grandma, did the witch kidnap members of the dog clan and take them to the land of games? Did she want them to fight in the arena?

The grandmother's eyes widened in genuine amazement.

- I don't know how you can know such things... Once, it happened that militiamen came to our house and wanted to capture people. The reason was obviously invented. Those who were attacked were provoked. They wanted to defend themselves, but the fight moved outside the security zone. One of the men was held down long enough for the demons to catch him and devour his soul. He could no longer be saved. Seeing this, the militia decided it was no use and left us alone. Since then, no one has bothered us. But where they wanted to take our people or what to do with them, I don't know.

I couldn't think of anything else. And I felt like I didn't understand much of it. I was still missing some essential element. I let out a big sigh.

- Thanks, Grandma. Maybe this will bring me closer to solving this puzzle.

- Be careful and beware. The truth is often difficult. Sometimes it doesn't help to know everything.

It sounded very disturbing, even though the woman spoke in a tone of good advice. I thanked her again and walked out into the afternoon sun.

I found Machdik in the field. On the way, I greeted Jaras and politely greeted the other people who were working.

- And what, you got that beaten boy out of the punishment cell? - Machdik asked at the outset.

- No, I don't. I think it's going to take a while. They probably have to fix it for me first.

- Is it that bad?

- I will tell you everything. A lot of things happened today.

- Evening. We haven't finished working yet.

So I too put my hand to the plow, while the others removed stones and roots and leveled the soil. All this with simple machines powered by their own muscles. If the dog clan had access to the energy available in the Center, it would be much easier for them to work. But I also found that working together was also fun. Doing something with everyone gave me a sense of belonging.

And when the stars came out, shining between the clouds, we sat with Machdik and Jaras in the comfort of the Majtrey house. I told the boys how I visited the nightwalker clan, how I joined the resistance, how I learned to shoot, and how we decided to buy a house. I didn't mention the conversation with grandmother Szechna.

- Are you going to take orders from the resistance now? - Jaras chuckled. His tone expressed reluctance.

- On the one hand, I'm also a little uncomfortable with them. But thanks to them, maybe I will be able to know more. Maybe about my origins, maybe about the ecological witch herself? By being in their ranks, I might paradoxically have more freedom. I have been given the green light to play as a member of the elite. I'm looking forward to learning hand-to-hand combat, it can be useful, I calculated as I snapped my fingers. - The resistance works for the poorer part of society, that's good too. Maybe I can help them a little. I suppose if I don't join them, they might sabotage my actions.

- What for? - Machdik expressed doubts.

- They would be afraid they couldn't control me.

- Now they can. - Jaras was adamant.

- Now they think they can do it, so they'll be less vigilant," I replied with a satisfied look on my face, thinking I was very clever. The boys, however, after a short discussion, found this dubious.

- They will look at your hands and if they think you are in the way or too conspicuous... - Machdik ran his finger over his neck.

- But that's what it's all about, getting me to notice...

We talked for a while until it was really late. I said goodbye and promised to wake up as soon as possible. I had a lot of plans to make.

After waking up at the Center, I hired Ransam and Hiiri to help me sort out the issue of buying a house. I wanted Hiiri to be there as a member of my elite layette and, with Ransam, also as an advisor and guide. She agreed to the idea of buying without much enthusiasm, but she was drawn in. We also had to find a discreet intermediary.

I wanted the house to be close to Mrs. Polishenko's apartment. However, it was a happily inhabited neighborhood, the buildings seemed well maintained and renovated. We did not find anything for sale.

I groaned, unhappy that my plan had already shown the first gaps.

- Maybe he should build a house from scratch? - Hiiri chuckled. Ransam ignored the sarcasm.

- We don't have that much time. Building a house even with this budget...

- Wait, that's an idea! Hiiri, you're brilliant! - The girl looked at me with concern. I guess she had already gotten to know me well enough to sniff out a weird idea. - I'm supposed to go after the elite, which means it will be perfectly reasonable to go after the estate, right?

- In fact...

- So building a house is the best opportunity for that. I'll be renting something "temporary" that can be renovated just a little bit, and I'll be known for my considerable wealth, right?

They looked at each other uneasily. It must have seemed too abstract. But I was carried away by the vision that was emerging in my imagination.

- Great! I'll employ many more people than necessary for the construction, and I'll be able to pay them! Maybe I'll even make a small canteen for the workers. Maybe Karan's mother... It will be a self-perpetuating machine... It can be a big space... I will want it to be neat and tidy and have a park and a small pond... Maybe the building itself will be designed for... bigger rooms, a small mansion, in the end the money is not a waste... - I didn't finish any sentences, saying half of each thought out loud.

- Aio, I think you're getting a little carried away... - Ransam tried to dampen my enthusiasm a bit, but I was seriously thinking about such an undertaking. They calmed me down enough to direct my thoughts to the first point, which was the purchase of a simple apartment.

We got to work right away, but it took two days of planning anyway. We looked at different locations, and I grimaced as I made all sorts of demands. But I also had my reasons. The center was built concentrically. In the middle was a business and administrative district, as you might say. There was the castle of the moon witch and other skyscrapers with similar

architecture, all of them too tall, which, although they were remnants of an earlier era, still made an impressive, modern impression. There are also schools for the elite, hospitals, banks. From there, I guessed that all the energy of the City was distributed and controlled. Nearby were various companies with state-of-the-art technology. A great contrast to the rural realities of the areas inhabited by the clans. They were also, I think, one of the few buildings where no expense was spared to keep them in the best possible condition. This state-of-the-art center was surrounded by a belt of much smaller, one- and two-story buildings. Warehouses, hangars, old factories. Nearby, there was also "my" disused power plant. Some of these places still serve their purpose, but many of the ruined ones were left to decay.

I was irritated to see this waste and neglect. Further on, the buildings looked like plants growing in clusters. From wall to wall stood the serpentine buildings that Ransam so loved to walk through. Many of these houses were abandoned. Some were inhabited by the poor or the most destitute citizens. In other places, small clusters of neat stores sprang up and commerce flourished. And the owners of these establishments usually used the upper floors for apartments. There were also some quite exquisite places, such as one of the arteries connected to the central part, where the rich would stroll. It was bustling, restaurants, cafes, galleries and all the goods of the upper classes of the city flourished. Police officers greeted the walkers in a cultured manner, and none of the poorer people even dared to show their faces here. But all one had to do was walk two streets over and *there it was!* A habitat for ragpickers. Old shopping malls, disused schools, ruined houses that haven't interested the city authorities for eighty years. So either the empty apartment was too dilapidated, or it was not at all suitable for the rich Sidonie.

The last circle consisted of the beautiful luxury properties where the elite lived. There, as it circled the Center, the train to the Land of Games stopped at individual stations. It could also be used to travel between distant acquaintances of the upper classes. There was no need to pass through dangerous neighborhoods. In any case, such a subdivision could be built from scratch, because it was impossible to move into something ready-made. Everything is inhabited.

These observations I made for myself, organoleptically, I guessed some of them, and the rest was told to me by Hiiri and Ransam. Both, it turned out, belonged to families that were doing well, if poorly, in commerce. They were one level above the poorest. However, the diseases that plagued their community forced everyone to change their ways. Ransam managed differently and was mostly at odds with the law. But the resistance movement, interestingly enough, was based on Johtai's small fortune. As I discovered (secretly), the Johtai family was initially among the elite. His grandparents were relatively wealthy. However, when his mother, although nothing indicated it at first, fell ill with heart disease and

died, his father broke down and almost squandered the rest of his money. He went into debt, alienated people and eventually killed himself. This is a scandal among the elite, and the young Johtaja, then a teenager, sells everything she has left and finds herself in the ranks of the resistance. Entirely devoted to the cause, she devotes every penny, all her heart and all her energy to fighting the Moon Witch, to whom she attributes the fall of her family out of revenge. Highly educated and intelligent, she climbed the simple hierarchy of the group until she was named leader.

I pieced together the story from the bits and pieces of information I got from Hiiri. With as much difficulty as separating cat hair from a sweater. I was helped a bit by the default Ransom, who had heard gossip and rumors. This gave me a little more insight into the "boss" and a better understanding of her motives.

But if we go back to the earlier observations of the City, the conclusion is this: the Moon Witch did everything to make sure that the elite had the best. They were entitled to all the privileges and amenities. And the poor had to die out. On the contrary, they could be helped to do so. Weak and sick bodies were ballast for the ideal City of the Moon Witch. This was confirmed by the words of others. Funny. They were fine. To the elite, the Moon Witch was a guardian angel. A good steward. But to the poorest, she was an enemy. And my dislike for the witch grew. Especially since it doesn't take much to improve the lot of the poorest. I mean, yes, certainly a lot of work, but no resources? And surely one could do without the luxuries to even out the disproportion a bit.

But no. One event reinforced my belief that the Witch of the Eco Moon is evil to the core of my bones.

On one of our walks along the rooftops, a column of smoke caught my attention and Ransom's. We were worried and ran to see what the source was. Worried, we ran to see what the source was. And there it was again. The same one, in pink and frilly, with her strange entourage of "magicians" and accompanied by the police. In a row of crumbling tenements, Ransom recognized the place where a group of ragged people had huddled. Smoke was billowing from the windows. Eco's subordinates were hovering around. She stood like a colorful parrot, watching them without moving. The dog, on a leash, circled around her and barked occasionally, frightened by the commotion. We knelt on a nearby rooftop and followed their actions from a distance. We could hear the terrier barking, but not the conversations. Then someone reported to the witch and everyone scattered a considerable distance away. The moon witch spread her arms. At that moment, there was a bang. There was a moment of silence, then we heard screams from inside the buildings. There were people inside. They tried to chase them away with smoke, but when that failed, they resorted to stronger arguments. The fire started to consume the first apartment building. People who ran out of the

building found themselves directly in the hands of the militia. A few stubborn people, or perhaps just trapped or weakened by the smoke, stayed inside. It was obvious from the screams coming from inside. No one bothered to remove them. I covered my ears, looking in horror at the moon witch. Eco calmly watched the fire consume the roof. His dog showed more emotion as he shook with fear, cowering at his feet. I felt Ransam's hand tighten on the fabric of my jacket. I looked at him, seeing his cheeks glistening with tears. We watched this, worried and unable to do anything. This went on for a while, but perhaps an eternity. Finally, the witch turned wearily and walked away, followed by some of her "magicians" from the colorful entourage.

We didn't even try to rescue people from the burning building, as the heat was quickly becoming too much. In addition, militiamen were still hanging around downstairs. Only after a while did they start to put out the building. A mortar-like device was rolled up, anchored to make it stable, and a stream of strange, dry foam was thrown up from a huge hose attached to it. The fire was going out before our eyes. None of the nearby buildings caught fire. But the buildings affected by the fire were already crumbling like a house of sand under the effect of a sea wave.

- Why... did she... do that? After all... - I said with difficulty as we dodged across the rooftops. Ransam finally stopped, looking around nervously.

- This is one of his methods of gathering. It is very effective. And that's what she does with buildings that are no longer fit for purpose. She lets them deteriorate. She lets those who just want a roof over their heads live. But they know. They know and they wait. We are afraid of the same thing at the "school". That one day they will come and Eco will appear and, with his power, will set us on fire. And we, like rats in a trap...

He didn't finish. His voice failed him.

The whole event cast a spell of bitterness and when Johtaja called me and presented his plan, I didn't hesitate long.

- Aio. We have estimated in which part of the castle the Moon Witch is located. It is also difficult for us to wait any longer. Her actions are becoming more and more radical. The raids are intensifying and the militia is patrolling more and more in the unguarded areas. Time was short, we could not afford any mistakes, any doubts... - We were in the underground resistance movement. This time we were accompanied only by a bald man and a dark-skinned Zyanya. - Do you still want to help us? Will you declare your dedication to our cause?

- Yes.

- You speak without hesitation, but you should know that once we present you with a plan, there is no turning back.

- I agree. I know what you want from me. That's obvious.

- Is it true? - The bald man gave me a worried look with his very bright eyes in a face slumped to one side.

- I have to kill the moon witch. Is this true? - I answered boldly. Murmurs of approval answered me.

- We think you are the right person. It also depends on the status you get among the elite. Well, as an elite citizen, you have the right to open a petition. If it passes the resolution of the witch's counselors, you have the right to listen to it.

- More precisely... ?

- If you are a citizen, and especially if you belong to the rich elite, you have the right to demand something, to ask for something. To make a demand. It can be anything. Whether it's installing phones at the train stops, renewing the flower beds in the park... Anything you want. Of course, there is no need to acknowledge it. Requests are collected, reviewed, and within two weeks, a month at most, they are either rejected or accepted. Well, not exactly accepted. They invite you to an interview first. If all goes well, the application is approved and goes into effect.

- But," Zyanya continues, "what we want is not just to get your application approved, but to write a good enough application to get you an interview. Then they let you into the top floor of the witch's castle.

- So I have an idea. - I smiled like a cat.

This gave my vision for the building a chance to succeed. A permit for the house, an application for connection to the city's energy sources and the absurd idea of installing a canteen in a wing of the building. At first, the trio of the resistance movement was against this last idea, for fear that the whole action would fail. But I convinced them that it was just a little provocation. An elite philanthropist? Where did this idea come from? The witch's managers will surely want to know. I'm going in anyway.

From that point on, a very busy period began for me.

We finally managed to get an apartment in one of the extreme tenements. Not too far from the "decent" neighborhoods. I bought two floors and had them remodeled so that they were connected. The specifically ordered renovation, for which I spent huge amounts of money, took a week and a half. At that time, I was still hiding in the "school". I also delivered the food. I paid one of the small companies royally to take over the deliveries to several small stores, including a pharmacy, and I did not ask any questions about what or why the deliveries were made, including who was picking up the goods.

When the floors were brought up to code, I used the upper floors as a refuge for the sickest people. This gave them a chance to recover. I installed normal beds and adapted them as much

as possible to their needs. They had a separate kitchen, where it was finally possible to cook something, and a bathroom. They were mainly taken care of by Louise, who was given the keys and appropriate clothes so that no one would notice that she was hanging out in my apartment. So it was easy to think of her as the daughter of the household.

