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The Green Moon Chronicles

Volume 2:

Queen Aria

I

I wandered around the house, going from one room to another. Monsieur Grisouille did not let me go at all.

sole. Since my return, he followed me wherever I went, giving me comforting nudges or nestled against my chest, purring as loudly as the vibration of his diaphragm would allow. allowed. He probably wanted me to know that he was happy that I was alive and back with him and my parents. I entered my room. It was plain and rather tidy, except for a bookcase crammed with all kinds of books. I sat down on my bed and my big grey cat immediately jumped onto my lap.

It had been several weeks since I came out of the coma. I had no memory of anything that occurred. I contemplated every day this mysterious green amber bracelet that I had discovered in my mailbox on my birthday, but I had no idea who the sender was.

My parents, worried about my health, gave me a little space to concentrate on my recovery, while limiting my movements and outings. I could actually do anything I like, I could stay in front of a screen for hours without them giving me a second thought, but when it came to going out, I had to tell them where I was going and always have my phone with me. But they still had to accept that I was going out. So far, it had only happened once, and I had to quickly put an end to my walk because of my mother's incessant calls and messages.

Exasperated, I went home and didn't come out of my room for the day. This did not help. seemed to upset them more than that. The school year was fast approaching, but the psychology faculty had given me a year's sabbatical after the dean learned of my accident. My professor, Mr. Head, apparently the driver, had told the police that a heavy truck had been in front of us and that he had swerved violently to avoid it. After several rollovers, we ended up in a tree, bending the car in the middle. Miraculously, he had escaped with only a shattered eyebrow and some slight bruising. He was able to call for help, after trying to wake me up, without success. When they arrived, I was still unconscious and my coma lasted almost two months. I had no memory of the accident or of my life before it. I knew deep down who I was, who my parents were, what my life was, and I walked around my town knowing full well where this path or that path would take me. Yet I had a huge hole in my chest, as if a part of me was missing. I was an empty shell that had been stripped of everything that makes us sentient beings. I had no taste for anything. But since I had no visitors, and therefore apparently no friends, I began to think that even before my accident I must have been lonely and depressed. I must not have been well liked in my faculty. Maybe I wasn't very funny or interesting?

I pushed Mr. Grisouille off my lap, which made him complain. He came and lay nonchalantly at the foot of my bed, staring at me, vexed.

- Excuse me, handsome, but I have to get out of here!

I hadn't set foot outside for months, not counting, of course, my deadly walk in the bud. Everyone in our little town knew what had happened to me and they had an unfortunate tendency to come knocking on the door to satisfy their need for gossip or to I would see them stop in front of our house and look in the direction of our house as they passed by. I would see them stop in front of my window to whisper bits of information they had gleaned from the grocery shop or the pharmacy in the city centre. But I was tired of going in circles and was ready to face their questions if I ever came across neighbours who were a little too curious.

So I took my khaki bag and slung it over my shoulder after lacing up my Converse. I went down the stairs and stopped in the kitchen to tell my mother that I was going to clear my head.

- I'm not sure that's a good idea... she began.

- Yes, it is! I assure you that it is necessary!

- I know I'm boring you, but we thought we'd lost you and...

- It's okay, Mom. There's no need to go over this again. You know, I'm not a child and I'm not going to text you every hour when I'm not living here anymore!

- Yes, but for the moment you are under our roof and you do *everything* we tell you! hard.

I sighed in discontent and slammed the door. I had had enough that my parents thought I was a kid. I couldn't remember anything, but I had the feeling that before the accident they weren't on my back as much. I could understand how they felt, but between the frustration of not getting my memory back and the boredom, I was starting to go crazy.

I instinctively headed for the park. I sat cross-legged on a bench next to a large oak tree.

Luckily, I hadn't run into anyone and the place seemed quiet.

It was still sunny, but the wind had picked up. I regretted not having taken a waistcoat, but it was there was no way I was going to turn back. I took a book out of my bag and began to look through it. I couldn't concentrate, my eyes were drawn to the green amber stone bracelet that encircled my wrist. I could not concentrate, my eyes were drawn to the green amber stone bracelet that encircled my wrist. I felt a presence behind me. I turned around, but saw nothing. For once I had escaped from my parents, I was not going to be paranoid!

I picked up my book and tried to read again.

- *Kof Kof!*

The cough startled me out of my thoughts. I turned my head towards the right. A man in his sixties was standing there with a bag in his hand. He was very elegant in his grey tweed suit and was frantically fidgeting with his glasses with his free hand. The thin scar, still pink, at the top of his eyebrow told me who he was.

- I'm sorry, Alicia. I didn't mean to scare you. How are you?

- Don't apologise. I'm in the moonlight at the moment.

- That's understandable. I had come to feed the ducks," he explained, pointing to his sack in the middle of the room.

paper. Can I sit down for five minutes?

- Of course," I replied, closing my book.

- Isn't it too hard for you? It must not be easy to deal with this situation.

- The hardest thing to deal with is my parents' anxiety. They're hellish," I explained, laughing nervously. Then, the people who come to ask questions... they are so... curious!

- You have to understand them, nothing exciting ever happens in this very quiet little town. So a student who has a car accident several hundred kilometres away, and with her teacher, moreover, must have been the talk of the town!

- Oh yes, I hadn't thought of it that way. We haven't seen each other since I got out of coma...

- I came to your bedside several times when you were still unconscious, and when I knew that you were awake, I didn't want to impose.

- I don't blame you. To tell you the truth, I don't really remember you, I admitted shyly.

- I know what you told the police, but can you tell me more? It could perhaps help me recover my memory!

- There's not much more to say. We met at the Green Moon Festival. I suggested that you go to several conferences to get a head start on your third year and the We had a terrible accident," he explained at once, as if he had memorised the text.

- The doctor did not explain my coma and memory loss.

- You know, you can't explain everything," he said sadly.

- Don't make that face, it's not your fault. Don't feel guilty! I put a friendly hand on his arm.

A hoarse moan startled us. We jumped to our feet and looked for anything that might have happened.

to make that frightening sound. I walked around the massive trunk behind the bench and searched through the

but I saw nothing.

- I don't know what it was, but we're not going to take any chances, I'm going to take you home you!

- I don't need a ride.

- Let me do this for you, please.

The look on his face was so sad that it was impossible for me to refuse. I nodded my head in agreement and we went in the opposite direction.

We walked the short distance from the park to the entrance of my house in silence the most complete.

- Thank you professor.

- Call me Henry.

This remark was like a slap in the face. I had a massive headache that was so bad I couldn't stand it, and it made me nauseous. My mother chose this moment to burst into the alley.

- What's going on?" she asked in panic.

- I only took your daughter home after meeting her in the park.

I gritted my teeth and straightened up so that my mother wouldn't notice my confusion.

- Yes, don't worry, everything is fine!

- All right, all right," she said as she mechanically returned to the house, without a word.

look for my teacher.

- Are you all right?" asked Henry, concerned.

- Yes, just a headache. I get them a lot, it's nothing. Thank you for driving me home. À soon," I said as I walked away.

- Take care of yourself," he said in a barely audible whisper.



My headache was not going away. I remained, for what seemed like hours, in the fetal position in the my bed, but nothing helped. My mother had come to see me several times, once bringing me Another time I had a hot chocolate, which I could not swallow.

My head felt like it was in a vice. My whole body was shaking and I had a high fever. At After a while, my parents panicked and took me to the emergency room, but the doctors didn't know what to do, numerous examinations found no cause for my illness. They only recommended rest and avoiding any stress. So I spent the next few days locked in my room, sometimes I had to fight against

terrible migraines, and sometimes I had to distract myself as much as I could, because my parents were not willing to let me go, again and again systematically refusing all my pleadings.

The pain and boredom were beginning to drive me crazy, so I decided to escape their surveillance, between two migraines. I had to get some air, I was suffocating in this room which seemed to shrink minute by minute. I went out in the dark, through my bedroom window. I managed, as best I could, to pull myself up to the roof of the garage. From there I could easily climb down into the garden by holding onto the gutter. The sound I made when I hit the ground was so loud that I started to run as if I had the devil on my tail. The cold wind slapped my cheeks and blurred my eyes. But I continued my mad dash, running away from my overprotective parents. I felt like a little girl again. A little girl being punished for doing something stupid. But I was a woman now, and I couldn't take the orders and prohibitions from them anymore. I could understand. But I could no longer accept this situation. I was not a terminally ill person who needed a sterile environment.

Indeed, this terrible accident had plunged me into a long coma, but there was no reason for my parents to be sequestering me. Once again, the call of the park was the strongest. I was strangely drawn to this place. Breathless, I stopped, again, at the bench next to the big oak tree. The same one where I had met Henry Head several days before. I sat down, panting. My headache had finally subsided and I was slowly catching my breath. The fresh air had probably helped to get rid of it. I forced myself to breathe in and out slowly to get my heart rate back to normal. After a few minutes in this vast expanse, I felt an inner calm, an appeasement. I felt free. I was seriously starting to suffocate, locked in my little room. The wind cooling my face and this large green space did me a world of good. Hearing the birds singing, the water lapping and the leaves rustling... I felt like I was living again.

I remained in this position for a long time, meditating. Suddenly, a shiver ran down my spine and an even more powerful headache than the previous one gripped my skull. I fell to the ground. overturned. Choking back a scream, I took my head in my hands. The pain was so great that I came to wish someone would finish me off with a baseball bat. The tears were flowing on their own on along my cheeks. Images suddenly crept into my skull. I ran, losing I looked behind me in panic. Someone was following me. No ! Several people. They all looked alike. Skinny, bald-headed and with bulging eyes, they seemed to float on the ground. They were catching up with me. I stumbled over a branch and slumped to the ground. They were on me, they grabbed me. I could feel their long bony fingers tightening around my arms. I struggled and screamed with all my might. But there were too many of them. I kept throwing my arms and legs around, but I had no energy left. I was weak. They took me away. It was over for me. The images scattered, until they evaporated completely. I did not understand what I had just seen. Could I be dreaming while awake? I massaged my arms. The pain felt so real. In the light of the street lamp I lifted my arms. sleeves of my jumper. I watched in horror as purple marks appeared all along my arms. Long, thin fingerprints were clearly visible. Like those of the beings I had just seen in my dream. Was it really a dream? I was seriously starting to doubt it. I decided to return immediately. The park, which had had a soothing effect on me, was now seemed terrifying. Shadows passed by, owls hooted, the branches were cracking. So I took to my heels once again, but this time to return to my home. Safe in my prison.

I pulled myself up the gutter and landed heavily in my room. I closed the window and the curtains and hid under my duvet. I trembled all over. The horror of my vision made me haunted me. What was happening to me? Should I tell my parents or risk being watched even more? I remained like that, tetanized under my blanket, until tiredness got the better of me. I fell asleep to join other dreams, other nightmares.

II

I woke up. Cold and dampness stung my aching body. I panicked when I realised I was not in my bed. I turned my head in all directions to try to recognize some detail of the landscape. I looked down and saw that I was sitting on a pile of leaves and branches. My wrists were bound, cutting off my circulation, and a gag was blocking my mouth. As I twisted in place, I saw a small cave behind me. The rest of the landscape was forest, a mixture of huge trees, saplings and carpets of ferns. A fire was burning in front of me, warming my cheeks. I was terrified. What did I do? What was I doing there? Who was holding me prisoner? And above all, why?

My vision suddenly blurred and I found myself back in my room, my whiskers on my head. Mr. Grisouille tickled my nose. His front paws rested on my chest and he stared at me with a look of strange. Had I shouted? Or mumbled in the dream? Was it really a dream? Or was this the second seizure part of the onset of dementia following my car accident? I must have taken a good blow to the head to stay in the coma for so long. I straightened up slightly, making the hairball run away.

I didn't understand what was happening to me, and I didn't know if I should tell my parents. They were bad enough as it was. I decided to wait a while. Maybe I just needed a little time and rest. Surely these nightmares would stop on their own. I went down to the kitchen to have breakfast. The morning was well underway and I was seriously hungry..

- Hello my dear!

I was startled. I didn't expect to find my parents at home.

- You scared me! Aren't you at work?

- It's Saturday, sweetheart", my mother said. How are you feeling?

- Very good! I had a very good night", I lied. Resting did me a lot of good.

- Ah! I'm glad! I know you feel like a prisoner. We talked to your father and...

- ... we'll try to give you a little more freedom on a few conditions," she continued.

- You'll have to go to the doctor once a month to make sure you're okay and we'll have to go to the doctor once a month to make sure you're okay. Also I always want to know where you are going and with whom," she continued.

- Fine!" I told them resignedly. Anyway, I don't really see who I could date.

I don't feel like I have many friends, no one has come to check on me!

- They probably didn't dare to bother you, but maybe you should join Marine and the others! my father exclaimed.

My mother cleared her throat.

- Who?" I asked, surprised.

- No one!" she intervened quickly. Your father must have been confused. You'll make friends when you get back to school, don't worry. Would you please go and get some bread?

- But I didn't have breakfast!

- You can have a pastry at the bakery, here!" She handed me a handful of coins that she had just taken from her purse.

- OK... You guys are really weird, you know that?" I told them while heading for the front door..

I walked slowly out of the house, trying to hear bits of their conversation, but their whispers were unintelligible. All I could hear was a "don't bother her with it", coming from the mouth of my mother. I walked slowly to the city centre, enjoying the fresh air on my cheeks still pink from my nightmare.

When I arrived at the bakery, I took two baguettes, a croissant and a small bag of hard bread so that I could feed the ducks on the way back. When I arrived at the park, I sat down on the grass facing the lake and began eating my pastry. The ducks, having seen me, were waddling towards me while quacking. I opened the bag and began to throw small pieces of hard bread at them, when a gigantic shadow appeared. The lake in front of me was covered by it, blocking my reflection. I jumped up and turned sharply around, causing the birds to flee in a cacophony of wings and disgruntled cackling.

- I'm sorry if I scared you.

A huge, broad-shouldered man stood there, arms flailing. His intense green eyes looked at me.

My heart raced to the point of pain, as if he were waking up from a very long sleep. The look in his eyes was so sad that the fear left me instantly.

- It's nothing. I was startled, that's all," I managed to say.

- I'm sorry. Can I sit down?

Caught off guard, I stammered out a ridiculous "yes" more sharply than I would have liked.

- They seem to like you?

- Who? Who is it?

- The ducks. They seem to like you.

- Ah yes, well, they like bread above all.

There was an awkward silence. For a long time, I remained silent, trying to find a way to say something, or to change the topic of conversation. My brain was racing, but nothing came to mind. I couldn't think of anything.

- Nice bracelet. Who gave it to you?" he asked in a whisper.

- Erm... I don't know," I replied, surprised by his question. It was in my mailbox.

- Don't you have a little idea?

- No, I don't. I thought about it for a long time, but I still don't know," I said, somewhat annoyed. I've been having memory problems for a while," I explained without giving too many details.

- Yes, I know about the accident.

- Ah ah! Yes, everyone knows! That's the problem!" I replied in a more angry tone than I would have liked.

The handsome stranger was therefore an inhabitant in search of gossip. This town was so quiet that every inhabitant needed their dose of gossip.

- I'm sorry, I should have left you alone," he said as he got up and made his way to the path.

- It doesn't matter. I'm used to people ringing my doorbell to get the juicy details. But Unfortunately, I don't have any details to give, since I don't remember anything!

- I didn't come to see you to satisfy a misplaced curiosity! towards me.

- For what then?

- To see if you remembered me!

- From you? Do I know you?" I asked, dumbfounded.

If I had, I think I would have remembered him! This handsome dark-haired man, strong as a I couldn't have forgotten him!

- I'm sorry," I continued, holding my head in my hands. I don't remember anything or anyone. We're really knows? I mean... really well? I asked shyly.

- It's okay, it's normal," he replied, evading the question. But I need to ask you something that will seem very strange to you.

- At this point... I'm listening!

- Do you have visions?



Shocked by his question, I leapt to my feet and walked up the small grassy slope to my room. place in front of him.

- How do you know about my visions?

- To cut a long story short, I stayed close to you to check on your health and quickly understood that something was wrong. I think they can help us solve a big problem, but I can't tell you more here, we mustn't overhear our conversation. Would you like to follow me?

- Following you? A stranger in an unknown place to talk about a more than strange subject? I asked, my arms crossed in a defensive manner.

- I wasn't a stranger a short time ago," he says, dejected. But I can see why you're suspicious of me. The problem is, if I'm right, you're the only person who can help us. And it's a matter of life and death.

- Help you to do what? And who are you?

- To find out, you'll have to follow me.

- OK. Let me think for a minute.

I was tempted to follow him. Perhaps I would finally discover the origin and cause of my visions. However, if I disappeared, my parents would soon find out. I was supposed to go home and bring them the bread. If they didn't see me return immediately, my mother would be capable of anything, like calling the police.

- I can't do it. Not right now anyway.

- When then?

- I don't know if this is reasonable... You might be a serial killer!

- Really? A serial killer?

- With your build, you could easily kidnap me, torture me and end up breaking my neck as if it were a simple twig!

- You'll have to get out more and stop the screens!

- Talk to my mother...

- What can I tell you to convince you that I am not dangerous?

- How do you know about my dreams, my visions? Who are you? Do we really know each other? Because it's true that I have big problems with my memory! But still... And why is it a matter of life and death?

- OK! Stop!" he exclaimed, placing his hands firmly on my shoulders and plunging his hands into my face.

eyes in mine.

His hands were radiating, I could feel their warmth penetrating my skin. A wave of well-being came over me

and I suddenly felt safe, as if in a warm, soft cocoon.

- I can't answer you here. There's something going around, he's working for a very bad guy. We We are all in danger, and I believe that you are the only one who can help us save our friend. She who has the power to settle this whole thing once and for all.

- I said thoughtfully. I heard something growling last time...

- Maybe it was me," he admitted, blushing.

- What?

- I told you, I've been keeping an eye on you.

- So you're not a serial killer, you're just a voyeur?

- No..." he stammered. I just wanted to protect you.

- I said again, looking at him from the side.

A psychopath wouldn't blush or stammer. And then I felt strangely very comfortable.

I was comfortable with him. I had a choice between rotting at home and going mad or joining him and going mad.

I learn a little more about what was happening to me.

- All right! Where do I meet you?

- Do you accept? Do you really?

- Yes!

- OK, wait!

He took an old crumpled receipt out of the front pocket of his jeans and wrote a few words on it.

- Here you go! Meet me at this address as soon as you can. I'll be waiting for you there.

- OK.

He turned his back on me and left without a word, leaving me stunned. I stood still for a moment. The My brain overheated, I replayed our conversation over and over. Could I trust him?

I wasn't sure, but if he had wanted to kidnap me or worse, he would have done it already. The park was empty and he would have quickly thrown me over his shoulder to zap me a little further. But what had made me decide to accept was above all the whirlwind of emotions I felt at his touch. This warmth, this well-being. I was forced to admit that yes, I knew him. To know more, I had to trust him. I could still see his figure moving away, but I was already burning to join him.



Having more or less recovered my senses, I made my way home. My mother was still in the kitchen, washing the dishes and my father was obviously no longer there.

- Mum?

- Yes, my dear," she answered without turning around.

- Since you are willing to give me more freedom, can I take the car?
afternoon to go to the city centre?

- What do you want to do there?" she asked me, throwing the sponge into the sink.

- Walking, shopping, seeing people...

- Mmmmmh! OK," she agrees. But you're not going to be back late then!

- Mum, I love you, but you make me want to get a job and get out of the house as much as possible as soon as possible.

- I love you too, that's why I'm doing this.

I sighed and kissed him on the cheek.

- The keys are in the pocket in the hallway," she said as I walked away from the kitchen.

I waited until early afternoon to join my beautiful stranger. I had to remain calm so as not to foil my plans or reveal my meeting in the park. I was eager to learn more.

I took the keys to the family car, after putting pepper spray in my bag by and entered the address on the ticket into the GPS.

After a good half hour's drive, I turned onto a path that looked to me like a dead end. I passed an abandoned lake and stopped dead in my tracks as the GPS told me I had arrived. I turned my head to the right and discovered a sort of red tin warehouse. I parked in front of it and got out of the car. My eyes were drawn to the lake. It was nothing but greenish silt and a jumble of algae and fish corpses. This place did not look familiar, but a shiver ran down my spine. I had the feeling that something terrible had happened here.

- You came.

I was startled and turned around abruptly.

- I'm really only good at scaring you.

- No, I was in my thoughts.

- Does this place remind you of anything?" he asked me, suddenly curious.

- No, it's just scary," I said, pointing to the lake.

- Yes... Come inside, we have to talk.

I followed him wordlessly to the front door, which opened with a shrill creak. I saw a gigantic room at the end of which was a steel staircase leading up to an open floor with a multitude of solid oak bookcases. All of them were overflowing with bulky books. Several beds and sleeping bags were gathered in the left corner, opposite to a fitted kitchen with bright red furniture. Several people lived here, it was certain. And opposite me was the sitting area. A three-seater sofa and two large armchairs

surrounded a coffee table on which newspapers, computers and knives were piled.

Huge hunting knives made to penetrate flesh and bleed game. I panicked and retreated, but hit an obstacle behind me.

- Don't worry, we won't hurt you.