I also wanted to offer a place to Ransom or Ove. But they refused. It was easier for them to operate from their current hiding place. The only thing I got was to replenish the resources of the "school". I organized mattresses and various other facilities.

I spiced up the downstairs with the most hideous decor I could afford. I mean, I meant modern and trendy. It was supposed to be show and tell, if any of my future elite friends were thinking of visiting.

Hiiri was forced to live with me. Once I showed up in her company as a servant, it would be difficult to suddenly send her away. Perhaps this could have been remedied somehow, but I had the sadistic pleasure of being able to show her off for revenge. It wasn't at all about how I treated her, but the very fact that she had to play the hated rich girl... even if not directly, but as a component of her.

So I quickly got to grips with the bureaucracy of the building permit and the design of the house. It was thoroughly discussed and agreed upon in advance with Johtaja. She wanted the house to be functional as well, i.e., for resistance meetings to be held there. The fact is that the project created by the architect also passed through the office of Eco Moonlight's most gracious administrator. Although the moon witch did not review the documents herself, a team of her subordinates did. And our plans were to go into a database. We couldn't afford to make a mistake.

I quickly paid a visit to Mr. and Mrs. Valentini. There was some news about Karan. The note arrived a week later. The boy was to be picked up at one of the city hospitals. Kind of like a package. Anyway, I had to carefully hide my genuine joy and relief. I announced to Valentini that I had moved in close.

- Honey, that's wonderful, will you be near us? - asked Mrs. Caelia while having tea.

- It's very close. It's just a temporary apartment for now. I'm dreaming of a house, but it will be a while before it's built. You can understand. - I spread my hands in a helpless gesture.

- Please! So you want to build a house, Sydonia? Is that some kind of imminent prospect? - asked a genuinely curious Mr. Frank.

- Very. I hope so," I confirmed. - I'm in the middle of a battle with bureaucracy. I have to deal with a lot of paperwork.

- Oh my goodness, that's a very close project. - Mr. Frank stammered with admiration. - Sydonia, we are very happy for you. May everything go well for you.

The warmth of these people could not be faked. I spent time with them with as much pleasure as I did with the "school" team or the dog clan. Although there wasn't much time.

Every morning I trained in shooting and hand-to-hand combat, while the dog clan visited me in the afternoon. Demir had not managed to get anything special from the elders, but in the end we decided that we should share with them and the rest of the village the idea of developing trade and contacts with other clans. We started the discussions after a week with my story. At first, the elders were not very supportive. Especially grandmother Szechna and Mrs. Oriana. The others had strong doubts about the rightness and legitimacy of any action. So I started on a good note and began to persuade Mrs. Oriana. I followed her for three days.

- Mrs. Oriana. I know it sounds unbelievable, but you must have seen the things the Night Walkers were up to or heard the Singing Family.....

- My child, this has nothing to do with us. Just because the stars are falling from the sky in another region, we should not risk the possibility of...

- But Mrs. Oriana, nobody talks about getting wet, on the contrary. I am committed to the safety of the clan. Besides, the dog clan has already started working with the tree clan. And what an advantage that is! Tell me if you would do well enough without mutual support...

- It's completely... - Oriana tried to object, but I wouldn't let her speak. I knew that fear and bitterness were in her voice. She was locked in. She had no way to get out of the village, even to see the Tree Clan.

- Think about it! I know you can't leave this place. But what if others come here? I think the dog clan is special. You could become a trade hub. It's very valuable! Everyone would come here... Certainly, the Night Walkers should have a good shelter from the sun here... And others on the way. But it's doable.

- Dreams, girl. You need to be a little more realistic. Somehow I don't want to believe that everyone will want to come here. Especially since no one has come forward so far.

- The city is big, Mrs. Oriana. I keep getting lost. But you should try. After all, I've visited many clans, most of them have interesting things to offer, and I'm sure the dog clan...

- The Dog Clan has vegetables grown on our land. There is barely enough for us and for trading with the Tree Clan.

- It's not just vegetables. You also have weaving, embroidery. Each clan is specialized in something. I think we could really gain a lot by exchanging ideas and knowledge...

And so on. I followed her everywhere, inventing new arguments or repeating the old ones like a broken record. She finally gave in, succumbing more to the force of the arguments than to the desire for peace.

The rest softened after the waxing in the sun.

During this time, as I told Lady Oriana, I visited other clans. My hiding place in the Nightwalker clan was flooded, so I had to get out. I then discovered another clan in the neighborhood. They were poisonous people who avoided contact with others because of the amount of poison their bodies were producing. They themselves were not injured, but a simple handshake with someone outside the clan could lead to death. For the same reason, they could not raise animals or seek the company of others.

I thought that perhaps their toxins could be filtered out by the roots of the growing tree clan or neutralized in some way. It would also be possible to see if these poisons could be used as medicine.

Another clan I found was from the village of East Knot. There were people whose bodies were covered with many hard tumors. From an early age, the growths would delaminate under their skin, keratinizing it and giving it an extraordinary hardness, like natural armor. In spirit, I thought of them as the Rhino people. They were curious as children, playful and noisy. They were amused by my appearance, which they found delicate. They themselves enjoyed wrestling and stick fighting. From the beating they received, others would certainly have ended up broken or at best bruised.

The children of East Knot were fearless and athletic. No one cared if a child got hurt, fell, or was hit. Even though their young skin was not yet hardened, they were eager to show off, fighting in fights similar to those of the adults.

I learned that the rhinos were fished out by the moon witch and thrown onto the hunting ground. Their willingness to fight was especially appreciated by the audience, and their awkward appearance confirmed all opinions about "misfits." Nevertheless, this did not dampen the fighting spirit of the Rhino people. On the contrary.

It turned out that the East Node fighting arena was famous. Also because the Node supposedly brought together clans that didn't feel the need to isolate themselves. Wanderers from other clans would join the community. This is how I met the furry survivors from the area where the playground was built, or the rubber-boned people. Having spent a lot of time among the newcomers at the East Crossroads, I got a fantastic map of the town, which I was able to supplement with my own notes. The downside was that I had to memorize all the conquests, as they couldn't be transferred in my sleep. I once spent an entire afternoon drawing, splitting my time between the dog clan and the East Node, falling asleep every half minute on average. Afterwards, my head was spinning for the rest of the day from all the jumping.

The last of the clans I encountered was the Eternal Fire Clan, located fairly close to the East Node. I didn't realize right away that the clan was largely run by children. The young ones, in fact. Jovan, Davor, Sanja, and Cvetka were thirteen, fifteen, and the two girls were

twelve, respectively. The twenty-five year olds had some oversight over them, but the kids made the decisions. The thirtysomethings were the oldest, the older people simply did not live to see. The eternal fire clan even walked around in the cool fall weather wearing only short shirts. Some only out of decency. The most beloved and soothing season for them was approaching. For their bodies were consumed by the rising heat.

Their body temperature increased with age. Young children were in what you might call a sub-febrile state. Teenagers were sometimes over thirty-eight degrees Celsius. Twenty-year-olds' skin was already steaming in the cool fall air. They also had much more difficult days and were unable to function normally. The thirty-somethings were burning with an inner fire. For many, it was already a matter of time and endurance. Many took their own lives, which became a way of life for the people. No one resisted. It was easy to see the immense suffering they were facing. Some died of overheating and dehydration while sweating an intense red sweat. This ooze paradoxically protected their bare skin from sunburn. However, it was of no use against the temperatures that digested their bodies.

I proposed an agreement to all the clans. I passed on the news, set up meetings, and directed them to the dog clan, where representatives from each clan would show up to discuss their side. I asked the clans in the Eastern Node to help build shelters for the Night Walkers, where they could wait for daylight during breaks in their travels. I was able to get the Singing family to work with the Twin Hearts clan vigilantes and find a way to communicate remotely. I was able to use the "mind reading" abilities of the linking hearts and the extraordinary hearing of the blind musicians who initiated communication through the signal sent by the drums. I sent the Poison People to the Tree Clan, and the Eternal Fire Clan to the Poison People.

The city has begun to change.

CHAPTER 8 Celebrity

As part of my ambassadorial duties, I took time off to visit the hospital and take Karan with me. Or what was left of it. I had a very bad feeling about this case. Hiiri, wanted to come with me, but I was afraid that a stunned Karan would inadvertently discredit her. Perhaps unnecessarily. Or maybe I wanted to handle it alone? I wanted him not to recognize me. What trouble it might get us into if the boy shouted in front of the hospital staff and perhaps a militia, "Oh my, Aia, what are you doing here!". So I armed myself with fashionable clothes and a hat with a veil. I had it sewn myself and, to do the tailor justice, he didn't write a comment on such a whim.

The city hospital was in a completely different neighborhood than the ones I had visited before, so I decided to take a rickshaw and asked the man driving it to wait. Almost like a cab, but more fun. At this point, however, I wasn't laughing. I was very nervous.

Karan was not assigned to the usual public part of the hospital, but to the one that looked more modern and well maintained. The buildings were stuck together, but a common wall was the only thing that connected them. At the door to the exclusive, non-public reception room stood a militiaman who first asked me to show my ID. Then I was redirected to another checkpoint, from where I was reverently led to the registration desk. There I explained the reason for my arrival and showed the official holo-file, authorizing me to claim my new property.

I was kept waiting. I was seated in a soft chair and given candy. Finally, with an inner disgust, I signed and paid the appropriate amount. I tried to keep an indifferent face, but not only was I nervous about the condition of Ransam's friend, but I was also disconcerted by the fact that I had bought a human being. Then, for a while, someone explained to me the rules of handling goods, when I had to report them for inspection, etc. I listened with awe to what they were saying. I listened with one ear.

Then they introduced the boy. He was stooped and silent. He was wearing overalls that looked like a package from a store. They wrapped my man up for me, oddly still without a bow. Instead, I noticed a necklace around his neck. I leaned over to the person I was signing the papers with and whispered, pointing to my own neck.

- What's the point?

- Your servant was captured because he broke the law. In order to make sure that no harm comes to you because of him, we put this security device on him. This is the remote control. If necessary, you will press this button and the object will be put to sleep. Then you can call the police.

Well, it couldn't be too simple.

- Can we take it off? I mean... won't he take it off himself?

- Any attempt to manipulate the device activates the immediate response of the collar.

- Good. That's good enough. Thank you," I mumbled through my teeth and refrained from any further comment. I waved my hand urgently. I bowed slightly to the staff and headed for the exit. I didn't look to see if Karan was following me. After a moment, however, I heard footsteps on the carpet of the lobby. I got into the rickshaw without a word and pointed to the seat next to me.

- Who are you? - These were the first words I heard from Karan. The boy's energy and lightness disappeared somewhere. He was afraid, but he tried to keep his courage.

I didn't answer. I had to pretend that we didn't know each other. So far, no one suspected me, but I preferred not to take any chances. Maybe someone was following us? I didn't think the practice of ransoming prisoners was very popular. I think it didn't go unnoticed. Anyway, in the contract I signed, there was a paragraph that said we had to report first every week for a check-up, and after that four times, once a month. I was told that these were security procedures. As for me, they just wanted to control the situation. Karan had to stay within the range.

- Hey, why don't you answer me nicely? Don't I even have the right to know who I belong to?

I shuddered, but stubbornly kept silent. I only showed, by bringing my finger close to the veil, that he should be silent. We soon arrived at my building. I paid the rickshaw driver. I was paid money. The small traders and subcontractors did not have payment terminals, as I had already discovered.

We entered the stairwell. I was afraid the boy would give a hoot if he took the opportunity, so I pulled him by the sleeve like an unruly child. As if that would stop him. As we hid in the privacy of the building, I took another look at my surroundings and revealed my veil. Karan seemed to not associate for a moment. The surprise on her face was so amusing that I couldn't hold back a smile.

- It's you! What is it, what is it about? Why didn't you say anything... - I wasn't at all surprised that she had a million questions.

- Lower your voice. One at a time. I'll tell you everything in a minute. But we have to be careful. This is our disguise. I don't know if we are being followed, or if someone is going to spy on me. Officially, I am very rich and I bought you as a servant. We have to stick to that role for now.

- But why, what is the purpose? Who is supposed to follow us? - He was so lost and confused that I decided to postpone the details.

- Ransom will come and we will discuss everything together. For now, I ask you to stay in the apartment.

- My mother...

- I'll go see her or one of our people and we'll let her know, don't panic.

We went to the downstairs apartment. Hiiri and Louise were redrawing maps. At the sight of Karan, they both looked up. Louise flashed a wide smile, Hiiri gave me a questioning look. I made a slight waiting gesture with my hand behind Karan's back. Meanwhile, Louise approached and looked at Karan with concern.

- Well hello, how are you, are you well?

Karan shrugged.

- I'm in a little bit of pain, but they told the hospital it was bruising and sciatica. I'm still supposed to take pills. Massacre, they said, supposedly the rest looked like.

- Did you see them? - Hiiri asked.

- No, I think they were lying in other rooms. But explain to me what all the fuss is about. They told me that as compensation for my robbery and attempted murder, I would serve a rich lady instead of staying in jail.

- What about the arena? - Hiiri insisted. Louise looked at her with surprise. We didn't share the story of the trip to Game Land.

- The tournament was good, but I got hit in the head and don't remember much. Girls, by the way, this place is great. But the decor is awful, who decorated it like this...?

- Wait until you see who is upstairs... - Louise picked up Karan to show him around, and Hiiri and I hugged each other.

- I don't think he fully realizes what has happened to him," I began in a low voice.

- They gave them so much dope in the arena that I'd be surprised if it was any different. I'm sure they sold him some kind of tale. A tournament is also something.

- And do you remember what Mr. and Mrs. Valentini said about these performances? According to them, it's a profession. The elite believe that people do it of their own free will.

- He is sick. I don't know how you can think like that. - Hiiri had nothing but contempt for the rich, but I got the impression that she gave it equally to the whole world.

- When you live in comfort and prosperity, it's easy to treat others like puppets. Especially when you are told that they are self-sacrificing actors or criminals who have the opportunity to redeem themselves.