A blonde head appeared from nowhere on the floor.

- Hey! Alicia.

- Do I know you?" I asked, completely lost.

- Wait, I'm coming down!

- Ah, there you go "miss, I've lost my marbles"!

- Shut up, Po!" the ice-cream maker shouted at a man with an athletic body who had just come out of an adjoining room.

- How many of you are in there?

- I'm sorry, but I asked them to be quiet and discreet when you arrived.

- That's it! That's it! We don't have time to be picky about your girl. We've got work to do.

The man, whose v-shaped body would make a professional swimmer blush, snarled.

- OK, so the meeting we had earlier was useless. You know, about what we can say and what we can't!" growled the colossus.

The tone was beginning to rise between these two. The blond head reappeared and a man with the face of an angel.

- It's good to see you again!" he said, giving me a hug.

I stood there with my arms hanging down, waiting for his embrace to end.

- Fucking hell, David... Seriously, you two are making me tired! I told you not to rush her!

Po and David walked hilariously towards the sofas. The third fellow invited me

I finally joined them, but sat down the furthest away from them. Hesitantly, I finally joined them, but sat down as far away as I could from his three noisy, overly familiar goons. Serial killers didn't cuddle and weren't that... annoying! I relaxed a little.

- So, this is Po and David. We were friends before your accident.

- Yes, well, friends is a bit of an understatement.

- Mmmmmhhhh! You'll soon learn to ignore that jerk who seems to have forgotten that you saved his life. Anyway, let's move on." The man called Po fell silent, his face closed. He sank into the sofa, uncomfortable.

- Did I save you?

- Yes, even if this story is your fault in the first place.

- Don't bullshit me," intervened David. It's not her fault and you know it!

- If you say so," he grumbled.

- Well, as I said, we were friends.

- What's your first name?" I asked shyly, cutting him off.

- Caleb.

- Oh yes! He fried your brain!

- What? Who fried my brain?" I asked in panic.

- It's a very long story and I didn't want to talk about it that way," says Caleb, the head in his hands. He looked exhausted all of a sudden.

- Caleb. Take Po for a walk, I'll do it.

Relieved, the ice-cream maker nodded her thanks to her friend and grabbed the infernal Po. He struggled, but eventually gave in. He struggled, but eventually gave in.

Left alone with the blonde head, I sank into the softness of the sofa, trying to calm the shakes all over my body.

- Well, the serious stuff is starting!" says David, wiping his hands on his washed out jeans. What I'm about to tell you will probably seem implausible. But I would like you to listen to me all the way through without interrupting me. Can you do that?

- I will try, yes.

My hands were sweaty and my heart was pounding. The time for revelations had finally come.

- Before your accident, you and I were in college together and we were friends, very good friends friends, he began. But there was a third person. Marine. You've known each other since you were babies. She is your best friend and we need your help to find her.

IV

- Find her?
 - Yes, only you can locate her!
 - What makes you say that?
 - The visions you have... That's who you are seeing!
 - How can you be so categorical? Besides, there's no such thing as visions!" I said, as if to persuade myself.
 - Of course there are!
 - Stop it! Nobody has that kind of power!
 - Yes, it is! Caleb, Po, Marine, me and many others, we have powers! The leader of the rebels, whose mission it is to get us back, has made an assumption. You see Marine, because you are related to her, as it was her powers that messed with your mind a bit. This revelation left me speechless. What he was saying didn't make sense. I shouldn't have followed any complete strangers in an unfamiliar place. I had fallen into a den of fools.
 - So, if I understand correctly, assuming that I am passing over the fact that you have powers, which is really, really implausible, you want me to help you find the girl who put me in a coma?
 - It wasn't her fault... Hajgar, the big bad of the story, forced her to do it.
 - There's a 'big bad' now... Well, look, I'm going home," I said, as I sat down. raising it gently. You're nice and all, but I've got to go. I backed away slowly, slipping my hand into my bag.
 - I see that you don't believe me. That's understandable, but we don't have time for disbelief! So look!
- He turned to a large ficus tree at the foot of the stairs. He held out his hand to it and for a moment For a moment nothing happened. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes. He looked totally cut off from the world. It was now or never, I was going to take the opportunity to sneak out. I began to leave, I was heading for the door when a firm grip closed on my ankle, then another on my back. arms. At first I thought he had caught me with some kind of lasso, but I was horrified to discover The thick leafy vines wrapped around my legs and up to my chest. I was I found myself bound from top to bottom. I screamed with all my might, and before the bonds reached my head, I was in the middle of the night. The green plant instantly regained its shape and form in the pot dangerously, spilling soil on the floor. I brandished my pepper spray in front of me, threatening the angelic-faced man who had just to use witchcraft to attack me with a common green plant.
- Sorry, I got carried away. I've been training for months to face him!
 - Who are you talking about?" I asked breathlessly, still threatening him.
 - Hajgar! He's the one who kidnapped Marine!
- Then he told me everything. How, I believed that Marine and Caleb had betrayed me, when I had caught them in the middle of a discussion at the Green Moon Festival. How we had to flee because of the threats Hajgar sent against me. Our battles with the invisible monsters, the help of the rebels, and Po's near-fatal wound. And finally, how Hajgar had fled with Marine after having fried my brain, thanks to the powers of the latter. He revealed to me the whole story at once, without taking a breath.
- This is crazy!" I exclaimed.

- I can imagine that this sounds completely crazy and improbable. But it is, however, well and truly, the truth. The stone you stole from Hajgar has kept Po alive, and the rebel leader has who was charged with putting him back on his feet by combining his magic with that of the Organza stone. Now it is up to

I'm asking you to help us save Marine. I know we're asking a lot of you, you're just a simple human, but you have proven your bravery and effectiveness on several occasions. Hajgar has had plenty of time to recover from his injuries using Marine's powers. So he must be in full possession of his faculties, but she... she must be terribly weakened. I'm trying not to think about what he's doing to her," he said, clenching his fists. Anyway, do you believe me now?

- After your little demonstration, I can only believe you!

The door opened with a crash. Caleb appeared soaked to the bone, covered in a greenish, slimy texture. His eyebrow and lip were bleeding slightly and his shirt was torn in places. Po, right behind him, was literally laughing his head off. A smell of silt and The room is filled with putrefaction.

- How are you? Did I hear you shout?" he asked, surprised to see me sitting quietly in front of him of his friend.

- Yes, yes! David gave me a little demonstration of his power. And I was a bit... caught in the unprepared!

- Um, OK!

- But what happened on your side?" asked David, surprised by the state of his friends.

- Romeo wanted to come back when he heard his Juliet screaming. I stopped him, that's all, explained Po, bursting out laughing.

- That jerk plunged us into the lake and tried to drown me!

- I just wanted to prove to Mr. Muscle that in the water, I have the advantage!

- Alicia, you shouldn't have saved that dummy!

I was in a state of rage as I walked towards what seemed to be the bathroom.

- Your guy has no sense of humour!" said Po, still laughing. David had told us about his smashing plan!

- I can't wait for Mum to come home..." sighed David.



Caleb had just come out of the bathroom. I approached him shyly. David's revelations about our relationship had upset me. I knew in my heart that everything was true, even if my memory had not returned at all.

- Hey!" I shouted awkwardly. How are you feeling?

- Idiot.

- Why do you say that?

- He made a fool of me in front of you... I waited for many months to find you and he makes me look like a fool.
for an idiot!

- No!" I reassured him. It was actually quite funny. I hadn't laughed for a while like this!

- You're laughing at me now! he said, a smile on his face.

- Yes, you do! You look so serious and sad. It's good to see you smile!

- I missed you, you know," he said, looking serious.

- I wish I could tell you the same thing... Despite everything David told me, nothing is ringing. But before you came to see me, I felt empty, as if I was missing a part of myself, you know? I think that maybe it was you who left this void in my life.

- Maybe. In any case, if you help us find Marine, she can certainly do something for your memory!

- That would be nice, yes! But I didn't understand everything our gardener friend told me. How

Did Hajgar manage to leave with her?

- When he grabbed Marine's leg, he *syphoned off* her powers, borrowing them for the time it took to turn them against you. He doesn't have one, but he has the ability to steal them.

He explained to me with a serious look on his face.

After that, you screamed," he continued. You took your head in your hands and fell to the ground. I rushed to you, but I couldn't do anything, you fainted. I tried everything, but you would not wake up. I thought you were dead!

The scene was replayed in my head, thanks to the details he gave me. I could feel, through His eyes were bright and shifty, the panic he had felt at that moment.

- Relax," I reassured him, placing my hand on his.

- All that matters is that we are all in one piece. In any case, your story held water. Everyone believed Mr Head's explanation. The police really thought it was a I continued.

- Yes. As the war was raging, the other ugly one took the opportunity to run away with Marine and a few clones who had survived. But when we saw that you weren't waking up, we had to leave you with that scoundrel Henry. I had to stop Hajgar from running away at all costs. So I took the car, did a few flips with it and smashed it against a tree. I would have messed up a bit more the old man, but there was no time!

- Why are you talking about Mr Head like that?" I was shocked by the violence in his words.

- He is a traitor! That's it! It's because of him that Marine and Po got hurt!

"The Malgrives found us because *he* gave information to Hajgar in the hope of be part of the journey to Organza! He has been trying to make amends ever since, looking after you and letting us live here," he explained, pointing to the shed.

- I... I don't understand. He seems so nice. And what is "Organza"?

- He just feels guilty!" said Po, who had just appeared in the kitchen.

- Don't tell that stupid fish, but we're a tight group, a family.

When someone picks on one of us, that's it!" said Caleb, evading my question.

- We had to entrust you to him, because we had no choice," continued Po. And look, he's so cute

- He said to his friend.

- You're a pain in the ass, but you know I can't do without you!

They started to fight nicely like two big children. I liked this show. I was I felt at ease in their company, as if I had finally found the piece of my soul that had disappeared with the accident, which - I know now - was not an accident. I didn't remember all those people, but a feeling of unconditional love ran through me as I looked at each of them. of them. Even that jerk Po!

I left them to tease each other and joined David, who had returned upstairs.

- Hi honey!

- What did you say?" he asked me, quickly lifting his head from his book.

- Erm... just hello, that's all!

- No, no! What did you call me?

- Chou, I think. Sorry, it just came out.

- But no, that's great! You always called me that. It'll come back! Everything will come back in You'll see," he said with a smile.

- I hope so. I really hope so," I said, looking at Caleb out of the corner of my eye.

- Don't worry about him, he will wait for you as long as it takes. In concrete terms, you are not allowed to be together but since he almost lost you, I don't think any one really cares.

- Your rules are a bit old-fashioned!

- Oh yes! And if I had the choice, I wouldn't follow them. Marine and I are made for each other, but it won't happen again," he explained with a heavy heart.