I would also like to add that there is some cruel justice in this case. Nevertheless, the city seemed to me to be a safe place. The greatest danger came from renegades, ragpickers and the poor. It was natural for the rich to see themselves as normal, decent people. Eco played the role of someone who administers justice. Did you steal, cheat, use illegal things? A

punishment was waiting for you. So what if it was cruel and inhumane. The world had changed, the rules had changed. The resistance wants to fight, but is it in the name of justice or because their friends are being taken away?

I wondered about the elite's perception of the existing situation. I had often heard flattering opinions about the moon witch. Now that Karan doesn't remember what he did in the arena, it's hard to prove that anything bad happened there. I assumed the others were dead or would be used for the next show.

- Hey, are you asleep? Don't fall asleep yet. I'll get Ransom, and you think about what we mean. I think they should know what happened. Don't you think?

Hiiri has guessed well that I prefer not to tell Karan everything. Especially if this knowledge can't change much. Would he be so calm, knowing that he may have caused the death of several people in the frenzy of the battle? On the one hand, I must be honest and reveal the truth. On the other hand, I didn't want to at all.

Ransom appeared quickly. When he saw Karan, he turned pale and shivered. You could tell he was touched. The boys greeted each other and everyone asked me how it went. I told them generalities and when I could, I left out the truth. When they finally stopped assaulting me, we agreed that it all fit perfectly with our plan. Buying a bodyguard and a servant gave me status.

After a while, I became quite well known in elite circles. I met others too. More or less close acquaintances of Mr. and Mrs. Valentinich and Mrs. Polishenko. I went to parties and social gatherings where I myself approached people and established contacts.

Building a house was the main topic. I presented my plans for what I called field work. I also told them that I intended to open a canteen for the homeless in a wing of my future property and to find people among them willing to work and help.

- But honey, it's a terrible job," wondered one of the fashionable ladies at one of the parties.
- To feed such a group, it will cost more than the total cost of building your home.

- And besides, they are just plain dangerous," added another of the ladies. Several people nodded at her, like a flock of cockatoos.

- That's the point! - I took it back with emphasis. - We must not leave it at that. These people are multiplying and are a danger to the environment and to themselves, but the situation forces them to do so.

- What situation? Let them get to work. We're all working," muttered one grumpy gentleman, earning him a round of applause.

- Yes, yes. Dirty bastards.

- They are freeloaders. They won't even be grateful for what you want to do for them. It doesn't make sense.

- They will burn your house and steal it.

I twirled my finger, cutting off these remarks.

- My darlings. Don't worry about me anymore. It is, of course, easy to take the good as something normal and obvious. We are not as grateful to the baker for every bun as we are to the sun for every ray. After all, it's so everyday and obvious to us.

- You forget yourself. Indeed, don't put us on the same level as those scoundrels. - Indignant voices and offended pride accompanied my speeches without interruption. I had to be very careful not to directly offend anyone, not to sound impertinent and rude like some people. One would think that I was burned for the theories I put forth. Nevertheless, the mere fact that I was dating a rehabilitated criminal became a hot topic. After all, I was such a curiosity, novelty and eccentricity in their world that I became popular. At first, they carefully imitated me, repeating some of my words or lyrics.

As time went on, people began to model my style of dressing. I had a lot of fun doing this, as Louise and Hayley (who joined the team more recently) and I came up with quirky pieces and combinations to make them look fashionable and interesting. This way we could also judge if my popularity was on the rise. The two girls in particular got to show off their creativity and ingenuity. Hayley was a little older than us and a great seamstress. So we got our revenge on the nightmares in the store and made our own adjustments.

But I also benefited from the knowledge of the rich and educated bourgeoisie. I learned, for example, that school was also a luxury reserved for citizens, of course not compulsory and not free of charge, except in the case of professional schools. A person from a family with citizen status, but not very rich, could ask to be admitted to a school teaching a specific profession. You could, for example, learn to cook or sew. You could train in sports at a special militia or security school, and the most difficult profiles to obtain were those of computer science and computer work. All these specializations were limited to one field, and graduates were immediately contracted to work in particular companies. Only computer scientists and technicians reported directly to the Board of Governors. The fee-paying schools for the elite were different. The emphasis was on global cultural and humanistic development and economic knowledge. However, in my opinion, this knowledge was extremely poor anyway.

The cause, which turned out to be common knowledge, amazed and terrified me. Well, the great dust explosion caused a reset of all devices, which meant the erasure of databases. All the computers, libraries, all the electronic storage, disappeared, and the people of that time mostly did not keep printed knowledge anymore. Most of humanity's output has been digitized. Today, individual books, old newspapers can be seen in a museum. But their number was ridiculously small. The reason for this is probably that during the first political clashes for power over the city, one of the groups began to burn the paper printouts, in addition to the effect of data loss. They decided that as we entered a new era, it was time to

say goodbye to the past. They burned everything that was left - books, magazines, posters, paintings. They had many supporters, but eventually, after a few years, a stronger party brought them down from their pedestal, taking power and gaining a new constituency, especially among the elite. Unfortunately, the city's political history has been so convoluted that I have not been able to establish any hard facts. All this information is conjecture and gossip. In any case, the cultural situation of the city's inhabitants has changed.

Before, anyone could look at famous paintings, listen to any music, or look at any art, but today all that has been lost. All that remained was the knowledge preserved in the minds of those who lived at the time. Some facts were written down, but since one relied only on memory, the news was not certain. Libraries were soon filled with actual works of art. People were eager to create, feeling that a new era had begun, where all the achievements of culture could be rediscovered.

What did it look like? I had the opportunity, for example, to visit an exhibition whose style was based on the memorized theoretical characteristics of ancient painting. Were they in fact? It's hard to say. I remembered several artists' names and snapshots of their work. But they were just residual, vague memories. Like something I had studied once and hadn't been exposed to in a long time. I wasn't bragging much about my knowledge. But I soon realized that, even with my pathetic collection of tidbits about everything, I could be considered well educated among the elite. The downside, however, was that I had no idea what had been built in the city itself. In the Central District, one of the high-rise buildings was a combination library, gallery, and museum. I went there once due to a constant lack of time. Nevertheless, I would not deny the creativity and great artistic freedom of the city's inhabitants...

Perhaps also the ugliness and abstraction of the elite's wardrobe was due to the exuberant creative freedom, the lack of need for functionality and, despite everything, the limited number of materials that could be used. The factories created mostly artificial fabrics, without an ounce of cotton.

Knowledge of practical things was better. The skills of a foreman were invaluable, and craft work was also respected in the highest circles. Of course, no member of the elite would opt for manual labor, unless it involved tinkering or tending a front yard. But even this work was somewhat unusual. The elite, as you might guess, held managerial and specialist positions, and there were also often ordinary bureaucrats.

Having learned all this, I asked Johtaja and the resistance to find me information about the so-called prophet known as Ring. Zyanya, having some abilities and remote knowledge, promised to do his best to verify this for me. However, not surprisingly, the restored databases are silent on such a name.

In the end, there was an application for a building permit, energy access and a social canteen. The building permit was granted separately and we got the green light surprisingly quickly. I was even more hopeful that the provocative proposal for a canteen would work. The foundations of the house began to be laid. Materials were of course limited. I boldly put forward another proposal, that of grinding some wasteland and ruins into building materials. I persuaded the company building the house to hire street people. The owners had to accept these conditions because they did not have enough workers available. I refused to associate with anyone more important. I was dictating weird rules and everyone didn't understand why. Construction was moving at a snail's pace, but I didn't mind. I was worried about something else. Our plans were unfolding, and so the time for the assassination of the moon witch was approaching.

My training had little effect. I mean, I gained some hand-to-hand combat skills, but I often lacked reflexes and decisiveness. I was a poor shot, the target had to be fairly close, otherwise my shots had about a thirty percent chance of hitting the target. Johtaja felt that I was not particularly good at this and that we could not overcome this. We discussed whether Valko, for example, should come with me. Or someone to help. But more people would have aroused suspicion. It was easier for me alone. Or maybe not? However, I didn't push.

While spending time among the elite, I also tried to find information about other spheres of the city. Mostly I dug into the dirt, the alleged power of the moon witch, and the true sources of energy. I asked hard, uncomfortable questions. How is it that the moon witch controls the dust and why only her? How was electricity used before, before the Eco Moonlight Witch was appointed administrator? And the city worked all the time. I asked Ransam about this.

- Of course, there was electricity. There is always electricity.

- And where does it come from?

- Well... Here it is.

- Electricity does not exist, it does not come out of nowhere. That's why we lay cables, we make installations, we put contacts, we put protections, we put transformers...

He looked at me as if I were explaining to a blind man what colors he should use to paint a picture. Ransam was young, but he wasn't the only one who lacked knowledge. Hayley thought dust and electricity were the same thing. Mrs. Polishenko that before the reign of the moon witch everything worked too, but worse, not as modern. Valentini argued that after all, Eco can not pump its energy into the city day and night, so she stores it in powerful coils, while she herself is like a relay. The power must go through her. Gyuri Saz of the East Node thought that the Moon Witch was simply more capable of using the power. Gyuri was an intelligent middle-aged man with a rhinoceros skin and a great fondness for ancient buildings. He made a special trip to the dog clan just to see the rokons. They immediately got into an

argument with Piran, as Gyuri wanted to take the rokona apart and see exactly how it was built. Piran almost went gray at the very thought of such inanity. The other members of the dog clan bet that they would face each other head on. Instead, they became best friends. When I asked them about the town's previous history and Eco's involvement in the distribution of energy, they were unanimous in saying that the witch does not produce energy, she has only found an additional use for it.

The multitude of opinions was debilitating. Do these people have any idea about ancient technology? About how electricity works? This knowledge was so jealously guarded that an electrician could be considered a magician here. In the clans, however, knowledge useful to the work was passed on to descendants. Then I remembered that Ransam had once suggested that I visit an old man. Old people and their memories were in the spotlight for me. I mentioned this to Ransam the other day, shaken and ready to put the idea into practice immediately.

- Do you want to leave now? Necessarily now when there is so much to do? And so we shred time and divide it like pieces of bread. You are still sleeping somewhere on the other side of the City, falling into your lethargy...

- I have an equally important job there. I told you so," I said angrily. Look at this! It seems that Ransam is still... - You don't believe me - I said, pressing my lips together in a tight line.

- But I believe, I believe. That's not the point. You fall asleep at such strange times... Once you were cut off while sitting in a chair, once you almost fell...

- It was a quick jump, I just wanted to get a glimpse of something...

- Aio. - Ransam involuntarily took my hand. - I am worried. You are flying away more and more often. If this happened during a mission, for example, you would be defenseless.

Maybe I should be happy that he cared, but I figured he was pretty scared of the success of our plan. I firmly withdrew my hand and responded decisively, cutting off all the "buts":

- I'll do my part, don't worry about that. But before I do, I want to know a few more things. Take me to this man.

Ransam looked at me intently for a moment, running his eyes over my face as if he wanted to read more than I knew myself. For a moment, I thought... But no. The concern hardened into something impersonal. In the same tone, he chuckled:

- Come on.

Grandpa lived on the border between the rich and poor streets. It was a single large villa, centuries old, badly deteriorated and neglected, but distinguished by its beauty. The other buildings huddled around it like aunts around a pretty girl. The wooden stairs on the second floor creak with every step. Dust from the cork drills fell. It smelled like old age. Grandpa's apartment did too, and even more intensely. It was surprisingly spacious. A large hallway, a

dining room, two bedrooms, a guest room, utility rooms. Lots of old furniture, rugs, ornate tapestries. Like a trip to the past. It was something I expected from the city when I woke up. But now I was again a little surprised. So places like this still existed. A relic of the old days. A refined young man opened for us. He wore an ironed shirt and neat, shiny shoes.

- Please visit Mr. Blumenthal?

Ransam and I nodded in silence, still offended by each other.

- Come this way, the gentleman is taking a nap after lunch, but if you'll wait a moment, he'll wake up soon.

The butler led us into the living room and sat us in deep armchairs. They were a little uncomfortable because the springs were out of them, but they were still impressive. It wasn't the extravagant style of the fashionable elite. The decor was based on the luxury of past eras. Old dark dressers and chiffoniers. Many patterned fabrics, candlesticks, clocks, several sculptures or a mirror in an antique frame. The number of objects could be overwhelming, but it gives an impression of comfort.

We sat in silence. Neither of us wanted to break it. When the servant brought the wheelchair into the room, Ransam got up from his chair and approached the old man. I did the same thing.

- Hello, Grandpa. It's me, Ransam.

- A ? Oh, what a nice surprise. Would you like a cup of tea? - The man was as wrinkled as tissue paper, slightly overweight, with pale, watery, small eyes, a woolen caftan and bamboo. He matched all the ideas one had of an elderly, staid man.

The servant went to prepare the drink, and I bowed in greeting.

- Hello sir, my name is Aia, I'm a... friend of Ransam. I really wanted to have a little chat with you.

- With me? Oh yes," Mr. Blumenthal dragged his voice ridiculously. It also took him a moment to find me with his eyes.

- Yes, sir. I wanted to ask you about the city.

The old man laughed hoarsely, then coughed.

- Khe, khe... What can I say? I never left him, that's a fact. But when I was still a child, I dreamed of going on a trip. Then it worked out so well that we stayed. My parents were inconsolable, they wanted me to go to college abroad. But that's how it goes, unfortunately.

- Sir, was your family rich?

- Rich at the same time... Well, I won't say, we could afford this and that. My sister, of holy memory, because she was a little older, she, my dear Dorothy, had such beautiful dresses. Oh, oh, oh! - The old man tried to reach her ankle - so long. With frills and a collar, it's so beautiful.

- They were expensive, weren't they? - I asked.

- Expensive? Yes, I think so... Dorothy sang. She played a little bit. And it was to these songs.

- And your parents, what happened to them?

Grandpa shivered. His vision became even more blurry.

- Mom and Dad didn't live very long. Dad was part of the group that started the first expeditions out of the City, and Mom died soon after. We were so sad. My little sister was older, we lived together for many years.

- Out-of-town trips? So there was?