- It's sad... Right now the most important thing is to find her!

- Yes... One problem after another!

- By the way, who were you talking about earlier? Who is your 'mother'?

- Ah! It's Aurora. The leader of the rebels. My explanations were a bit brief earlier on about her. Basically, she stayed to help us, because her real mission is Marine and nothing else, understood. His companions joined Hajgar's ship to prevent him from escaping with Marine. They are a barrier. But the best thing would be to find them before they get their hands on them. We'll have to fight this monster in small numbers, but he doesn't have many clones left so we could easily have the advantage. If we can get it away from Marine of course!

- Ship? Did you say "ship"?

- Arf! Yes. How to tell you? We're not really from around here...

- Hmm... I guess I'm not that close anymore, am I? But you'll really have to come back to the subject, eh? Not just yet, because my brain will finish frying otherwise. The boys have I don't remember... It sounded like a place where...
I was suddenly very hot and dizzy, but I took it upon myself to refocus on the conversation.

- Another planet," he added. I'll explain later, I promise.

- Thank you. Um, so Aurora has the same powers as Marine, if I understand correctly? the I asked to change the subject and try to regain my composure.

- Yes, but she is much weaker than her. She knows how to use it better, but if Marine learns all there is to know she will be the most powerful among us. We belong to four families with different powers, but Marine alone has the power to destroy us..

- Okay, so I guess Hajgar wants to use her to keep his enemies at bay and take the throne.

- You've got it right. That's why we have to stop him from going back to our planet and get Marine!

- And you're going to do this because of my visions. Am I seeing her?!

- Exactly! But trust Aurora. If she says that you're the only one who can find Marine, she's right. Given the love you both have for each other, she wouldn't do you to go to war with us, if you were not our only hope!

V

- How do you do it?" I asked the small group that had gathered on the sofas.
- First of all, you should tell us what you saw.
- Mostly I felt fear, fright even," I explained. I saw a cave that seemed to be be in the forest. The vegetation was dense. I tried to run away, but this thing caught me. Well, Marine... I experienced the scene as if it were me who was there instead of her. Besides, a strange thing happened. Well, stranger than everything else, I mean. When Hajgar grabbed her arm, I felt his fingers digging into my flesh and purple marks appeared there," I revealed, still in shock.
- There is a very simple explanation. You are connected!
- I turned to see who had spoken. At the door, with her arms full of bags, a beautiful blonde with advantageous curves stared at me intensely with her jade-coloured eyes.
- Ah! Mum is back," said Po.
- Very funny! Come and help me instead!" she ordered, seriously.
- Now that she was here, I suddenly felt much less comfortable. I felt as if to be small and insignificant. Her icy stare did not seem very friendly to me. She did not take She gave the bags of food to Po and both of them were busy packing them. She gave the bags of provisions to Po and they both set about putting them in the bags. They are still quarrelling with each other.
- You didn't get along very well," Caleb felt compelled to point out.
- David told me about it, yes.
- She couldn't stand it when a little human stole her thunder," David said, giving me a look that was very different from the one I had seen before, he winked.
- I replied with a shy smile.
- Can't she do anything for my memory? She has the same mental powers as Marine, right?
- I asked, suddenly hopeful.
- No! It's Marine that's made its way into your mind, so it's Marine that'll have to fix the damage," intervened the blonde. - And anyway, I've got better things to do than to tire myself out trying to heal you" she continued dryly. - I must save my strength to save her.
- Well, boys, I'm going to go. There's way too much love in the air for me," I say, ironically, as I slowly stood up.
- That's fine. But take this before you go," says Caleb.
- It's a prepaid phone," he continued. If you have other visions or just want to discuss, call me.
- Here we go again! I'll have to remind you again about the rights and duties!
- Aurora snapped.
- I'll walk you home," Caleb offered, ignoring her comment.
- OK. See you guys later," I said, waving at Po and David.
- Bye Ali.
- Bye little human.
- I retrieved my bag and followed Caleb, completely unaware of the rebellion leader's presence.
- Be careful," he whispered to me.
- Yes, don't worry. I'll call you as soon as I have more information, I promise.
- Thank you," he replied, running his fingers through my hair.

He gently grabbed them and bent down to kiss me. I put my hands on his chest and pushed him away with more force than I would have liked. He immediately withdrew his hand and looked as if he had been hurt psychologically.

- Sorry, I shouldn't have done that!

I immediately regretted my action. His face had completely faded, and the pain was reappeared in his eyes. My memory failed me, but for him everything was fresh and real. The situation must have been even more difficult for him, because he remembered everything. He loved me, I could see it. And, I couldn't deny that I felt something for him, but I wasn't yet very familiar with human contact. I had spent months alone killing time as best I could trying not to go crazy. And now I was surrounded by a group of people who seemed to know me perfectly, yet I had no memory of him. I needed time to digest the whole thing and to get back to a minimum of sociability.

- Don't apologise, it's me. I'm a little shocked by all these revelations. I just need a little time, okay? That's a lot for one day. I'll call you, okay?

I asked, trying to catch his eye.

- OK.

I got into my car and drove back to my home, my prison.



- Did you have a good walk?" my mother asked me as soon as she arrived at the door.

- Yes, yes," I replied, caught off guard.

- Didn't you buy anything?" she asked suspiciously, looking at my empty hands.

- No, I just needed to get some fresh air, to see people.

- Um OK. You haven't had any more headaches?

- No, Mum. Is the interrogation over? Can I go to my room?

- Yes, of course.

I quickly climbed the stairs and locked myself in my room. I couldn't stand this atmosphere. I felt like a criminal on parole. If I made a mistake, It'd be a life sentence. Discretion would be required if I wanted to see Caleb and the others again. I was still feeling guilty about my reaction and sad that we parted in this way. I absolutely had to make up for it. I took the phone and unlocked it. There was only one number. I started typing a message: "I'm sorry for my reaction earlier. I really didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Let's forget it, okay? I hesitated to send it, but my finger clicked on its own. I waited several minutes, my eyes glued to the screen, but nothing happened. Just as I was about to give up, the screen lit up, telling me that a new message had arrived. "OK. Call when you have news. C ". It wasn't very warm, but it was a good start. I couldn't wait to get back to Marine, so she could finally give me my damn memory back. So I had to try and see where she was. I had no idea how visions worked, but I wasn't going to wait around.

I lay down on my bed with my back straight and my arms at my sides, trying to clear my head. in my mind. I breathed in and out calmly, trying to find a way to catch a glimpse of the world. message or a picture. I called her name in my head. Louder and louder.

- *Marine. Marine. Marine. MARINE. MAAAARINEEEEE.*

Nothing happened. Disappointed, I opened my eyes again and sat on the edge of my bed. I couldn't see what was going on. What else could I do to trigger a vision? Monsieur Grisouille chose this moment to curl up in my arms. I stroked him for a moment, my eyes unfocused, not knowing what else to do. I had no powers and my memories were lacking. Even though we were both connected, I didn't know how it worked. The visions I had had must have been her doing, not mine. I felt frustrated and angry. I was not in control, and most of all, I felt useless.

Suddenly, my big grey cat started to spit and turned around. He ran away with a roar, disgruntled. But what was happening to him? I understood then.

- *Can you hear me?*

Where was that voice coming from? Was it just in my head, or could my parents hear it? I couldn't I didn't recognise it, but I knew it was Marine's. Finally, she had received my message.

- *YES, YES, YES!!!* I screamed in my head, excited. *Where are you?*

- *I don't know. I am in the dark. But I can hear them talking. They are preparing to reclaim their ship.*

- *The rebels have gone to hide it. They will protect it.*

- *He's going to be pissed, very pissed...*

- *We'll get you out of here.*

- *I thought you were dead.*

- *No, I'm not. I am fine. But I have to tell you something.*

I wanted to talk to her about my memory problems. If she could help me from a distance, we would already have one big problem out of the way. She seemed to be at her wits' end. Her voice trembled and was sorely lacking, but I needed to know if there was anything she could do for me.

- *He'll be back. I'll get back to you later.*

The sound of his voice was more like a complaint. My heart sank as the silence returned in my head. I hadn't been able to talk to him or get much information. But, I

I had to inform the others about Hajgar's intentions. I immediately sent a message to Caleb.

I received a simple "OK". With a heavy heart, I lay back on my bed and spent hours

all the revelations that had been made to me today, without being able to find the right words to say them. I lay there processing today's revelations, unable to sleep.

VI

- *Alicia!*

I was in total darkness. I felt cramped. Was I locked in a box? No
The link did not grip my wrists this time, but my legs hurt. How long had it been
Was I curled up like that? I was cold. I was afraid.

- *Alicia.*

That voice in my head. Where was it coming from?

- *Alicia.*

I heard footsteps, then noise above me, as if a thick blanket was being pulled.
A few rays of sunlight penetrated through the thin gaps in my prison. A click was made
I heard and was dazzled. I couldn't see anything, just a white light. I put my hands in front of my
and waited for them to get used to daylight again.

- *Hi princess! I have some work for you.*

I would have liked to remain blind. The being that towered over me was foul and terrifying. He
offered me a hand, with his long bony fingers, to help me up.
I leaned on the edges of what seemed to be an old chest. And managed, in a last ditch effort, to
I was struggling to stand up. My back and legs were sore and my head was spinning. I was
felt weak.

- *We're going to have to rehydrate you and feed you a little. I need all your skills. I finally have
found my baby!"* he declared, laughing out loud.

A sadistic smile had formed on his monstrous face, distorting his already distorted features even
more nightmarish.

The image suddenly blurred. I woke up sweating, my head caught in a vice.

Poor Marine. She was going through hell. And what was this sicko talking about? Which baby was it?
I imagined a bald newborn with bulging eyes, distorted by the same sadistic smile as his
sire. The image seemed grotesque. I hastily grabbed the prepaid phone, and dialed the
only number on it.



- OK, I'll pick you up right away!

With that, Caleb hung up. An adrenaline rush went through my gut. My parents couldn't find out.
We had to be discreet. A quick glance at my alarm clock told me it was past midnight. They were
definitely sleeping. To be sure, I slowly left my room and stopped in front of their door. As I listened, I
could hear light snoring. I was reassured, but I would have to sneak out again. I returned to my room,
washed my face with cold water to fully recover my senses, and when I got back to my room, went to
the bathroom. I put on my black hoodie. I slung my bag over my shoulder and began my climb.
Trying to make as little noise as possible, I went down the gutter. It was beginning to be a
It was a bit wobbly, it wasn't holding up very well in some places. I would have to find another way
out next time.

After several long minutes of waiting in the dark, cold night, a car pulled up

With all lights on. I approached and recognised Caleb's incredible build. I entered and closed the door as quietly and discreetly as possible.