- Oh, yes. Yes. A little bit. But to no avail.

- What did it look like? - The old man gave me a puzzled look.

- Yes. Just like that. People would go out and not come back. The dooies would get them. These expeditions were soon abandoned. Too bad for the people. Too bad. Charles, pour some tea for my guests. Are there any more cookies?

- There is none, Mr. Blumenthal," the servant replied, and thoughtfully adjusted the blanket and pillow under Mr. Blumenthal's back.

- It is difficult. And you ask me about the city? The city is like the city. There was some confusion at first. The power supply was erratic. We all tightened our belts for a while. Before things settled down. But I'll tell you, miss, it was all that Johnson. Roger Johnson promised so much, and we got nothing. And the people voted for him, they did. Of course, we were in opposition from the beginning. Dad had connections and knew in advance who to support. You know, that's the way it is. Johnson was pulling the strings too. As soon as Abreu's group made their demands...

I soon realized what Ransom meant when he said he was unable to listen to Grandpa's monologue. At first I sat there, tense as a rope, straining not to miss a single piece of information. Finally, a man who remembers the time right after the explosion! Unfortunately, Grandpa's stories went into political details, character descriptions, and political games, which were mostly about putting someone on top, but they didn't explain the prevailing situation and what was happening in the city. I just took the leftovers. And Mr. Blumenthal unfortunately remained deaf to my interjections. Occasionally he would mention some facts from his family history, but it was equally convoluted and didn't hold water at all, so I began to doubt the sharpness of the old man's memory.

I stayed like that for nearly two hours, until Mr. Blumenthal coughed and Charles, the servant, announced in a gentle tone that it was time for Mr. Blumenthal to take a break, and asked him not to tire him further. The old man, obediently like a child, let himself be escorted to the bedroom and turned on the old tape recorder with music.

- The gentleman was a little feverish, but I'm glad someone wanted to visit him. It's a great attraction for him. He's in no condition to go out now," Charles announced in a low voice, closing the door to Mr. Blumenthal's room and leading us out.

- It's nice that Grandpa at least has someone to take care of him," I remarked with a smile. - Have you been working here long?

- I have been in the Blumenthal family for ninety-four years.

- ...What? - I asked him to repeat the number, but there was no way I could have heard wrong. - But... How? - I stammered, letting out a few inarticulate grunts in shock. - Are you kidding me?

- No, I'm not. I am an android.

I stared at him in silence for a moment before reflexively searching Ransom's face to judge if he was as surprised as I was, but the boy seemed calm despite some surprise.

- After all, you... You don't look like a machine," I began cautiously, not knowing how to broach the subject. Mr. Charles let out a soft laugh.

- Yes, it's true. I come from a fairly modern generation of robots. In fact, only longevity or resistance to disease separate me from humans.

- Is it... common for androids to work... like this? Do you... like to work like this?

After all, such a person could develop a successful business in the city. Does Mr. Charles voluntarily decide to help a sick old man?

- As far as I know, androids were created for this very purpose. To help people. I am very close to the Blumenthal family. It only saddens me to see Mr. Blumenthal languishing in obscurity. The death of his sister has been very disturbing to us. Mr. Blumenthal's health has declined considerably since then. - Mr. Charles' words seemed very sincere. I thought it was amazing.

- So you remember the moment before the explosion?

The servant hesitated.

- Unfortunately. I only know the stories. But I can mostly confirm that Mr. Blumenthal is telling the truth. Sometimes he gets lost in it, everything comes from those childhood books that the old man once enjoyed, so the house has this decor and not that. In this house there was a fashion for a style from two centuries ago. You yourself happen to think you live in that era. It is a progressive disease.

Well, that explains a lot. I had many questions about the language, but I felt too embarrassed to ask them, so I let it go. We said goodbye and left the building.

- Did you know that? I didn't know that... I mean, it's plausible, people have designed androids, robots actually... But he... I think he has his own self!

Ransam shrugged. I, for all the sensationalism, had completely forgotten that we were angry, but he maintained a certain reserve.

- I didn't know the butler was an android, but overall it doesn't surprise me. In fact, he's always the same, I've never seen him take time off, bring his own family, or leave the house in any way for anything other than errands, shopping... That kind of thing. I haven't paid much attention to him. He's kind of like a piece of furniture.

- What do you know about it? I never knew it wasn't human. So there are more? Androids?

- Surely yes. The elite can afford such a service. I think they stay in rich families for generations. - Ransam paused for a moment. - In any case, are you satisfied?

- Hm? Oh, yes. In a way. Well, I may not have found what I wanted, but I did get a totally surprising bonus... - I replied reflectively, looking at the street absently.

Androids are something completely new. Unusual. Do people consider them as something common? Ransam claims they're elite... If they look like Mr. Charles... How to distinguish them? How do you know who is an android and who is not? At a glance, without going into the family genealogy? Shouldn't a robot be more stupid? Mechanical, without emotion? Man has made considerable progress in robotics. In recent years, a number of machines have been put on the market that were supposed to help households, I was sure. But based on the principle of a computer, not an empathetic and sensitive being! Mr. Charles had been in the Blumenthal family for ninety-four years, so they had acquired it earlier, even before the explosion. But he claims not to remember that earlier period. Perplexing, but logical. After all, the reset should also apply to each android's database.

Or do I know anyone who might still be in possession of an android? I have no knowledge of the past lives of the elite I've met... Maybe a little about the Valentinis, but they don't have servants after all. They wanted to hire someone themselves. And the maid of Mrs. Polishenko, Jacqueline? A charming and calm woman. Or is she an android?

I had these thoughts, oblivious to what was going on around me. I followed Ransam silently, by reflex, without looking where I was going.

- Aren't you going home? - He asked in the tone of an offended child.

- What? - I looked around, waking up from my reverie. We were at the entrance to the school. - Oh, sure enough. I hadn't noticed. I'll go now.

- Aio. - Ransam weighed something in him. He touched my cheek. - Take care of yourself, please. You are broken by so many things... I don't know where you put it.

Everything inside me froze. "Oh, my God," I thought stupidly.

Then I mumbled something I don't remember and went home on autopilot. All I could think in my head was "where do I fit in?" and other such nonsense. When I got home, there was a bucket of cold water waiting for me.

In the room, Johtaja was sitting on a sofa. On the table in front of her, papers were piled up. I knew what was on them. Maps and notes about the witch's castle. Johtaja held a white envelope in his hand.

- Aio. - She greeted me with these words. - It was time to start our action.

A call from the Castle for an interview about the proposal came in. It started.

Even though everything had been agreed upon in advance, Johthaya went over the different strategies and possibilities with me step by step. It was mostly speculation, but something had to be done. In case I was captured, I gave various orders to facilitate the operation of the house, even the construction work long after I was gone. Not everyone knew what was coming, but they could feel it in the air. It is also possible that I spread a dark aura around me. I was nervous. It's easy to say "hop," and then it turns out that what I wanted to jump over was a vast abyss.

We decided I would go first thing in the morning. I went to bed with an empty head. "Do I have anything else to do?" The ambassador project developed brilliantly. Despite the first frosts, the clans successfully continued their hikes. This was not without some arguments and disagreements. There were some more belligerent clans, but the trend was positive. The dog clan council even honored me with flattering words. I liked it, but because of my involvement with the elders, I had no time for Machdik.

- Machdiku?

- Here you are," he said over the planed piece of wood as I entered his room. I sat next to him on the bed, folding my legs under me in my own way.

- Are you angry?

- For what? - He asked curtly. You had to be completely cut off from empathy not to sense that something was wrong.

- Machdisia, they sent me... In the morning I will kill the Moon Witch.

He looked at me in awe.

- Really?

- Yes... I told you, didn't I? About the resistance plan...

- A little.

- I'm worried," I admitted, a little pathetically. I think I cheered him up with that. He put down his piece of wood for a moment, stared at the ceiling, then crouched down next to me.

- What's next?

I shrugged my shoulders.

- If things didn't work out... I'm glad I met you. That you brought me to the dog clan.

- Don't say that. - He put his arm around me and hugged me. - Do you really have to do this? Why do you do it? Why doesn't someone in the resistance do it? What do we care about the moon witch? Leave her alone. We don't need her.

- Machdiku.

- Seriously. You have united the clans. We've already seen more people in our land than was ever possible... We can manage without the Witch and her tricks. And even if... We can't leave here... - Her voice almost broke. - I wish I could go with you.

I shrugged my shoulders.

- Thank you. I think that's exactly what I needed to hear. Now I think I can cope.

- Are you sure? - The concern in her eyes was both painful and warm.

- Sure. You should see me shoot.

- What's up?

- Desperately.

We burst out laughing. I told him about the news of the last few days and, of course, about my latest discovery - androids. Machdik listened in suspense, reacting, as he usually did during my stories, quite viscerally and impulsively.

Later, we talked about the possibilities of androids, with incredible ideas and twisted theories. We fell asleep embraced like kittens.

And then the morning came.

CHAPTER 9 The Moon Witch

As expected, I called a rickshaw that took me to the very gate of the castle. One would like to say "doors", but it was just a simple sliding glass door. A few petitioners had already shown up, one man was applying, asking the clerk for details. I directed my steps to the adjacent office, showing a summons in a white envelope. I was immediately directed by the elevator to the third floor. A woman, detailed as a guide, led me down a hallway to a door at the end of the hall. There were several chairs there.

- You're a little early, but everyone will be gathering soon. You'll be kind enough to wait here.

- Of course. Excuse me, is there a toilet?

- Yes, it's the door on the left.

The employee left, disappearing into the elevator. Perfect. Perfect. I was about to scoff at the restroom, but as Johtaja had predicted, the board that approves applications doesn't meet as soon as the Castle opens. I had time to go higher without being noticed. I peeked into the front bathroom. There were no windows, only a large barrel at my head height. I opened it and looked out. I had four feet to the gutter and a small ledge. That could have been my escape route.

I left, taking a moment to look down the hallway and replaying in my mind the blueprints of the building built with the resistance. I fumbled behind my back, making sure my gun was in its holster. I was wearing a tight, stretchy gray outfit, and over it, a bright gauze suit studded with sequins. It looked pretty extravagant, and when I got rid of the gauze by rolling it into my backpack, I regained my freedom of movement. I couldn't find the stairs. The elevator was a simple but risky solution. How do I know I wouldn't end up in plain sight once I opened it?

I eventually found a narrow staircase behind a door, right next to the elevator. Eventually, I should reach the thirteenth or fourteenth floor. That's how we estimated the height of the building, and Johthaya bet six to ten that's where the Moon Witch lives. I climbed carefully and quietly, planting the steps two at a time. I reached the tenth floor and wasn't even out of breath. But then I heard footsteps. Someone was coming down from above.

I was on the mezzanine. The only way out was back down. I descended as quietly as possible, even though I wanted to run as fast as I could. Below me was the door to the ninth floor. I ran through it, closing it as quietly as I could. The lock clicked but I hoped the person on the stairs wouldn't think it was anything suspicious.

I found myself in a wide hallway dotted with soft carpets. The high floor-to-ceiling windows offered a panoramic view of the city. There was also a glass wall on the left and a

dark room inside. It looked like a meeting room. Further down was a door with a panel that looked like a cable. I slipped in there and listened. The room was dark, but there were red, orange and blue lights flashing. I stood there with my ear to the door for quite a while. The man on the stairs had obviously gone downstairs, because the upstairs remained silent. I looked up.

The cell-sized room looked like a server room. Machines humming very quietly, pulsing lights and flat black screens. I didn't really know what I was looking at, but the thought crossed my mind that maybe this was where the electricity generated by the dust was distributed and controlled.

"Maybe I can find more clues on this floor?" I decided to look around a bit. The resistance needed to exterminate the witch immediately. No questions, no judgments, and no hostage taking. Johtaja felt we were risking too much.

I left the "server room" carefully and moved down the hallway on the carpet that cushioned my steps. The left wall was back to glass, made of non-transparent luxaffers, shining with their own light. Behind it was a large room with a spiral staircase in the middle. It reminded me of my own apartment with an interior floor of the building. I thought that, as with me, the entrance to the upper floor might be walled off.

The downstairs room was a large space with equally large windows. It looked a bit like a terrace. There was a couch, a chair and a table. In the corner, there was an antique desk and a lamp. Other than that, everything was covered with a nice soft carpet. I went upstairs. I poked my head in, taking a curious look around. The pretty, cluttered room was a surprising contrast to the entire castle building. Soft ottomans, colorful blankets and pillows, pink furniture, pictures with animals, a corner for a dog and on the shelves - dolls. A figure dressed in pink was sitting next to a chest of drawers filled with various accessories.

"It's her!" - I was worried and motionless. A frilly dress, her hair braided into an intricate braid, her height small. The Terrier was asleep, breathing steadily on the blanket beside the Witch. If I can hide enough that they don't notice me, my task will be fabulously easy.

I reached for the gun and gently unbuckled it from my belt. I aimed as Valko had taught me. I stood there counting my breaths, completely unable to fire. Also, in the back. Hiiri said:

- If someone is in your way, but their back is turned, attack. This is your advantage. There's no hesitation. You shoot and that's it. Or you strike, no matter what. In fact, you're so desperate in hand-to-hand combat that this may be your only chance - she then says with her usual sarcasm.

"Hiiri, I can't. Johtajo. Ransamie... I can't." - I thought in my mind, cursing my weakness... No, not weakness. I wasn't scared or confused. I just felt like I shouldn't. And then she turned around. Was it a premonition or a sound that got her attention? She looked at me. She didn't

have her face painted this time. Maybe just a little makeup, but it couldn't hide the truth. Across from me sat a girl. Maybe twelve years old. Eco was a child.

We exchanged glances, me still with my gun pointed at her. But she didn't react. She looked at me, surprised, but not afraid. Then the doggie woke up and barked. She must have jostled him with her hand, I don't know. I didn't take my eyes off its face. And the terrier barked in high-pitched tones. Then something inside me snapped and I snapped out of my numbness. I started to run away. I jumped over the railing, climbed all the steps in one leap and rushed to the exit, I had almost reached the stairs, when they started to come out of the elevator. One by one, the Castle employees, dressed either in gray suits or absurd wizard costumes, as I once called them. I thought it might be hard for them to fight in such uncomfortable rags.

I didn't even ask myself if I was afraid. My mind was working at high speed. All I cared about at that moment was escaping.

- Stop her," ordered one of the wizards. The people around me surrounded me and tightened the circle. I didn't let myself wait. I threw myself at the first best person, trying to cut off his legs and thus make a dent in the trap. In the shouting and noise around me, I could only make out words that were incomprehensible to me.

- This does not work...

- ...switch...

- ...has a gun!

- Give...

- ...don't let her...

The woman I attacked reacted quickly and grabbed my foot. I fell, twisting slightly to the side, and stuck my leg out, kicking blindly. I rolled, immediately getting up and pushing back with my forearm. This was my favorite trick. I couldn't attack well, but my stamina allowed me to defend myself. I had just had the idea of breaking through like a battering ram when something made me lose the ability to move at all. I stood half-bent over, one arm stretched slightly forward, unable to move in any way. Even my eyeballs seemed to have become fixed. I felt panic set in. People were moving. I watched helplessly as the passage to freedom was suddenly revealed. But then the witch appeared before me.

She stood up, turned her head curiously and held out her little hand to me. How could I have mistaken her for an adult before? Actually, I thought she was very old. She touched me like a museum piece, curious about the texture of the top layer.

- Who is it? - She asked someone behind my back. Her voice was a little icy. Dry, slightly off. And passionless.

- We'll check it out, Miss Eco. You can go to your room.

Eco went meekly, having lost interest in me. One of the wizards appeared. He had dark skin and wore a beard and mustache. He really looked like a wizard. He looked at me with a cheerful, almost benevolent expression.

- Good, good. What a surprise. You came to kill Ms. Eco, didn't you? Very naughty. - The man stammered, obviously having fun at my expense. - We didn't think it could be done by any of us. You're about to tell us everything.

I was lying horizontally on top of a few people, still focused and unable to move in the slightest. "How did I not suffocate?" - flashed through my mind. In fact, I didn't feel the need to breathe. Strange. Or maybe the paralysis is preventing me from feeling the functioning of my organs?

I was taken to an adjacent room, which looked like a meeting room. Someone placed me on a table. The wizard nodded and one of the women searched me. In my suit, in an inside pocket, I had my ID card and a small black chip. There was no point in leaving them with anyone. I was the only one who could use the card anyway. Besides, I wouldn't feel safe leaving them anywhere. Also, I always carried my knife somewhere with me, no matter what I was wearing. It's my stuff. I was found with them. I couldn't even protest when the black token was taken away.

- Relax, you'll get over it soon. It will be over soon. - The wizard smiled as he looked into my eyes. Panic began to grow in me. Then the rigidity suddenly subsided. The man helped me up and sat me on one of the chairs. I looked around. Three people were standing at the entrance. Two outside, plus a woman assisting the wizard. I sat quietly, as I wouldn't have had a chance to escape anyway.

- Very good. Now, please tell us, who sent you to us?

I kept my mouth shut. There was no way I was going to betray anyone. The wizard didn't seem bothered by my silence. He sat sideways on the tabletop.

- We just want to check off some basic possibilities. It's much easier and more humane than preemptively burning down an entire neighborhood, so what's it going to be?

A real fear came over me. So they would be able to kill random people out of revenge? Let's be honest, capable probably yes, but was it worth it to them? Maybe it was just a bluff to intimidate me. I remained stubbornly silent as the man looked curiously at my face.

- Mr. Torelli, we have something," the woman called, lowering her voice significantly.

The wizard looked over his shoulder. It appeared that a second door led to the server room next door. The assistant walked over and handed him back the chip. That was quick. I never got a chance to check what was on it. Mr. Torelli seemed to see this thirst for information in my eyes.

- Hola, miss, are you sure this is yours? - he asked cheerfully.

- Yes.

- Yes, and do you know, my dear, what's on that chip? Why do you need it?

I didn't want to betray myself. The more words and lies, the more credibility I would lose. I said briefly:

- I know what's on it.

- You don't know," the wizard replied softly, pressing something to his forearm. The top part came off, revealing the mechanism. I looked at it with wide eyes. A prosthesis? No. This... This person is not human. I looked around me. Everyone around me was looking at me calmly and with some curiosity. I couldn't stand it.

- Do you... all of you?

- Yes, my dear, yes. We have been caring for Miss Eco's family for generations. We protect her and now we are her only family. Who could be so cruel as to lay hands on this innocent and defenseless creature?

- She is not innocent," I denied emphatically. - She is responsible for the murders and tortures in the City. She has no right to act like this.

- But you didn't kill her, did you? Your system wouldn't let you.

- You've brainwashed him. You're just machines," I angrily exulted.

- And who are you? - Mr. Torelli smiled, playing with my gun. Then he shot me in the head.

I woke up with a scream. Machdik came running after a while, apparently he was still in the house.

- What happened? Aio, why are you screaming?

I was breathing hard, clutching my hands to the comforter. I was shaking and couldn't get my thoughts together. I tried to fall asleep and move to the Center. I couldn't. I tried somewhere else. It worked. A hiding place in the East Node, near the Night Walkers, in the Eternal Fire Clan... the Center... no. I returned to Machdik.

- I can't, I can't go back to the Center! Mashdik, something happened, something bad... They are making me... I think I'm... - I panicked. Machdik sat next to me and grabbed my hands, trying to calm me down.

- Aio, it's okay. Easy, you're here. You're okay. You were here the whole time.

I shook my head, regaining some balance.

- Machdik, they killed me. The witch Eco doesn't exist, she's just a little girl. She is just their puppet. Everything is run by androids.

- Wait, slow down. What do you mean? I don't understand, how is it with androids?

- Remember what I said yesterday about Mr. Charles? He doesn't look like a machine at all. He has such human reflexes, he's empathetic, he cares for Mr. Blumenfeld...

- Blumenthal, I think...

- Well, that's it.

- And they are also empathetic? - he asked, doubtful.

- No, I don't. I don't know... Machdik, he shot me. - I told you the whole story.

- I still don't understand something - the boy wondered. - What was on the chip? And why did the guy say it was the "system" that kept you from killing the witch?

- I don't know... But you're right. The chip could be the answer. I just don't know how to use it.

- Well, you certainly need a computer. There is none here.

- Computer.

- It's the same thing. I've never even seen one. One of the clans?

I wondered. When I woke up in different places, people usually lived pretty modestly, the only energy they had was light and heat. No one drew on it because everyone was afraid. It was the power of the witch, after all. Nevertheless, Eco doesn't really have... She doesn't really have any power. She's just a girl. A blanket? Why?

- Who ran the City before the Witch?

Machdik was somewhat confused by the question.

- Well, things have been different. For a long time, it was just the City Council. A few people from the Centre. Always from the center. We were never particularly interested.

I thought feverishly. I started walking around the room from one corner to the other, as if chasing my own thoughts.

They needed someone, a figurehead, someone who was a symbol of power. So that the clans would understand that this is no longer just any anonymous city council. It's a real person, with real power. Someone like that can be feared. She can be admired and a legend created. The power wielded by the Witch was all the more inaccessible. It could be modestly shared and dispensed... So that it seemed to all that nothing more could be dreamed of. So it is possible... In reality, the Witch has no magic. All that matters is the belief in her, which has been planted in people's minds as a conjecture. But the energy exists, it comes from somewhere. Maybe exactly as before.

- Where did the energy come from before... Before the curse? Before the kiss of God?

- Well, how. Well, from the power plant. From where? - Machdik was clearly lost. He was just following my path around the room.

- And where was she? - But before he could answer me, a daze came over me like a summer rain. - I know... Machdik, I know where it is. I know where I have to go. - I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out a black token. - I have to go to the Center. On foot.

- On foot. - Machdik glanced mischievously from under a mane of black hair. - We have the rokons.

I was baffled for a moment.

- Oh no. No. I can't. They're too valuable. How about a train?

- Which train?

- Game Land can be reached by train. Maybe the train station is closer?

- And do you know which way to go on this train?

I denied it. I knew more or less the layout of the clans and could roughly imagine a map of the City. But the layout of the railroad was too meandering, I didn't know which way the tracks ran. Climbing the rokon was very tempting, but it would have been treated as a crime in the dog clan. Stealing something so precious....

Machdik saw that I was hesitating.

- Look, this is important, isn't it?

- Yes. I'm not sure, but I prefer to assume that I don't have the right to ignore it. This guy - Torelli - was pretty much telling the truth, he couldn't just tease me since he was going to kill me in a moment anyway.

- It's just that... you're here.

- And that's good. After all, he didn't know my capabilities.

- But does being here... Does that count as... Are you even dead? From what you've told me, you have a body in every place you wake up. In this case, you only lost your body. To me, the fundamental puzzle is that you have more than one. Why is that?

I clenched my jaws, silent for a moment.

- Until now, I thought - I started carefully - that when I was sleeping, my mind traveled to different places and created a kind of hologram there... a body counterpart. You know, the mind can't appear anywhere by itself. So it created something that it could fit into. But now... No, I need to be sure. I think the chip contains information that people have forgotten. Something I should know too... - I kept my mouth shut.

Machdik put his hand on my shoulder and leaned over me, speaking softly but insistently:

- Drive.

He was so serious and determined that it cleared up my own doubts. We ran to the Rokon garage. I sat on the first one to the edge, assessing what I had in front of me.

- I have no idea how to drive it.

- Here you have the clutch, you press it every time you change gear. Here is the gas and on the other side is the brake, he explained. - You change gears with your foot, look. Right. Rokons are stable, but not very fast. But they'll pass on the worst terrain.

I did some moves, practicing my coordination. I hoped to do better than I had in hand-to-hand combat. I nodded my head to show I was ready.

- On three. One, two... Three! - Machdik pushed open the garage door, and at the same time I started the engine and went ahead. Fortunately, the rokon took me by surprise and with a howl I crossed the square, heading for the village exit, just past Grandma Szechna's house. But I was a bit jerky, because I didn't press the gas pedal very skillfully. I scattered sand everywhere.

- Hey! Stop! - I heard behind me. I was spotted. People started to converge and someone started chasing me. I panicked and shifted into the wrong gear, the bike groaned and slowed down.

- Where to go?

- Thief!

- Stop the rokona immediately!

- Stop it! "people shouted. I buried my head in their arms. Even Grandma Szechna came out of her hut. It was her look that froze me the most. I corrected the gears, pressed the gas pedal. Someone tried to reach out and pull me off the bike, but I turned violently, leaning on my foot because the machine was tilting too much.

The grandmother stood with her cane, spreading her arms and blocking my way. I didn't want to run into her, but the slightest delay could cause people to throw me out of the rokon.

"Please." - I thought. "Let me through, please." I fixed my gaze on her, looked into the blue of her eyes and tried with all my might to express the request. We exchanged glances. The grandmother moved her lips and pulled back at the last moment. I didn't hear her, but I guessed what she meant. I walked past her at that moment.

"Come back." - said the grandmother.

I left the village, the cries of people trailing behind me.

I drove as fast as I could, initially following the same path that led to the tree clan, but instead of turning, I went straight. The terrain was very rough. I occasionally encountered cracked sections of road. I crossed many times. The Rokon worked very well. One time I got caught in a corner. I had to turn the bike while riding it. Starting was harder than the first time and I got the gears wrong several times.

But eventually I got to the outskirts of the center.

I entered from a direction I didn't know. I was a little lost. I went a long way around, because I got confused, until I found myself in a district I knew. Soon enough, I found the

place where I first woke up in the Center. The power plant looked like a complex of abandoned buildings. Why wasn't it used in some way? Why weren't the bricks used, why wasn't another rich neighborhood built? There were some empty sheds and crumbling buildings in the center. But they were not a large area, nor were they in a very good location. The power plant, on the other hand, was huge and was right under the side of the castle. From here, I could easily see its slender structure, towering over the other buildings.

"Somewhere out there is my other self. Dead," flashed through my mind. But there was no time for dilemmas in the middle of the street. I turned off the engine and continued to ride the bike. I was afraid of attracting onlookers with the noise of the bike. I put the bike under the cover of one of the walls.

To get in, I pushed aside the rotten boards that covered the window. Once inside, I blocked the passage for convenience. I had little time before dusk, but daylight wasn't coming in here anyway. I searched in the dark, hoping to find machines that hadn't been used in a while. That's how I stumbled upon a light switch. Now that was faster. I searched one room after another. I made my way deeper into the building, finally reaching a closed door. Although the windows were boarded up, everything inside was open. If this one door was closed, it must be hiding something. It was holding and I was already wondering if I should attack it with a battering ram or maybe try to break the lock, when I noticed that instead of a keyhole, there was a narrow slot next to the handle. On a whim, I pulled out the chip and slid it into the slot. Something clicked, so I pressed the handle and entered without difficulty. I removed the chip, leaving the entrance open.

In the center was an octagonal office island. I noticed a few small lights shining here and there. The machines must have been working. At the door, I found a switch and the room lit up. On the sides were also computers, machines, a few cabinets and some chairs.

I walked over to the middle panel and began to walk around it. There were eight screens and at each a control panel, and to the right was an additional console with buttons, dials and several inputs. One of the inputs was narrow and I slipped my chip in. The screen lit up and information began to appear on it:

Type of android: Artificial intelligence version A - AIA

Creator: Alan T. Ring

Type: Security system...

Then the hardware data, the capacity, the number of copies... 6.

I skimmed through the paragraphs of scientific data that did not interest me. Further on, however, I came across another collection of texts. It consisted of articles, notes, and entries

in the notebook of the creator A.T. Ring. I greedily absorbed the letters like spaghetti. I started with an excerpt from an interview published by ST magazine.