Neither of us spoke. Still in shock from my vision, words failed me. I was scared for Marine. What was going to happen to her?

He parked in front of the warehouse and together we entered their lair.

- Well, go on, tell us again what you heard!

- He said he found his baby. Can this thing reproduce? But who would want to make a child with him, seriously?

- Pffff! What an idiot!" exclaimed Aurora in a humiliating tone. Her baby is the invisible beast! It has a very special relationship with her.

I swallowed my pride and did not respond to his insult.

- Well, we're in deep shit!" said Po.

- Yes, we have to get her out of there as soon as possible!

- We should already know where it is! Did you see any details that might point us in the right direction?

Caleb asked me.

- No, he locks her in a trunk. She sees nothing and hears almost nothing. The daylight has so I think she spends her time locked up. I really don't know where she is!

I concluded, dejected. On top of that, he's starving her to keep her under his thumb...

- OKAY. Well, we know he wants his ship back. So, all we have to do is wait for him there," David suggested.

- Yeah, and then when he shows up with his little baby and your girlfriend's powers, you get laminate? Is that right?" asked Po.

- Do you have another idea?" Caleb interjected, seeing his friend's confusion.

- She needs to contact Marine again," said the swimmer, pointing to me with a nod. We need to know what he wants from her. I've dealt with this bug before without being prepared. I won't do it again.

same error.

- Yes, and we understand you," conceded Caleb. But you can also understand why David is in a hurry to get it over with and to find her.

- Even if we all have to die, Marine has to get back to our planet safely. She is the only one who can save our people!" said Aurora.

- Yes, we're all just disposable and replaceable pawns," Po poked her, clearly offended.

- I didn't say that...

- It's just the same," he said, getting up and leaving the room.

- What's wrong with the fish?" asked Caleb, surprised by his friend's reaction.

- Nothing!" the rebel leader replied curtly, getting up and leaving the room in turn.

- Great atmosphere!" said Caleb.

- Yeah, we're all tense, I think. We've been waiting for months to do something.

And now that we've got you back in our camp, it's hard to wait for you after your visions. If he had if we just picked him up at his ship, we'd be there already!

- Ah well, excuse me, I'm not like you," I said, somewhat annoyed by his note.

He, who was usually gentle, became hurried and annoyed. I continued:

- I don't know how to do it. And then, if we get caught, it's over! We won't be able to ever communicate again. So sorry for wanting to make this right!

- Don't take the piss. He didn't mean to hurt you.

- She's still got a bit of a temper, our little Ali," said David, trying to get back on track. a bit of contentment.

- I'm sorry, I'm on edge. I haven't seen anyone for several months now, and there's nothing going on. nothing, that I'm deeply bored and then suddenly I have to save the princess from a world in peril.

I think it's normal to be slightly stressed!

- Yes, we understand you. It's just that we're also stressed out because we don't have much time, David admitted to me.

- We're in trouble if everyone starts stressing out," said Caleb wryly.

The tension dissipated somewhat and the colossus, who had regained his scowl, took me back home in silence. No sooner had he stepped out of the car he was gone. I saw him turn the corner and all of a sudden he was gone. Again it became silent. Despite my apology, he still seemed offended by my gesture. I was going to have to pluck up the courage to talk to him face to face so that he would finally understand that the situation was as complicated for me as it was for him. In the meantime, I had to try and get some rest. The last few events had taken a serious toll on me. I could barely stand. All I had to do now was climb up the gutter and I would be able to get into my warm, cosy bed. I put my foot on the brick that protruded a little from the wall and supported myself. I held on to the gutter and pushed on my foot. I climbed up to the roof. I pushed on my left leg one last time to pull myself up onto the roof of the garage. The gutter suddenly gave way under the roof, but an ominous sound was heard. My head hit the ground hard and my breath was taken away by the shock. I fainted.

VII

I opened my eyes. I turned my head slightly and realised that I was in my living room. The room, bathed in a soft orange light, was silent. I tried to sit up but a searing pain in the back of my head shot through me. I put my hand through and felt a fairly large and painful lump. I rested my head on the sofa cushion and closed my eyes. My whole body was in pain.

- Ah! You're awake!

The familiar voice startled me. A shadow emerged on my right and came towards me.

- How do you feel?" asked Mr Head.

- I'm fine! What are you doing here?" I questioned him, on my guard, thinking back to the revelations of the boys about it.

- I saw you fall and...

- What do you mean you saw me? You don't live in that part of town at all!

I noticed as I sat up on my elbows.

- Caleb made me promise to look after you.

- Yes, he told me why," I revealed, staring him in the eyes.

- I'm sorry for everything.

- Yes, you should," I replied coldly.

- Alicia! Don't be so mean!" suddenly exclaimed my mother, who had just entered the room. piece.

"He made mistakes, but he was always there for you!

- What are you talking about?" I asked suspiciously.

I made an immeasurable effort to sit up and turned my head towards her.

- About what happened this summer, and even before.

- What do you know about this summer? I asked her, hoping she would only mention our accident.

- You know very well what I mean!" she exclaimed, annoyed.

- No, I lied. Tell me!

I wanted to hear from her what she knew so as not to blunder and jeopardise the safety of my friends or even my parents.

- Alicia... listen," she said, sitting quietly beside me. I know enough to fear for your safety," she continued, taking my hand.

- I would like you to tell me clearly what you know, and since when! coldly.

- Everything, well almost everything, I suppose, and for a long time... she confessed with a vague look in her eyes.

I abruptly removed my hand from hers and stood up a little too quickly. My head was spinning, quite so that I have to sit down again immediately.

- Alicia, are you all right?" the two traitors asked me in one voice.

- I can't believe it. You've been acting all this time? And when I called you to Did you know that I was lying to you after the festival?

- Yes, I suspected that. There was no trace of the boys and Marine in town, I suspected that you were with them. And it was confirmed when Henry called me right after you.

- I didn't want to believe it, but you really are a dirty traitorous scumbag," I spat out.
direction of my teacher.

- Don't talk to him like that! He has only helped you.

- Help us?! I shouted. How can you say that? Po almost died because of him! Sir is so obsessed with the green moon, that he betrayed us to get his way! If you know about all this mum and you're endorsing him, you're no better than him!
What exactly do you know?" I asked him after catching my breath.

- I know a lot of things. I think I do. I saw Marine 'sparkle' at the orphanage," admitted my mother.
mother. At first I was terrified, and then I wanted to understand. Henry investigated the phenomenon you mentioned - the green moon - and we ended up running into each other in the library. We soon realised that we were looking for the same thing. After that he showed me his collection of books and we agreed that we had to protect you. Every time you go out, we were, one or the other, never far away. And yes, he told me about his mistake, he feels very bad about it you know ...

- So you spied on me?" I cut her off, dumbfounded.

- In a way, yes.

- You're sick people! And you were going to follow me like this for the rest of my life?

- No, of course not. Henry was able to overhear several discussions from your friends. And he reported to me that they would leave on their twentieth birthdays. Their destiny lies elsewhere.

- Caleb was right, he should have beaten you up more than that," I said, badly.

- Alicia, that's enough!" my mother ordered.

- Marie. Leave it. It's not a big deal. I understand her.

- Oh, because you're on a first-name basis too! No, I must be dreaming.

- Yes, we are friends. Your safety has brought us together!

- What about dad? Is he also part of your little plot?

- No, your father doesn't know anything about it.

- At least I can still trust one of my parents!

- Try to understand," Henry intervened. We only did this to protect you. We thought that they would go back and everything would be normal again.

- I'd like you to stay here with us and let them work it out. Would you do that for me?" my mother begged.

- You want me to abandon my friends? What about Marine? Should I leave her in the hands of that monster?

- You don't even remember them!" cried my mother, with tears in her eyes.

- Don't say that! It seems to benefit you!" I shouted out of turn.

- On the one hand, yes, I admit it. I was relieved when the doctor told us that you had lost the memory. If you didn't remember them, you wouldn't suffer and you wouldn't have to put yourself through the pain and danger of following them on some adventure.

- You disgust me... I'm leaving! I announced in a tone that left no room for negotiation.
I abruptly left the room, ignoring my mother's calls. I left the house and ran to the as quickly and as far away from them as possible.



- Alicia!...

I suddenly stopped my mad rush. His voice was only a whisper, but I was sure of it.
to have heard it.

- Marine?" I shouted. You really need to tell me where you are! Tell me how to find you?
I asked aloud, stifling a sob.

Several houses in the street lit up. I hid behind a thicket and caught my breath.

- Alicia, what's going on?

- I'm sorry, I'm exhausted from the whole thing. I need to calm down.

- *Has anything happened?*
- *No, no, don't worry, but we need to find a way to find you as soon as possible.*
- *I've thought about it and I think I can create an image in your head.*
- *What do you mean?*
- *I'm going to... I'm going to send you a sign," she said breathlessly. You must follow it. It will lead you to me.*
- *Okay, I'll do it. When?" I asked, sensing the urgency of the situation.*
- *I must regain my strength. I am too weak... Hajjar... He starves me and hardly lets me sleep. But he will need me very soon. I'll take advantage of it then.*
- *OK. Marine? Are you going to be OK?" I asked her, terribly worried.*
- *I feel like I'm going crazy. I... I have to go.*
- *Courage, Marine, we will be together soon, I promise you.*

Tears came to my eyes, my throat was tight. A multitude of emotions were running through my mind. I was overwhelmed. I was mad at my mother and Henry and very worried about Marine. I couldn't imagine what my friend was going through. My mother's words still seemed to me to be even more selfish now. I was so angry with her. I wasn't sure I wanted to go home the following day. I picked up the prepaid phone left in my jacket pocket. It had miraculously survived my fall. Fortunately, my mother had not found it. So I was able to dial the number to Caleb.

- *Yeah," he replied in a detached tone, at the first ring.*
- *Can you please come and get me? I'm here where we first met, talking about the lake to the ducks. Well, the second first time I mean.*
- *Do you have any news about Marine?*
- *Yes, and on something else...*
- *OK, I'll be right there.*

I waited for long dragging minutes in the dark, alone, crying, sitting on the wet grass. I tried to warm myself by rubbing my hands together, despite the cool wind. I could hear the leaves rustling as they touched. Owls hooted in search of small rodents to devour. A wave of terror swept over me as I thought of the monsters the boys had described. What if one of them was lurking in the dark? How would I know? I wouldn't even have time to scream before it was ripping out my throat. Yet wouldn't it be better to die in his clutches than at Hajjar's hands?

The beast would probably finish me quicker.

I was pulled out of my thoughts by a large hand that rested on my shoulder. I was startled and let the a little cry.