Tori Pinkless: *Professor, I have no doubt that readers will agree that robotics is a fascinating and innovative field. However, please reveal: what attracted you to this branch of science?*

Alan T. Ring: *For years, machines have made our lives easier. We can no longer imagine daily life without vehicles for high-speed travel, without holograms that transmit world news, without refrigerators, without coffee makers, without electricity... Wonderfully innovative devices, always more conveniences, always more new ideas.*

T.P.: *There is no denying it. I don't think there's a construction company out there that doesn't have exoskeletons, no blind person is going to give up a holovision device to replace their eyesight, and who, if paralyzed, would agree to live in a prone position these days when they have machines at their disposal?*

A.T. Ring: *Indeed. And yet we're only talking about the bad guys. Robotics has advanced dramatically in the last half century. Doctors in infectious disease departments could not do without robo-nurses. In the mines, mechanical moles (or robohokuro, as they are called by the parent company) dig boreholes, with humans merely watching them. In the heights, mekaleddjurs - droids that move like arthropods - work. They are all precise and accurate. Finally, we come to the androids - the popular idea of a copy of a human.*

T.P.: *Well, androids have been functioning in our society for some time now. We've gotten used to their presence. But this is not the time when everyone can afford their own private android. Is it still a commodity for the wealthy?*

A.T. Ring: *I don't agree with that. We are slowly reaching the stage where android is becoming as popular and necessary as a vacuum cleaner. For the last decade or so, governments in many countries have been allowing applications for the home android, and international grants are supporting the development of this scientific and (already, one might say) industrial branch.*

T.P.: *Although androids are your hobby, you also work, Professor, as a consultant and chief engineer for an energy company.*

A.T. Ring: *Yes, two aspects have overlapped in my scientific work. I've always been fascinated by robotics, the desire to create the perfect android, and the relatively recent issue of renewable energy - dust...*

An additional note on the dust collector:

Dust collector - a device for condensing and converting dust energy into electricity. Dust drawn into the collector by the dust absorber is artificially condensed into a dust plasma, then directed to a series of devices that capture its radiation and convert it into electricity.

Subdivision : simple dust collector; dust collector with generator; suction dust collector; three-phase dust collector ...

I opened another document, which was the somewhat chaotic notes of A.T. Ring, something like a journal or diary. The oldest entry was torn out.

...it is necessary to start at the beginning, and thus with the question: what is dust? It is not a product that one would think must be extracted somehow. The situation is more like extracting solar energy, because the dust is actually the energy itself. It is an entirely new energy, unknown to mankind until now, and yet it has always existed everywhere. It does not matter where a so-called power plant is built. And the building itself, although it is called that, mainly houses laboratories, warehouses, offices, server rooms and, most importantly, a dust collector. Its function is to capture the ubiquitous dust, filter it and condense it.

Dust has been observed through plants. Trees, called dust absorbers by physicists, allow dust to circulate freely within their structures. Unlike humans and animal parts, which form a kind of dust barrier. We move freely through dust without disturbing its structure or being directly affected by it. Vegetation, on the other hand, is the opposite. Similarly, insects and some primitive forms do not show the presence of dust barriers. But what is the purpose of dust? Until now, we still don't know. There are several theories, but none has been confirmed.

Thanks to these discoveries, we were able to see, capture and condense the dust, then its enormous energy is activated. We are unable to accumulate it permanently. The dust plasma is very unstable and the machine releases it by dispersing it back into the dust. The collector works continuously because of the constant flow of dust.

We have also been testing wireless charging for years. The latest idea is to connect the charging port directly to the collector. I designed a small battery with a relay that picks up the port. The tests were successful. The battery charges remotely, even from half a kilometer away. I hope that androids working in a power plant and any other device will not need a weekly recharge, but simply sense the presence of the collector and benefit from the whole process.....

The rest of the file, along with several others, was corrupt. But I came across a set of notes from the youngest :

Dust is a delicate material and it's always good to have someone watching it. We are still studying its properties. It is one of those advances that we use, understanding only a fraction of what it does. Just as lead once poisoned the Romans and cigarettes were supposed to be harmless, dust can be really dangerous. But even if it is, the benefits of its use so far disproportionately outweigh the potential risks...

... Carthy and I have created a new type of android. They are intended to be used as helpers in the power plant. Mathis Carthy says that our androids are already a step behind humans. I agree to some extent, although that step is a chasm. No matter how many times you type two plus two into a calculator, it still comes out to four. You can repeat that action over and over and the machine will never get it wrong. It's the opposite with humans. Our fallibility and uncertainty cause us to blindly follow a path, giving us as many opportunities as possible to make mistakes.

...I thought about my last words. By putting so much data into the android software, we surely made some mistakes. We want androids to support humans with their infallibility, but at the same time, that infallibility could be our downfall. That's why I started to develop a system that I call the old-fashioned "antivirus". It is supposed to question the unquestionability, objectivity, neutrality and react in case of error. It is not about estimating data correctly, but about being guided by what would guide a human being in evaluating a situation.

...Bad rumors spread about the instability and radioactivity of the dust. We have control, the device is monitored and any disturbance is diagnosed and repaired in time. But the assurances of scientists and specialists can do nothing against such anti-advertising. People are panicking. The government relies on public opinion and is deaf to our voices - those who have experienced the dust for years. It's as if a study of a modern breed of dog proves that they are capable of killing. This is naturally frightening, but dog lovers and trainers know that even though the danger is there, they are intelligent and amazing creatures. That's how we feel when such opinions assail us.

Several media programs have expressed their protest, which has triggered numerous demonstrations. Some people voluntarily decided to give up energy in favor of a survivalist life. Fortunately, the government did not decide to shut down the plants. Yet. Entire cities are running on it. We have become more dependent on dust than children are on their mothers. Carthy rubs his hands together and says that there is no turning back. Our colleagues agree, but with less enthusiasm. They whisper in the corners. Mathis J. Carthy is considered a fanatic. He is a great scientist. My only fear is that he sometimes forgets what it's for... We need to keep working on the dust to minimize the risks.

... Carthy has gone crazy. He's come up with something, I don't know exactly, but it sounds threatening. He thinks that dust can be controlled better, more completely. He believes that the human mind is capable of malleable creation...

This fool wants to do it. He has locked himself in the main keystone and any day now, disaster may strike. Out of concern for the public, we gave information to the media. We didn't know what could really happen, so we announced that we feared the plant would explode because the machines were leaking. This is absurd, even if the system had allowed this to happen, we would not have had time to take action. In any case, the government decided that those who had greased their paws well would go to the shelters first. It was a disaster. It's impossible to get everyone there. Not enough time to evacuate...

I decided to deploy copies of my anti-virus system throughout the city. However, my android consumes too much memory and I have too little time. The system has to regulate itself. I guess it will take a long time before it calibrates itself properly and creates intra-module connections. And I had to split it into several copies, and actually, I have no idea if it will work like that. In each core, I built a battery with a dust conductor, like in the android prototypes. This is my new project, which I hope will not be the last one.....

Carthy, the idiot, went with the impulse. At first he claimed that was what he was after, but I think he's lying. The effect was beyond our wildest dreams. The city is in a panic. People are writhing in the streets as if in convulsions. I saw terrible things. Someone started growing fur, someone ran around in flames, bursting into flames, screaming and not dying. Bodies were being deformed. Carthy and I were both at the beginning of the pulse current, the more it spread, the worse it got. Still, we could feel that something was wrong with us. Mathis is gasping for breath, coughing up blood, I am slowly losing my sight. I am already recording these last notes in my voice. I can't stop, this is our confession. Carthy's and mine, because I feel no less responsible. I could have stopped it somehow, but I guess deep down I was curious about the outcome.

There was a violent release of dust, which affected living organisms and equipment. The condensed dust plasma spread, as if it had exploded, and in a chain reaction began to affect all sorts of delicate structures. Vegetation survived virtually unscathed, simply passing through the dust beams as it always has. More bizarrely, small devices either burned out or momentarily focused. The data reset. We lost everything in our computers. We only have pre-printed documents, or handwritten documents like this notebook. People and animals in close contact with the blast wave (what you might call a violent dust ejection) suffered severe health damage. People separated by a certain distance began to mutate immediately. Those

who went down into the bunkers suffered the most from the explosion. Some animals died, others showed human-like defects, and still others proved to be completely immune.

My initial theory is that the dust from such a strong wave broke all the blockages that living organisms had formed against it. The dust penetrated the molecular and mental structures. Hence the mutations and degenerations.

The nightmare also occurred at some distance from the city. The explosion seemed to accelerate. It wasn't the epicenter that was the strongest point of destruction. It was the increasing distance. What met the living beyond the City's borders... in fact, they could no longer be called living. Insanely dangerous. All those who undertook expeditions outside the City died. Someone threw the term "dooies" around and it caught on. And now, despite the fear, no one dares turn off the collector, because it keeps the electricity on the fence, which, in the end, was the only effective way to stop the poop.....

We coordinate the protection of the city. We have lost communication with the world. The holo, the phones, the internet have stopped working... We tell people that the power plant is offline, but it's not true. There is no power replacement, we haven't had solar panels or gas pipelines for a long time. There's no way to even build a coal-fired power plant, it's not cost-effective. Nevertheless, the dust is still settling.

This is not the end. The mutations are progressing. Chaos reigns.

Carthy's health is declining, he's become a wreck in a few days. I think he's having second thoughts, too. It's our fault. He thinks he can stop what's already happened. It's so absurd, impossible. But that thought possesses him like a fix. And so do I. To go back in time. That's what we're missing.

Carthy had the idea of sending another impulse - a counter impulse. Something to at least stop further mutations.

I wish I could give something better, but our calculations seem right. At least plausible. So we decided to go for it. We're sending a counter-impulse.

This time, more carefully, more sparingly. We don't want a repeat of the data reset. We are afraid. The pulse is too weak to cover the entire area of destruction. It only reaches the edge of the city.

We observe.

A stable city. It looks like a final judgment. People come out of their shelters. Fear, disgust.

The government orders the isolation of several parts of the city.

I can barely see. Carthy is not supportive, his breathing sounds like an old tractor. He is on the verge of exhaustion.

Something else has happened. Our androids have changed. All the robots working in the facility, as well as the others... They have become aware! Their memory reset, but they gained something impossible with simple algorithms and data tapes. We didn't notice it immediately. When the situation calmed down a bit, several of them took control of the center. They know we made a mistake...

And we thought it couldn't get any worse.

My system... Carthy knows it.

He distracts me so I can escape. I don't think he'll survive this.

These notes are the whole truth about the incident. I intend to transcribe them and copy them to all copies of my system. I am trying to hide them, I don't want the other androids to find them. I hope a copy of the system survived. They have a delayed ignition, the data needs to be ripped and synced. All because of the rush. But for now, I'm looking at the big picture. I'm hoping to kind of redeem my mistakes this way.

Make it work.

I stared at the text, feeling that if I had tear ducts, I would cry. Surely this can be faked, even in an android, but my creator, Alan T. Ring, apparently thought I didn't need them. I felt a sadness that I didn't know how to express. All this... the truth about me didn't surprise me that much. But the grief was no less great. It was like expecting to have an incurable disease and seeing the test results in front of me.

Instead, everything became clear. All my memories of reality were a system downloaded onto me before the explosion. I am like Mr. Charles. Therefore, I had no memories of my own, as opposed to general knowledge, which was probably a collection of loose information written by Alan T. Ring. My endurance came from the respective structures and materials of which I was made. I did not get physically tired, but only felt the need to sleep, or rather to change my body, which quickly underwent energy regeneration. I did not sweat, I did not cry. I could eat, but I usually forgot about it anyway. I did not feel hungry. I was sending back all the nutrients, for me actually useless. My heart wasn't beating and the beating in my chest was just an artificial effect to keep it real. Breathing was also only simulated, in fact I could hold it for a while. So the paralysis I was treated with in the witch's castle worked. I was simply immobilized, which probably would have been impossible in relation to a human being. Maybe if I had been alive, it would have killed me.

The damage to my head from the gunshot prevented me from returning to this body. But my mind... my programming was roaming freely between the copies of my image. I was sorry. I am not real. I'm not a person. I'm just... I am something. My emotions are pre-programmed reactions to stress, emotion, joy... No wonder my programming has been

dormant for so many years. It must have taken a long time to digest so much information and configurations...

All these thoughts were causing a split in me. At the same time, something inside me was analyzing the data, and another part of me just wanted to disappear, to collapse. I sat on the floor under the desk and hid my head in my arms. I stayed like that for... I don't know how long. It was the same for me. Maybe a year? Or maybe a minute. But eventually, the analytical part won out. My programming didn't allow for helplessness and inaction.

I went back and read. There was still data on the dust itself. Its properties, its uses. Ring must have also copied his colleague's notes. And also the information on the pulses sent.

"Not good." - it hit me. Torelli and the others have one of the chips. So, at this point, they probably already know that I have spare bodies. That I will act against them. I was functioning as Sydonia from the beginning at the Center. But maybe they can find me through the data on my ID card. Especially if they follow the trail of the card payment. So Karan, Louise, Hayley and the others are in danger. I don't have much time. I have to warn them. And then..."

For a moment, I considered it all in a sort of stupor, and then it was as if something had surprised my mind. "Problem scan complete," I thought mischievously to myself, dazed by what had to be done.

I took the chip and headed for the exit. It was time to complete the task I had been given.

CHAPTER 10 Those who have the power

Hello. The deafening sound of footsteps on the stairs woke everyone in the room. A knock. Hiiri stood at the door, Karan and Ransam were hidden behind the sofa. They all kept their weapons at the ready. Aia didn't return for a long time. Too long.

Last night the frost made its appearance, as did the mood. The most icy aura was spread by Ransam tense and pale. They had long waited for the time agreed by Johtai. The time for evacuation was also long past. They had only taken out the sick. Logically, if they caught Aia, they shouldn't be here. Ransam insisted on continuing to wait. The prolonged moments were a slow torture. Because if the militia isn't here yet, maybe they don't know... And if they do, why don't they come back?

The blow was repeated. It was a sign. Hiiri opened the door.

- Listen, because I'm not going to say it twice. - She entered the room with a creaking step, causing a collective gasp that was an expression of long-held tension.

- Aia! - Ransam leapt down the stairs, crossed the room and hugged the girl.

- What took you so long! - said Hiiri, grumbling.

- I'm glad to see you too... - Aia looked tired. Her usually cheerful face was drawn and focused. She frowned, giving her eyes a rather repulsive expression.

- The most important thing is that you are okay... - Ransam began quietly. Aia broke free of his grip, gently pushing him back at arm's length. But further away, he was stopped by her steely gaze.

- No, they didn't. They shot me. It's a different body. I'm from the dog clan. Listen, please, and don't interrupt me. This is very important. You must get out of here quickly. The Moon Witch isn't really our enemy. Or rather... In this game, she is irrelevant.

With a wave of her hand, she interrupts any protest and continues.

- The witch is a little girl. A man raised by androids. It is with them that we have a problem. Eco has been devoid of empathy and morality. Maybe it's the disease, or maybe they caused it. They also make her and us believe that she has power over the dust, that she has some kind of power. I don't believe it. I don't believe it. Dust has long been a source of energy, used by humans. After the explosion, the plant was not destroyed. In fact, it was not even an explosion, but the madness of a scientist. The power plant is still operational and provides energy to the city. It also maintains a protective signal isolating the city. All the tricks the moon witch was supposed to perform were just a game to maintain her image and the fear of the people. Most of the phenomena - for example, the man who didn't bleed despite his injuries - were caused by drugs. They synthesize a lot of them. They were injected into Karan

to get him into a fighting rage in the arena of the Game Land, and then they helped him forget everything.

Ransam gave his friend a worried look. Karan looked like he was about to throw up. Hiiri looked at Aia with a puzzled expression, tilting her head slightly.

- So," Aia continued after a short pause, "the goal is to disable the androids. Humans need to take care of themselves, even if they do so in a chaotic way. I intend to make this possible for you, but before I do, there are a few things I need to do. I don't think clans should isolate themselves. There are many people who need help and others who are willing to share it, if only you show them how. Do as you wish, but if I were you, I would consider cooperation.

The girl remained silent for a moment, rolling her eyes over the faces.

- It's a little... unsurprising what you're saying...

- A little bit? It's like crashing into a wall at full speed," Hiiri remarked bitterly. - I don't really believe it.

- "You don't have to," Aia said as she passed her and headed for the stairs. - Neither of you have to. Why would I, right? The logical thing to do would be to get rid of all those ridiculous words and continue playing in the underworld...

- Aio! - Karan's voice made him stop on the first step. - Don't get angry, at least let us calm down...

- Refresh yourself as you wish. I said what I wanted to, now I'm moving on, fixing a mistake... And a few others.

- What do you want from us? What do you intend to do? Are they chasing you? Explain further... - Ransam could barely control himself. He looked like someone who didn't know whether to get angry, cry, or fall asleep.

Aia raised her eyebrows, showing her surprise.

- What should I expect? Nothing. I'm not your boss or someone important. The task was largely a failure. I have been killed. I am dead. But they will try to find my remaining shells. By looking for me, they can hunt you down. That's why you're not here anymore! - She opened the door wide.

- Wait... - Ransam took his hand. - What do you mean when you say you are dead?

Aia now seemed irritated.

- That's what I said. Listen more carefully. Do you remember that I can move from one place to another? I have several bodies. One has been liquidated. Damaged. If I only had that one, I wouldn't be here anymore. But I still have five. Don't make that face... It's not a trick or magic. I'm a machine. An android. I have backup bodies. I'm made up of several copies. Do you understand?

She spoke louder and louder, trying to pull her hand away. Ransam held it in his.

- What do you want to do?
- I must return to the Dog Clan. I need their help... I also know something that will help them...
- And later?
- Later... I will restore all androids to factory settings.
- Speak more clearly... - Ransom grabbed her by the shoulders. - What do you want to do?
- I will render the androids unconscious. I'll send a pulse.
- Don't. Don't do it... There may be another way. We can fight. - He hugged her and his voice broke. - I don't want you to go...
- I'm glad I met you," she whispered and collapsed into his arms.

She woke up in one of the bodies she recognized as the closest to the dog clan. The rokon did not have time to return. One of the bodies had to stay in the center to trigger the pulse. The dog clan now had to be reached. So she ran away. Her stamina certainly had its limits, but she didn't need to save herself particularly. It wouldn't be long now.

She managed to reach the place a little after noon. She resigned herself to entering the village through the main entrance. She went around the settlement, hiding in the bushes and climbing over the rubble. In this way, she reached the house of the Maytres. She didn't want to go in, fearing that Machdik's parents would catch her. She tried to lure him out by throwing rocks at the window. Her room looked out onto a sheltered area with bushes. Once, she saw him at the window. That's okay. Otherwise, she would have had to wait for him to return until evening. The boy disappeared from view and a few mechanical breaths later she saw him running out from behind a corner.

- Did you do it? Did you make it? Did you find out anything... - he launched a torrent of questions.

- Come on, we need to talk.

They moved away from the house and entered one of the unoccupied buildings. Here, only the walls and ceiling of the first floor survived. The rest had collapsed and the house was slowly being overrun by weeds.

- I managed to reach the power plant and found what I was looking for and more. Rokon is here, later I will ask someone to deliver him to you or... Don't worry about him. If it works... Machdik, your curse... I have a theory and it's very risky, but if it works...

- Aio, slowly, I find it difficult to grasp your thoughts. You jump with them like a cricket in the grass. Let my stupid head understand it. One by one.

- Good. - She took a breath out of habit, just to calm herself and get her thoughts in order. - There is energy in the city. It's always been there, people have used it and still do. That's what

the power plant is for. The energy is the light, the heat, the water intake... everything comes from the dust. It's an amazing source of energy and it's not really about producing it, it's about absorbing it. One day, while normal people were working in a power plant, a scientist decided that if you condensed the energy of dust, it would be more efficient than any human understanding. This is what happened. Because of his negligence, there was a brief explosion. Short, but destructive in its effects, as it acted mostly on complex structures, mainly living and dead organisms. The power of the explosion was based on the fact that the changes that took place in people, animals, even machines, allowed for an uncontrolled development. The development of something. Inside, in us, in people... But these changes were progressing and were too aggressive, so scientists created another impulse to stop it all. You call it the kiss of God - the moment when all the changes were stopped and everything stabilized. The counter pulse only covered part of the City, and besides there were few survivors, because some had already died from the force of the first pulse. Some of the defects were monstrous and killed many people. Some created or activated abilities that were hidden deep in the brain or in the cellular potential. Less on the details, I don't understand it well myself. One thing has become clear to me and that is what is important right now. The curse of the dog clan is caused not by the first impulse, but by the second...

- You are wrong... The other one saved us... - Machdik began reflexively, but Aia shook her head.

- No, the other was inhibiting, blocking what was going on in your minds. I believe that the specifics of your defect would allow you to break through that barrier, however, you exacerbate it yourself. Machdik... demons... are just a product of your mind.

The boy smiled wryly.

- A speech! Maybe, but if you have seen the band yourself...

- No, not like that... Listen. They are there, you see them... but they are not demons. They are dust.

- What does that mean?

- Dust. Power. A manifestation of what your mind can perceive... Every spirit in the Dog Clan sees dust and can influence it.

Machdik laughed briefly but fell silent, stunned by the serious and calm face of his friend.

- What do you mean: influence?

- You can overcome the curse. You have to control the demons, instead of running away from them... make them... whatever. You could do it before. You told me so yourself.

Machdik remained silent for a moment, unable to grasp what the girl was talking about. Finally, his own memory came to his aid.

- I was a small child and I left the safe zone of the village.....

- There is no such thing as a safe zone. You invented it. Here, you keep the demons at bay because you are convinced that they do not threaten you, and they do.

Machdik froze, staring wordlessly at the girl. As if he was trying to track down the slightest sign of mockery or doubt... But Aia seemed calm and unyielding. No. She wasn't lying.

- I'm scared," he admitted. - Will you come with me?

She nodded and shook his hand. They walked to the edge of the village, where the clan marked the border.

- What should I do?

- Imagine perhaps that you summon these demons and, by the power of your mind, hold them at bay.

The boy squirmed, but after thinking about it, he took one step forward, then another. They walked slowly, as if it were a child's nursery rhyme, where each step corresponded to a letter or a number - they were measuring inches of conquered land. Mashdik began to frown and sweat. He barely blinked, clenching his jaw and his right hand on Aia's palm. Finally, he stopped and began to back away.

- No... I can't... Aio... I can't. They're here, they see me... Aio, don't punish me...

- Machdik. Take it easy. I am here. This is not their land. They are not at all... They are not dogs! They look different. In fact... they are... they are yarn! Lots of colored thread. It's thread. They make embroidery for your clothes.

- Of course... - he growled through his teeth. They hung there for a moment. Machdik blushed from the effort and groaned. Finally, he added with difficulty, through a tight throat: - I'm trying... sons. These sons want to get me too, Aio... what should I do?

He panicked, but he was no longer a man falling into an abyss. Now he was a man hanging on, holding the edge with one hand.

- So... let the wires in... it's just wire, it won't hurt you, it wants to get along with you.

Machdik took another step back, then screamed and bent over, clutching his head. The girl watched this with horror in her eyes... after a moment, however, the boy straightened up and swept his stunned gaze around him.

- And what? - Aia was concerned. - What do you see, Mashdik, okay? What's going on?

- I'm out - he announced calmly and as if surprised by his own words. A wide smile lit up his face. - Aio, I'm out! I am here, I am out! Nothing is chasing me anymore.

Aia sat directly on the dry leaves with relief. A smile broke out on Machdik's face.

- You weren't sure at all.

- No," she replied weakly. - I had a strong feeling and a pretty good theory. I'm sorry I put you in danger...

- No kidding. It's the best thing that could have happened to me... Aio... You made up your mind with these wires. Where did you get that?

- I don't know. Of all the things I thought were dangerous, the colored threads seemed the most absurd.... And somehow I have such strong associations with your village.

- Nothing? No matter, in any case, it has an effect. And now what? Should we show ourselves to others?

- One more moment... I would like you to try something else... These wires... do you see them?

- Actually... yes. They're there all the time, but they look so natural that when I'm not concentrating, I don't notice them at all.

- Try... ordering them to do something.

- What?

- Something, anything. Playing the wizard... Oh dear... - She rolled her eyes and wrinkled her brow in thought. Machdik only now saw the familiar Aya in her. Until now, she had been stiff, tense and seemed foreign.

- Create an image, a thing, a hologram... an illusion? - She suggested other words, hoping he would understand what she meant. - I can't believe that people from the future don't know the basics of fantasy... Uh, okay, so maybe... - She picked up a rock. - Turn that rock into a glass ball.

Machdik stared at the pebble with concentration and nothing happened for a long time. Finally, as Aia lost hope and began to think of something to replace it, the pebble disintegrated and a small glass ball with bubbles inside rolled out from the center.

They both remained silent for a moment, contemplating the phenomenon, and when their eyes met, they burst with uncontrollable joy.

- We did it! Did you see, I did it! Amazing... Do you think the whole dog clan can do it?

Aia shook her head, smiling widely.

- I think all of you are capable of much more. The witch was only pretending to have powers, and her family was probably not even touched by the impulse. They were elite, after all, they could afford androids. Torelli told me so himself. But you... You can command matter to change, to create light and heat, to help nature evolve... - she paused, seeing that Machdik's head was spinning. - Can you handle it? - She supported him with her arm.

- Yes... I was a little tired.

- Let's be careful... This kind of fun surely affects the energy of the body... In fact, it's also a bit reassuring, you are not all-powerful.

Machdik crouched down next to her on a pile of bricks, Aia bent down to look at his face. She became serious again and the feeling of sadness returned.

- Hey, what happened? What are you worried about?

She gave a pale smile.

- Do I look worried?

- Yes, we do. Yes, absolutely. And too tired.

She laughed a short, barking laugh.

- That's nice. That sounds... comforting. - She smiled more broadly. - Come on. Why don't we take a trip to the Tree Clan?

Machdik made round eyes, but immediately beamed like the dawn. He leapt to his feet and gave Aia his arm.

- Allow me.

- Admit it, you're just still dizzy.

- No way. Now, my dear Aio, the chosen one will free the village.

They walked along a circuitous path, crunching through dry, frost-bleached grass. The air was frigid but pleasant. Steam escaped from the lips of each of them. Moreover, the boy was getting happier with each step and looking excitedly up at the bumpy gray sky. The demons no longer pursued him, and he could walk beyond the boundaries of the village as freely as he could within. He described what he was seeing and how the suggestively designed thread by Aia was arranged. It was a representation of the dust, or perhaps just the creative invention of Machdik's mind.

They walked along the path to the Tree Clan, talking about how the Dog Clan would react to their return, and what they would do with the power they had discovered.

A curtain of vines showed the village of the tree clan asleep and deserted. Only smoke rose from the huts and the smell of roasting meats and herbs could be smelled. Aia walked confidently across the square, heading for Zerah's hut. She had been here many times, bringing selected envoys from other clans. Each had to be approved by Zerah beforehand and had to keep the clan's location secret. Machdik had come to the Tree clan from time to time on an annual basis, but the visit had always been so brief that he had never been able to look around. Now his eyes darted around his head.

- Hello, Aio, what brings you... To the green shoots of my beloved wife. Is that Maytrei's son?

- The same one. - The boy bowed theatrically, leaving Zerah in a stupor.

- But by what miracle? Are you feeling well, my boy?

- As good as it gets. The curse has been broken, the curse has been lifted.

Zerah, not knowing what to do with himself, embraced Machdik and Aia herself, then summoned the neighbors, who were lazily emerging from their warm homes, not immediately realizing what was happening.

- Zerahu, can we see you grow up?

The man raises his eyebrows, a little surprised.

- Please, there is nothing that can stop you.

- The curse has blocked the true abilities of the dog clan members," says Aia and explains to her friend what they have discovered and what has happened.

People gathered in front of Zerah's house in increasing numbers. Aia used to cause a stir in the village by appearing. The villagers usually reacted to any news by herding together and waiting for intriguing news.

- So it wasn't the Witch who was powering the City?

- No, it's not. Besides, she's pretty harmless herself. I don't think she can do anything wrong if she's not monitored by androids. Just turn the machines off. - There was that deadpan, metallic note in the girl's voice again.