- *What were you thinking?" asked Caleb.*
- *Things I shouldn't think about if I want to keep my cool.*
- *Follow me. I'm not parked very far away.*

He helped me up and wrapped his arm around me to warm me up. An incredible warmth came over me.

I felt the warmth of his body wash over me. I relaxed almost immediately. His touch reassured me and my tears stopped flowing. I just wanted to stay in his arms. I didn't understand my backward movement towards him, it was obvious that we had been very close. My whole body vibrated when I was near him. It was obvious, he was obvious.

We got into his car and he drove me, once again, to the warehouse where they had their served as headquarters. The trip was again silent, but I saw him looking at me several times. I went back to the house and took a few discreet glances at it. Inside, I saw the tired faces of the rest of the gang. I must have roused them from their slumbers by calling Caleb.

- *What's going on, Ali?" asked David, no doubt worried about his beloved.*
- *Yeah, you look like shit," continued Po.*
- *Thank you, that helps me a lot...*
- *No, seriously Ali, what's going on?*

We sat down on the sofas. I took the plaid that was lying on the armrest and wrapped it around me.

inside.

- To begin with, Marine managed to contact me. She explained that she was going to send me a kind of sign.

- A sign?" asked Aurora. What kind of sign?

- No idea. She just said I should follow him. She told me about some kind of image that she would create in my head.

- OK! And when did she send you this sign?" asked David, suddenly agitated.

- The conversation was very quick. I'm sorry David, I don't know.

- OK, but did you get the impression that it was going to be imminent or not?

- I don't know. We really didn't have time to develop. She just told me about a image, a sign that I will see. But I don't know any more. Really, I'm sorry," I said in a soft voice to try to soothe her.

- Yes, so we'll have to wait for you again," David said scathingly.

His words hurt me, but I could see that he was at his wits' end. I had, unfortunately, no idea what to do or how to answer. Noticing my confusion, Caleb came to my rescue.

- Take it easy, buddy. I know you're on edge, but we're doing everything we can to find it.

- This is clearly not enough.

- Hm! OK! Ali, you had something else to tell us, right?

I mentally thanked Po for his intervention, which for the first time was without and altruistic. So I told them what I had learned about Henry and my mother.

- Yes, uh... I don't know if this is going to be of any importance to you and to the rest of the events, but I've made quite a discovery," I began.

"As I was going up to my room, the gutter gave way and as I crashed to the floor I was thrown into the water.

I continued, "I hit my head hard enough to pass out. When I woke up, there was Henry and my mother at my bedside...

- What was that bug doing in your house?

- You see, he and my mother are in cahoots. They joined forces to supposedly protect me. She knows everything from the beginning.

- What do you mean 'everything'?" the blonde asked nervously.

- She saw Marine using her powers at the orphanage, and since then she has been researching. She met Henry in the library and joined forces to find out as much as possible about you. And then, Henry followed you and spied on you. He reported everything to my mother. Anyway, she finally told me she was glad I lost my memory...

- Nice girl!

- Shit!

- As you say! So I was wondering if I could stay here with you.

I don't really want to see either of them anymore.

- It's understandable," admitted David, who seemed to have calmed down.

- You can stay. That way, as soon as you see his "sign" we can get going immediately," Aurora told me.

- Um, thank you.

I was relieved, even though I knew that the rebel only accepted me on her territory because I was useful to him.

- Well, if you're done, I'm going back to bed. You should all do the same. Get your strength back, we don't know what to expect.

- Yes, Mum!" said Po, following her to the bunks.

David turned his back on us and went back to his bed without a word.

- You can have my bed, I'll go on the couch," Caleb offered.

- Given your size, it would make more sense for me to take the sofa.

I didn't give him a chance to reply and lay down before him, leaving my feet dangling.

He capitulated and joined the others. The lights went out and I sank down, without a word of warning. In a world full of nightmares.



I was wandering, alone. I was lost. The forest around me was dense and filled with creatures hiding in the shade. I walked slowly over a carpet of moss and foliage, occasionally running over a twig, the sound of which reverberated throughout to the threatening trees around me. I didn't know the woods I was in, or at least not that part of it. I had no idea which way to go. I walked slowly, engulfed by darkness. Terrifying noises reached me from everywhere, and at times I noticed several pairs of red eyes staring at me in awe.

My heart was racing. Scared, I couldn't get my nerves under control. I continued. The landscape remained unchanged. Still the same dense and frightening forest. Behind me, several twigs cracked simultaneously. I turned around, but could not see anything. I continued to walk slowly, putting all my senses on alert. The noise repeated. I stopped dead in my tracks, not daring to move a single limb. I knew what was going to happen. I didn't stand a chance against this monster anyway. I had neither the strength nor the weapons to fight.

I closed my eyes and waited for death to come for me. My heart ready to explode, my legs I had lost all hope. Then she threw herself at me. My face was crushed. I felt my hand against the moss, whose touch, for a moment, gave me some comfort. Then I heard an excruciating sound of skin tearing, of flesh being torn away. In shock, I felt, at first, nothing, then suddenly an unbearable, hellish pain overwhelmed me. The beast had torn the right half of my face. A warm liquid poured down my neck, soaking my shirt. I managed to pull my hand free and put it over what was left of my face to contain the bleeding. With my fingers, I tried to gather the mass of skin shreds and flesh. The flesh was raw, but there was too little material to fill the gaping hole that had become my cheek. It attacked a second time, this time piercing my shoulder with its huge, sharp claws. My scream echoed around me, enveloping me in a nightmarish bubble. I felt its breath against my throat. I heard my skin crack as his fangs closed in on me and my blood spurted out, splattering his shaggy, greasy fur.

VIII

I couldn't stand Aurora. But I needed answers, and she was the only one who could provide them. to give. So I decided to put my pride aside and go see her.

Sitting quietly on one of the sofas, she was chatting with Po and David, Caleb having taken refuge in I don't know which corner of the huge hangar.

- Can I talk to you?" I asked him as calmly as possible, while fidgeting with my hands.

- What do you want now?" she asked me, scathing.

- I'd like you to tell me more about the animals," I admitted, shivering.

- Leave us alone," she ordered the boys, without even a glance.

- Love and delicacy incarnate," said Po.

- We'll leave you to it," said David, getting up. Come on," he continued, pulling his friend by the sleeve, while he kept staring at the blonde. The boys moved away, giving us uneasy looks. They were probably afraid that our discussion would turn out badly.

- What do you want to know?

- Despite what you told me, I don't remember anything. I don't remember fighting I have never seen these things, let alone seen them. Yet I see them in my dreams.

- I think there are still some bits of memories somewhere in your head. That's why these things haunt you. Any sane person would be haunted by these monstrosities," she says.

- Thank you for the compliment," I teased her to bury the hatchet.

"You know, I am not your enemy. I don't understand this hatred you have for me, I continued.

- I don't hate you. You are, at worst, indifferent to me.

- I did not ask to play a part in this story. I don't come from your world, I don't have powers. I think I would have been better off staying at home and moping around, instead of going to play spy at the Green Moon Festival. I only got myself into a lot of trouble.

- I have to admit that you have a certain power," she suddenly admitted to me, feeling uncomfortable.

- What do you mean by that?

- You are brave. Without you we would have had a hard time getting out of the prison that is our dome. That doesn't make you one of us, but I have to admit that you stand up for yourself. Let's say that you are the least weak of the weak.

- I think you're at the top of your game in terms of kindness and compliments, so I'll just to say thank you. At least I think so. Anyway, back to the bugs. What do you know about them?

- Basically, they are creatures created to do good, she taught me. They are related to your police dogs for example. They help us to keep peace on our planet. The Malgrives, as they are called, have been genetically engineered to be very easy to train. They can learn any command, and they can be given mentally. Moreover, as you have seen, the master of the Malgrive may be aware, at It is possible to determine the state of health and the location of the animal at any time. The beast has a special connection with it's master and it obeys only him.

- So Hajgar hijacked their function of defence, of protection, to make them henchmen for his service!?

- Yes, that's right. He trained them in secret. The problem is that these creatures are extremely faithful. Once they have attached themselves to a master it is too late, they will listen to orders whatever they are and whatever happens.

- I agree. And if I have understood everything correctly, it is possible that one of these beasts is alive and that Hajgar found it?

- The one we subdued and turned against him is still alive, yes. And considering what you said, she is either already with it or will be soon.

- If he manages to get his hands on it, your friends won't stand a chance, will they?

- No, they don't. They moved his ship and surrounded it with a protective field, but With Marine's powers and the destructive force of the Malgrive, he can win, that's for sure!

- Um, this really doesn't look good for us.

- No, I don't. Do you have any other questions?

- Yes. Their power of invisibility? Where does it come from? Is it a modification that you had provided?

- This ability is not of our making. It is not a genetic modification, but an evolutionary process of the species. They were hunted for a long time for their meat and fur, before it was realised that they would be very useful for the safety of the Woirgards. So they mutated to protect themselves from us. And being a very shy, even timid species, it was natural for them to make themselves invisible to us. And the scientists thought that this would be beneficial, that it was a bonus in a way. A matter of discretion during missions. But now we know that in the event of a coup, this does us a great disservice.

- I almost feel sorry for them now.

- You say that because you don't remember the massacres they committed. They killed and shredded several of us. Not to mention Po, which was recovered in a sorry state. These images will haunt me forever. You're lucky you don't remember them.

We remained silent for a few moments, pondering our exchange.

Without a word, she stood up and joined the boys in the kitchen. Spotting a figure I stood up and went upstairs.

- I didn't hear any screams, so I take it you've become civilised," Caleb quipped.

- Very funny! We're not animals," I laughed. She just answered some questions I was asking about the creatures. And I even got one or two compliments in passing. I felt compelled to continue in front of his round eyes.

- Aurora-style compliments, don't get carried away!

- I thought so too!

- What are you up to on your own?

- I read the old man's notes. He's really got it bad, this guy. I think he thinks we are gods.

- Totally! At the same time, Aurora is no better when she talks about Marine. It seems like almost in love," I whispered to her.

- You're not wrong," he confirmed, chuckling.

Our eyes met and we both laughed heartily, forcing each other to stop, while holding our ribs.

- Oh God, it hurts," I said with tears in my eyes.

- Maybe, but you have to admit that it feels good to relax!

- That's clear!

His emerald green eyes were staring at me. I just wanted to get lost in them.

- I missed you, you know," he said, suddenly serious again.

I took his hand and put my head on his shoulder.

- Marine will give me my memory back," I said softly. I will remember, I promise. And this that I feel now will only be multiplied tenfold.

- What do you feel?" he asked, his cheeks turning pink.

I felt his pulse quicken.

- I feel like I'm falling, or at least falling in love again," I said, shyly raising my hands to my face. eyes towards him.