His words caused a stir. The tree clan was clearly concerned.

- But... I understand neutralize... Will you... Will the resistance fight them?

- No, we're not. We're not going to approach them at all. We just need to restore the previous state of things... reboot... I mean...

- We get it, you want to take away their ability to think consciously, right?

- That's all.

Whispers and more whispers.

- That would be murder, my dear. To permanently deprive someone of consciousness is murder," Zerah said softly, drilling Aia with a look. She looked away.

- But they are a threat. But they are a threat. They are dangerous and harmful.

The leader of the tree clan didn't answer anything, merely pointing them to the part where the winter sleepers slept. Aia knew which way to go, but Zerah clearly wanted to accompany them. Several of the residents followed them in silence.

Machdik had never been to this part of the village before. He couldn't suppress a yuck and a murmur as he walked around the clan ancestors carefully planted in the ground.

- They are alive... I can see the threads that entwine their bodies and how they move between them. How big it is... And there! Something is changing there... It happens faster there, here it's very slow.

Zerah let him touch the bark, young shoots and branches. At one point, Mashdik made a movement as if he were pulling something out. He did it with concentration, but eventually he wobbled and had to kneel down.

- It's good, it's good. I get tired quickly. I wanted to try to get a piece of what they were sending between them. I got it! Aio, you know, it jumped out at me. I can move on... I'm just going to rest a little bit. It's cold out here. Can we sit somewhere warm for a while?

They moved into Zerah's house and one of the neighbors brought a hot soup and gave the boy a treat. Aia refused. With her head down, she listened to Zerah and Mashdik's conversation.

- So the rest of the village doesn't know yet?

- We wanted to see how it worked first to make sure the curse symptoms didn't come back. But I feel fine.

- That's a little unreasonable. You should tell your father.

- I know... maybe a little. But we'll bring you the good news soon.

- I am immensely pleased. - Zerah smiled warmly, and the mesh of wrinkles on the visible part of her face shifted. - Tomorrow morning we may send someone to the other clans to tell them the news. They should know.

- Let's wait until the Council has decided. Why don't you come with us?

- It is too late now. In fact, your clan will have to deal with these changes on its own first. In the morning, however, I am expecting a visit from a member of the Twin Hearts Clan. If he arrives, we can pay you a double visit.

- Okay, I'll tell my father and the village council. I think it will be necessary to send someone to the Night Walkers and the Singing Family.

- In my opinion, the priority is the Eternal Fire Clan. They have the biggest problem. Perhaps your power could remedy that somehow?

- I'm a little afraid of interfering with someone's body. We don't know if it's possible yet.

- Gyuri Saz, from the Eastern Crossroads, used to say that a hot engine needs to be cooled. You can try it on inanimate matter first.

They talked like this, exchanging ideas, until it was dark. Finally, Aia decided it was time to go home. She thought that those who sought her would not find her so easily, especially in the scattered corners of the clans. But every hour she was late could put her friends at the Center in danger. Machdik, having come out in front of the house, concentrated and held his hand out in front of him, making a gesture as if he were spreading salt. After a moment, the inside of his hand glowed softly, like a lamp. The boy was sweating a little, but he looked happy.

- That's what I pulled out of the tree. Just a little. It will light our way back.

They walked quickly toward the house. Machdik walked first, lighting the way with his hand. This time they didn't have to take cover. They walked straight to the door.

- Machdik. Wait. - Aia held him by the arm.

- What is it? Are you worried about this rokon? We'll explain it to them. When they see this - he waved his hand - they'll forget the question.....

- No, that's not the point... - The girl realized that they had been spotted in the village. - You see me... I must return to the Center. Tell the village council and the others everything.

- So let's tell the story together...

- I will not take the glory away from the chosen one. - She smiled slightly. - Time is running out... you'll know what to do.

- Thank you. - Machdik kissed her and hugged her tightly.

- Thanks to you too. - Someone decided to run outside. She guessed that they wanted to take Mashdik back to the safety of the village. Probably Demir. She smiled. - Take care of yourself.

And she fell inert on the ground.

Machdik stared at her body, as helpless as a puppet. Usually she tried to lie down or sit up when she moved, but she found herself cooing on the floor just like that. But this time, the sight made her shudder. Kind of like the first time she had fallen lifeless and lay in his house. He knelt down and touched her hand, which quickly lost its warmth. The threads in her body no longer looked like the ones that surrounded his or tangled along the tree trunks.

At the edge of the village, Grandma Szechna looked away.

One body was lying under a glass coffin in the Twin Hearts clan. The other two are hidden near other clans. The first one in the East Node. She came out of hiding and lay down at the edge of the village. In the morning, someone might find her. Perhaps the clever Gyuri Saz, or the cheerful Edina Fehér, or the young Vili Halász, who had recently become a champion in a contest... She had met some extremely cheerful and energetic people here. She preferred that the envelope of her body be handed over to the militia in case of emergency. The search for the remaining specimens, if it failed, could be disastrous for the inhabitants. There will be no shortage of them. There is no shortage of androids. There is no tear to wipe away or sting in the heart.

She wanted to leave the second body with the Night Walkers, but it might be found too soon. So she ran to the vicinity of the Singing Family's blind colony. It took her a while and a deeper night fell. This was to her advantage. For the Singing Family, it made little difference - night or day. Darkness was not a problem. But you have to sleep sometime. It was unlikely they would venture too far at this hour. She lay down on the main road leading to the village. She remembered the lonely shed from which Anaru and his fellow Singing Family members had extracted her. She wondered if it was her creator, her father, Alan T. Ring, who had carried her there and hidden her eighty years ago. A muffled chant came from the distance. It

was the clan that had gathered in her room and was now sending her a lullaby in the darkness. Sleep, Aio, it won't be long now.

She moved toward the Vigils. Despite the late hour, she wanted to talk to Mr. Wynn. She would wake him up and say a brief goodbye. The night was favorable, so the townspeople could not sense her. Why make a sensation? Someone would explain it to them someday. After all, what they believed did not have to be wrong at all.

She exited the temple, carefully swinging the door open. The way was clear. She trotted along, hiding in the back of the buildings, against the walls, in the half shadows, and found the right house. She entered, quietly closing the door behind her. Something was wrong. The cottage, modest anyway, seemed to be missing several pieces of equipment. The shelves were cleared, the table devoid of dishes, the curtain by the bed drawn. She looked to where she expected to find the old man. It was empty. The bed was stripped of its sheets. She sat heavily on the edge, burying her head in her hands for a moment. The old man was dead and his house had been cleaned. She curled up on the bed and remained in that position.

She returned to the Center. The last place. She got up on her elbow. She was in some kind of attic. She looked around. Someone was sleeping nearby, wrapped in a blanket. She leaned over, noticing a dark hair. Karan. Then they listened to her and moved. Good. A little farther away lay Hiiri. Under the window, papers were scattered on the top of a legless table. She stood up carefully and looked at them warily. Plans of the witch's castle, applications, permits, measurements, house plans. She flipped one of the sheets over to the clean side. She wanted to write to them to take over the dog clan rokon. Hopefully there was still gas left in the tank....

- Is it okay to sneak out at night like that?

Aia shivered and turned around in one motion. Her silent movements were nothing compared to Hiiri's skill.

- It took me a while. But I'm leaving now," she whispered in response.

Hiiri didn't say anything, but came closer. Aia assumed an indifferent expression.

- Near the power plant, tucked away, is a rokon. I'll draw more or less where. I have a request, you must give it to the dog clan.

- And you can't do it yourself?

- Not really. I don't think so.

The resister nodded. They remained in silence for a while, not looking at each other. Finally, Hiiri came up and kissed Aia. Briefly, awkwardly.

- But if it doesn't work... Then come back.

- There is no such thing...

- I'm just saying. - Hiiri looked embarrassed and sad for a moment. But only for a moment. She handed him a small pencil. - Well, go ahead and draw this card.

They looked around as if on command when Karan murmured softly. Without hesitation, Aia sketched out a few words and a simplified map.

- Go now," Hiiri said, and her voice seemed to tremble. Perhaps through a whisper.

She tilted the window to indicate a safe passage through the path of the cats on the roofs. Aia followed the road without a word. The city was swarming with militiamen and patrols. She had no doubt they were looking for her. She had to make her way through two places to avoid being spotted. Sometimes she hid behind chimneys, waiting flat, frozen, lest a sleeping bird betray her. Once she came down from rooftops, because she could be seen from the opposite window, where she would spot observers by chance. At some point, after reaching the bottom, she heard the sound of footsteps approaching. The rhythmic trot of several pairs of shoes. She immediately fell to the ground and crawled under the delivery truck. The runners stopped near the car, but quickly separated, leaving only one of their own. Aia saw everything from below. The militiaman's boots were right in front of her nose. After waiting a moment for the pursuers to move away to a decent distance, she grabbed the man by the ankles and pulled with such force that he lost his balance. Even though he reflexively clenched his arms, he still hit the asphalt with his forehead. He froze. Aia took the opportunity to get out from under the chassis. She jumped on her opponent and smashed his head against the ground again. She hoped he was one of the androids. He wasn't. A dark, slimy liquid spilled from between the girl's fingers holding the man's head. She thanked her father, in spirit, for his lack of gag reflex and squeezed the man into his seat under the car. Looking around to see if anyone was coming, she found the right entrance and climbed to the rooftops again. So far, they didn't know where she was. The only clue was an abandoned house. The dead body left behind would be another clue. She had no doubt that her companions would find it soon. Time seemed to speed up. And the journey was becoming incredibly long. And this growing anxiety. She spat into her chin that she had wasted so much time in the Tree Clan.

But eventually she arrived. Her biggest fear was that the building would be under surveillance and they would try to claim her on the spot. It seems, however, that Torelli and the others did not fall for her game.

The power plant, as usual the least lit, glowed in the interior darkness. A look at the witch's castle. The lights spread a glow there. Who will live there when people discover that the castle has been abandoned? Will Eco escape? Will they recognize the witch in her? Will the girl have enough sense not to get killed? She will have her chance. Aia had already spared her

life once. What would make her spare it a second time? It didn't matter. She entered through the hole she had left in the window and said aloud to the darkness:

- There is only one thing left to do.

- I think so," said a familiar voice near her ear. Really, the resistance had never had a worse spy, if she let herself be approached like that for the second time. She wanted to turn around, but two hands held her back. She felt a warm breath on the back of her neck.

- You're not going to run away now, are you?

- No, I'm not. I'm almost there. Let me go, Ransom.

- And then what? Do you give in to this impulse and think everything will be okay?

- No. But it will be better.

- Yes? And Charles, Grandpa's butler? What about Mr. Blumenthal? How long do you think he'll last without his servant?

- You will help him. Charles... He's just a machine. Just like me.

- You know very well that this is not true.

- What is not true? I don't have feelings, Ransom. I just have a downloaded program. I have a behavioral pathway. Algorithms of potential emotions that my creator thinks I should feel. These aren't real emotions. It's just a trick. It's called progress.

- You're stupid, you know. People are like that. Every one of us is like that. We are governed by stress and hormones and anxiety and deviance... We are ruled by drugs and... and... you know what else? Love! It's all made up too. But I don't care if someone programmed it, if nature, genetics, an unknown god or a genius scientist did it. Do you understand? I don't care! - he shouted.

If she could have, she would have cried too. But she wasn't sweating, she wasn't crying, she didn't have a runny nose. Her body temperature was caused by the temperature of the working mechanism. The cramping and panting was an imitation of the body's real reaction to surprise. She felt no pressure in her stomach, which could store food but did not need it. Her heart was not racing - it was functioning with its regular, artificial rhythm, slightly increased by the intense movement. His hands did not shake, his body did not stiffen.

But still, she felt. Not like people do. But she felt it in her own way, as grief and joy, sadness and relief. And there was so much of it that she did what people do. She embraced Ransom. With that, she calmed down a bit. With that, she was able to turn around and go straight to the octagonal panel room, where eight computers were moments later digesting the command she'd sent, copying the data from her chip. The eight monitors displayed a message asking her to confirm her desire to perform the action. "Yes," she clicked. And she froze.

EPILOGUE - The city

Ransom stood for a moment leaning against the boards blocking the window and held back a dry sob. He didn't want to go. He didn't want to see her die. How his conscience was dying. He waited, feeling worse and worse with each passing moment. Selfishness dictated it. It was necessary to be there. Not necessarily to hold her hand. But at least to be by her side. "She would have done it anyway, alone," he apologized. And he couldn't.

Time passed and no sound reached Ransom's ears. Finally, he moved to follow the light that a room diffused behind the half-open door. She was standing there. But he already knew it wasn't her. She was staring impassively into the void. On the screens, it blinked: "Trial over. Impulse sent." Nothing could be more obvious.

- Aio - he tried. She turned her blank gaze to him.

- How can I help you? - The voice was not the same. He stopped, blinking again at the eyes that had irritated him so.

- Let's sit down.

- Yes, sir," the android announced sharply as he crouched against the wall. - Can I tell you something?

- Please.

- Please place the memory chip in the port. - She held out her hand. A hole appeared on her wrist, suggesting that the chip should be placed there.

- Do it yourself.

The android stood up and removed a black rectangle from the octagonal panel, then inserted it into the slot on his wrist.

- Data activation process completed.

I was born in 1990 in Białystok, but very soon, together with my family, we moved to Zielona Góra in the province of Lubuskie, a beautiful, welcoming and friendly city. My parents are an extremely creative couple, who instilled in me a love of literature, and in particular of fantasy in the broadest sense. At the age of 6, I was reading Tolkien to my pillow, and soon after Sapkowski or Strugack. Supported by my parents, I enjoyed immersing myself in various interests. It was difficult for me to choose only one field, so I graduated from a music school in violin class, and the University of Zielona Góra gave me a master's degree in painting and Polish philology. After my degree in music education, I started a business where I teach the basics of violin and, in my free time, I give riding lessons. I am passionate about languages, I am crazy about animals, I love the mountains and traveling. Except for a small volume of published poetry, "Obvious Things", the novel "Dream" is my first work.