His hand gently wandered into my hair and, gently bringing my head back to his, he said, "I'm not sure I'll ever be able to do that again. He kissed me. This time I didn't push him away. His kiss had the taste of a reunion, so much so that I could not resist.

We had been waiting for this, mixed with passion, relief and the desire to become one. Our embrace became more hard.

- You're not going to make us a small one in the dingo's library!

- Po ...

Caleb, irritated by his swimmer friend's intrusion, loosened his grip.

- What do you want?

- Mum says that the meal is served," he announced.

Caleb grabbed me firmly by the hand and we followed Po. He was sure that the revival of our relationship was going to displease Aurora. The axe had no time to be buried and she would be happy to tear it out of the ground with rage and ferocity, in order to push it into the heart.



Aurora had arranged various dishes on the table, each more appetising than the last. The chicken cooked to perfection surrounded by small vegetables that shone as if they were fictitious made me feel like I was in an advert promoting top-of-the-range household appliances. The rebel leader was playing the perfect little housewife, pampering the three men like a good mother would. The only thing missing was a floral apron! I was a spectator of this theatrical scene, staring at the slightest of her movements, her gestures towards them. I couldn't figure her out at all. Sometimes a fearless, heartless warrior, sometimes a mother, taking care of her three children. I knew that his goal was to get them all back to their home planet, especially Marine who seemed to have the most important role for their survival. So her little game must have been calculated. She must have thought that this behaviour would make them more docile and that they would follow her without reluctance. However, my friends did not seem so easily manipulated. Of course, David would be on board as long as she was with Marine, although unfortunately for him, they would not be able to live their love in the daylight.

As for Po, having always lived as a recluse from society, coming to visit his friends only a few days in the year, I didn't really understand what he had to gain from this. history. He lived most of the time in places surrounded by water. Maybe finally his solitude was too much for him and that he wanted to meet his marine people.

But Caleb wasn't going to make it easy for him. Before I lost my memory, he had resigned himself, accepting our separation. But now everything was different. The fear of losing me had changed the game. I didn't remember our relationship before that, but my feelings for him were real. He had simply decided that we were going to live our relationship out in the open, without worrying about the consequences or the time we would have together. He hugged me and kissed me, in a strangely normal way, in front of a table that was both happy for us and amazed. David was delighted, Po was teasing us, as usual. Aurora, on the other hand, was ranting. The look in her eyes was dark and with clenched fists she made no comment throughout the meal. However, I felt that she had no lack of desire to do so.

Once the remains of the meal had been cleared away, the boys threw themselves onto the sofa like children and grabbed their joysticks. A headache suddenly came over me, encircling my skull. The The frantic pounding of their fingers on the buttons became unbearable. I felt nauseous.

I staggered out of the room, hoping that the fresh air would do me good. A firm grip stopped me as I crossed the path.

- You and I need to talk! I thought it was clear in your little head, you and Caleb this is not possible!

- Aurora, this is not the time!

- Yes, it's time! And this is the last time I'm telling you!

- Let me go!" I managed to say before falling to my knees in pain.

- What's wrong?" she asked me, suddenly worried.

- A searing... migraine. I can hardly... keep my eyes open, I can't stand it anymore all that light. I'm... dizzy. That's the worst one of all.

- OK, sit down," she said calmly, helping me to settle down on the grass next to the muddy lake.

- Take my hands and concentrate on my voice, I'll try to help you," she continued.

I squeezed her hands and closed my eyes. A light shone before me, shining through my closed eyelids. They had told me about what happened to the hair of cerebral people when they used their powers so I was not surprised.

- I'll try to work my way into your mind. If I can, I'll repair some damage to make your migraines less severe and less frequent.

- Thank you," I said in a whisper.

An unpleasant sensation lifted my heart. I had the impression that a worm was making

It was going back and forth in my brain. It was creeping into the tunnels Marine had dug. I was trying not to move and to concentrate, but the feeling grew stronger and a rush of bile came over me which forced me to let go of Aurora's hands and I returned all the lunch to within a few inches of her jeans.

- Are you all right?" she asked as she lifted my hair.

- It was very... unpleasant," I replied, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

handle.

- I suspect so! I'm sorry I couldn't do anything. He didn't miss you...

- Is it that bad? I asked.

- Marine will have to hurry up and send you that damn sign, otherwise we'll never get it.

- Why is that?

- I don't think you'll be around much longer...

IX

- What's this nonsense again?" asked Caleb, somewhat annoyed after Aurora and I had tells the boys about the latest events.

- Hajgar has severely damaged her mind, she explained. I'm sorry, but if Marine doesn't repair the damage in the next few days, she will go into a coma again, but this time it will be irreversible. There will be nothing more to do...

- And you saw that just by walking around in her head?

- I know very well what I am talking about! And besides, I have no reason to lie to you!

- We know that, just let him digest the news. He's only just got her back," Po reminded him.

- We've all just found her," said David. And we're not going to let it get any worse.

What can be done to speed up the release of Marine?

- I'll try to contact her and tell her everything," I informed them. I've already managed to call her mentally, I can do it again!

- I don't know if this is a good idea," Aurora interjected. In your condition it will just speed up the process. You have to keep your strength up.

- What about you?" said David. You still can't talk to Marine?

- No, Hajgar has cut her off from all of us, you know that! Only Alicia can talk to her as they are connected. Marine has left her imprint, so to speak, in the head of Alicia. When that monster used her to get to him, he didn't think she would make it and would keep a link with Marine. She created a kind of bridge between their two minds. But right now, it seems far too risky to attempt a new communication.

- We don't really have a choice, I say. I'm not going to sit back and wait to fall back into the coma. I have to try something!

- Try it then, but at the slightest pain, at the slightest tiny headache you stop everything, Caleb ordered me.

- Very good. I need a quiet place. I'll go up there," I said, pointing to the huge library.

- Do you want me to stay with you?

- No, I can do it better if you're not there.

I felt obliged to clarify this in front of his disconfirmed face.

- I won't be able to concentrate if you're near me," I explained gently, taking his hand.

- Time is running out, lovers!" said Po.

I went upstairs to settle down. I sat cross-legged, my back resting on a large shelf

I put my hands on my knees and closed them. I put my hands on my knees and closed my eyes.

the eyes.

"Marine. Marine, please, I need you. I really need you."

Nothing happened. For several minutes I called my friend, without result. I could not hear than my voice echoing sadly in my head.

No headache showing its face, I persisted for many minutes and then went on to tell her everything.

"Marine, I don't know if you can hear me, but I need you. I haven't told you everything. I'm not doing to well, I've lost my memory and Aurora doesn't think I'll survive what Hajgar did to me."

We have to find you first, otherwise all will be lost. She thinks I'll only be a few more days. days. Marine! You have to answer me!"

I repeated my message over and over for what seemed like hours. After a moment, exhausted and now with a headache, I stopped the expense and went downstairs to join the rest of the group. I didn't tell them anything about my headache so as not to worry them more, but explained that I had not received a reply despite my best efforts.

The evening passed quietly. Desperation had overtaken all of us. I wanted only one thing thing, staying snuggled up in Caleb's arms, wrapped in a blanket. David was searching the internet, looking for a miracle solution to my ailment. At the back of the huge room, Po and Aurora were calmly talking, facing each other, each sitting on a bunk. We were all surprised. I heard a pounding on the door. No one dared to move, and we all remained silent.

- Alicia? Are you there?

- It's my mother," I whispered, bewildered.

- What are we doing?" asked the man who was now officially my boyfriend.

- We're opening!" exclaimed Aurora loudly. If it's your mother, she's not going to eat us," she declared rolling her eyes at the sky while walking with a determined step towards the front door.

- Hello!" she said sharply after opening the door wide." What can I do for you?" she asked him with pursed lips, trying to be as friendly as possible.

- I would like to see my daughter!

- Come in then!" the blonde invited her with a wave of her hand.

My mother entered the shed and looked around. She was followed by Henry Head. His gaze fell on me and his eyebrows furrowed at the sight of the man who was still holding me in his arms.

- I think we've said it all, Mum!" I declared, cutting her off.

- I know you're angry with me, and I understand that I can't do anything to dissuade you from helping these young people.

- So what did you come here for?" I asked, still hostile.

- I'm here for Henry," she admitted, pointing to the man hiding behind her.

- Brave as ever, I see!" said Po.

- I'm glad to see you looking so well again," Henry said shyly." I wish you would forgive me for my mistakes. That is why I am here. I would like to accompany you, help you! Let me make it up to you," he begged.

- How do we know we can trust you?" the rebel leader asked. The last time around you were blinded by your fanaticism!

- I have learned my lesson! I have been deceived by Hajgar, but it will not happen again. I can't live with what I did...

- You bet!" Caleb attacked him.

- That's enough! I say. He seems sincere. We could give him a chance, couldn't we? And any help is good to go! We'll definitely not be outdone given what's ahead!

- I would be reassured to know that he is with you!

- OK, you can go now," I replied curtly.

- Can I talk to you alone first?

- Do you have any more revelations for me?

- No, I just want to talk to you. Please, I just want to talk to you.

- Very well," I conceded, under her pleading expression.

She turned to Henry and hugged him.

- Be careful," she whispered in his ear, and left the room.

I followed her outside. It was dark and cool.

- I would like you to forgive me for my lies," she said, turning to me. All that I did, I did it for you, to protect you.

- I know. But I need a moment to digest it.
- Will you come home?
- Once we save Marine and they're gone... Yes.
- Do you promise me that?
- I can't promise you that.
- Why?" she asked anxiously.
- I don't want any more secrets between us... I began.
- Explain yourself!" she exclaimed in alarm. What is it?
- I have to find Marine. On the one hand, because she is my friend and I am the only one who can to do. But also because she is the only one who can save me.
- Save you from what?" cut in my increasingly agitated mother.
- She has to repair the damage in my head. And quickly.
- If not?
- Otherwise I'd fall back into a coma, and this time forever.

She remained silent, taking in my revelations. Then she walked over to me, and took me in her arms.

- Come back with me! You need to see a doctor, they'll be able to do something, they have it already done once!
- They won't be able to do anything, Mum," I said gently, squeezing her hand. Only Marine who can undo what has been done.

She gazed at me in silence for long seconds. Her tear-filled eyes stared at me with intensity, as if she wanted to mark this image forever in her mind, then she continued:

- I love you more than anything. Don't ever forget that. Do whatever it takes to get us back, okay?
- I promise. And... I love you too. And daddy too.
- I know. I'm going to go home to him before he worries that I'm gone. Take care of yourself.

Your cat hasn't left your bed since you left, so don't make him wait too long...

I nodded and fought back my tears.

She kissed me on the temple and quickly got into her car so that I couldn't see her.

His own tears rolled down his cheeks. The moment his headlights disappeared from my sight, I burst into tears

My feelings were jostling each other. At first I was terrified at the idea of imminent death, I was afraid to not see my parents again, because despite my mother's betrayal, it was a real heartbreak for me. On the other hand, I was afraid that everything would end well and my friends would disappear from my life. Whatever happened, I would be the big loser in this story.

With reddened eyes, I returned to my companions. They were all gathered around Henry. The tone and the boys, red with anger, began to warm up. Their shoulders and heads were down, He was subjected to the group's accusations without flinching.

- Stop!" I interjected, pulling them apart. What are you doing?
- Can't you tell?" asked Po ironically. We're settling our accounts!
- That's very clever," I said. We're in a mess and this is how you get what little help we have? Henry made mistakes, but all of us have as well. I don't condone what he did and I don't forgive him for it, but we do owe him a second chance. From what I understand, it was still him who got us out of hell at the festival, I reminded them.
- Um...
- OK, the old man can stay. But keep him away from me!
- Any other claim besides the pea prince?" I asked, exhausted.
- No.
- So maybe it's time to get to work and stop bickering!
- For once, I agree with the human," announced the rebel.

X

- *Alicia!*

Her voice echoed in my head, over and over again, as if she couldn't get the right one frequency. I could hear her, but she could not. I was shouting her name, but she couldn't to have enough strength to make full contact. Knowing that she was in the hands of this monster made me sick to my stomach. I still couldn't remember my past, but I knew she was part of it. I could no longer imagine my life without her, nor without David, Po and Caleb. Even so, I would have to say goodbye the moment we found her again. My life would then be sad again, lonely and devoid of any magic whatsoever. Whether we are talking about real magic, or the magic that fills the heart when surrounded by the people you love, all that will be gone.

I felt useless and desperate. I could only wait. Waiting for a sign. I had no idea what the sign would be. Would I at least recognise it? Or was I going to miss it and do screw up the whole rescue mission?

Just as I was beginning to panic, a strange little white light flew up to the tip of my nose, making me squint. My first instinct was to push it away with my hand, as if to chase away a rather insistent gnat. However, this tiny white spot reminded me of the thousands of fireflies I had seen glowing in Aurora's hair when she used her powers to connect to me. Similar to the luminescent beads that shone in her blond mane, she was the epitome of cerebral power. Suddenly the firefly hit my forehead. This small shock brought me out of my thoughts.

- Yes! I understood. I warn the others and I follow you! I tell the light, overexcited by this new dose of adrenaline.

I ran down the stairs to the ground floor where the whole gang was waiting quietly on the sofas.

- Let's go! We have to follow the firefly," I said, excitedly, pointing to the bug who followed me everywhere.

- Has she lost her mind or...?

- But don't be silly!" breathed Aurora, exasperated. For the umpteenth time, she and Marine are connected. Did you really think you were going to be able to see the projection of her mind? We're going to have to rely on Alicia, and follow her wherever she goes according to the will of this 'firefly', she said disgustedly, sweeping her hand across the empty space beside me.

- Well, no more looking like idiots. Let's go!" exclaimed Caleb. Grab the bags and head to the car in two minutes.

He grabbed my hand and turned me towards him.

- We'll find Marine and she'll take care of you. Everything will be fine," he insisted, as if to reassure himself.

- You know very well that in any case, everything will not end well. In the worst case, we all die trying to stop Hajgar and in the best case scenario, you all go home and leave me alone here. There is no perfect happy ending.

He kissed me on the forehead and held me close.

- Come on, let's go save the queen.



We rode without a word for several hours. Only my voice broke the silence to give the direction indicated to me by the glowing firefly flying in front of our car. My heart was heavy. The further we went in our quest to save Marine, the closer the outcome became. I felt that even if I got through this unscathed, my life would change irrevocably at the end of this adventure. But we had to hurry and get her out of Hajgar's hands. She had enough suffered. I was afraid of the state in which she would be found. Could she survive after all that? He had weakened and tortured her so much that Marine would find it hard to recover, whether it be physically or psychologically.

We passed countless towns and villages. The firefly took us to the edge of a very dense forest. The terrain being inaccessible by car, we had to abandon our vehicle. We hoisted our huge bags onto our shoulders and set off. I took the lead, closely followed by my colossus and David, who was impatient to get to the top, to finally meet up with Marine.

- Caleb, please, can you put some distance between you and Alicia for just a few minutes? I would like to talk to him alone...
- I don't have any favours for you," he growled at the professor.
- I know, but...
- Caleb, let him do it, please," I said.
- As you wish.

Caleb stopped dead in his tracks, forcing everyone behind him to do the same. David bumped into him, which caused a snowball effect. They all became entangled with each other, shouting all against the mountain that blocked their way. When he judged that the distance between him, Henry and myself was sufficient, he resumed his walk without making a single comment, but I could feel his sight on me. The others continued to grumble as they kept pace. The others continued to grumble as they kept pace.

- Thank you," says Henry. You didn't have to...
 - Stop with the excuses! It's tiring. I'm here now, I'm listening.
 - Yes, of course! I... I wanted to thank you. Thanks to you, I have a chance to make up for my mistakes.
 - What kind of relationship did we have as teachers?" I cut him off, making sure to drown out his excuses.
 - I like to think that I was your favourite teacher. Outside of class, we spent time together. I have always been there for you and will continue to be, if you allow me, of course. I have always been there for you and will continue to be, if you allow me, of course.
 - Why do you put so much energy into making sure I succeed in my studies? You are not my father, you don't have to worry about me more than the other students.
 - Yes, you are right. But...
- His eyes filled with tears and he continued.
- You remind me of my daughter, that's all. Lucy was just like you. Small and slender, with long hair and beautiful. You have the same look, both fragile and determined.
 - What happened to her?
 - She became ill. By the time we realised it, it was too late, the metastases had invaded her body.
 - I'm sorry. I didn't know that.
 - You never knew. Even before you lost your memory. How can I tell you, without sounding like I was only spending time with you to take me out of my despair?" He admitted to me with a nervous laugh. "My Lucy wasn't lucky enough to finish school, to find true love, or even to have a tight-knit group of friends like yours. Sharing this with you is as if I was sharing it with her," he continued.

He paused and turned his head towards me.

- Do you think I'm an old fool now?

I put my arm under his and rested my head against his shoulder.

- No, on the contrary. I understand better.



The walk seemed endless. I became tired and asked for a break.

- We really need to stop for a few minutes, I'm starting to get blurry from staring at this damn spot of light! I see it even when I close my eyes...

- I agree with Alicia," Henry supported me. I am also at the end of my rope.

- OK, but not for long," Aurora allowed, huffing. I forgot that we were teamed up with simple humans, weak and...

I did not understand the rest of her complaints, and I concluded for myself that this was better. With supernatural powers, their physical conditions were much better than Henry's and mine. We were a burden to them, but we stayed, all the same, They were very helpful, so they had no choice but to give in to our whims. But this break was more like survival than mere childishness. We sat in a circle, some on logs, some on the ground. The firefly stood right in front of my eyes, as if she was staring at me. Suddenly, she hit me on the head with her full force.

- But stop it, will you?! We need to rest. We are not little bugs with the tireless imagination of a telepath!

- I thought we had a bit more time before she went crazy, Po intervened.

- First of all, I'm not going to lose my mind, I'm just going to fall into a coma...

- Yeah, only..." repeated Caleb, in a wry tone.

- And secondly, I think Marine doesn't want us to stop, because her vision keeps on giving me the same feeling.

I continued, pushing the bug away with my hand.

- Catch your breath and we'll be back in ten minutes," says David, in an unusually firm tone.

- OK! Because I not only see it, I feel it. She'll give me a headache if she continues like this. And I don't miss it at all...

I continued to chase my stalker with my hand while removing my shoes. I rubbed my feet I tried to warm them up and relax them, but to no avail. Caleb sent me a packet of crisps, along with a bottle of water, and then did the same for Henry. I winked at him, gave him my best smile and thanked him for his gesture towards my teacher. He answered me with a grimace. The forest was dense with tall, full trees. The ground was covered with moss, mossy There was something comforting about the mushrooms and bugs full of chestnuts. However, it was cold and above all very wet. Branches were cracking here and there. Shivers of anxiety shook me from head to toe. I felt vulnerable in this space that was too big and without any real visibility. Even though I was surrounded by super-warriors, I couldn't get the Malgrive out of my head.

- I am reassured, I was afraid that Marine would take longer. This projection requires A lot of concentration and strength," the rebel explained, bringing me out of my stupor. She is even stronger than I expected.

- I also thought it would take longer. She told me that Hajgar was starving her and keeping her awake so that she could not use her powers against him.

I felt David's body stiffen and saw him clench his fists. I put my hand on his arm to calm him. He put his hand on mine in return, but his face remained closed.

- It's okay," I whispered.

- She is stronger than all of us put together, she had to draw on her last resources. That must be why she doesn't want us to stop. She's probably afraid she won't be able to hold out long enough.

- So let's get back on the road and get it out of the hands of that monster," ordered David, with his eyes wide open.

eyes shining with rage.

We all got up as one to put our things away.

- What did the old man say to you?" Caleb whispered in my ear, having joined me discreetly.

- I'll explain later, we have to hurry.

- So, it's good now, you're buddies, arm in arm, and so on?

- Are you jealous of Henry?

- No, but you suddenly start hugging this traitor, I have to wonder questions, right?

- No. But please be nice to him. Let's say he has extenuating circumstances. Come on!

Come on! We don't have much time left...

XI

We set off again after carefully extinguishing our fire and collecting our rubbish. The firefly, delighted, had stopped hitting me and was wisely pointing me in the right direction. We followed it in silence for a long time. My feet were aching, and I wished I had worn a good pair of trainers or walking shoes. But that wasn't the worst of it. I could feel a headache coming on. At first it was mild, but then it increased suddenly. My brain was pounding against my skull, like a heart beating too hard in my chest. I lost my balance and fell full length into a tangle of branches, leaves and brambles. In a fetal position, I clutched my head with all my strength with the palms of my hands to try to reduce the pain, but nothing helped. There was movement around me, but I couldn't hear anything and I couldn't open my eyes. All I wanted was for the pain continuously, by all means.

- Kill me..., I breathed.

I was waiting for the final blow, but nobody put an end to my terrible suffering. What a bunch of cowards! There was not one of them who had the courage to deliver me. I cursed them. I remembered

when only one person could really help me.

- *Marine !!!!*

I screamed her name in my head for my friend to help me.

- *Go away !!! Run away !!! It's too late ! The beast is here !*

My headache disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. I sat up and realized that Caleb supported me as Po, Henry and David leaned over me and stared at me with concern.

- How do you feel?" asked my brave knight.

- It's okay," I said, still shaking. But we have a serious problem. Hajgar has got his monstrous beast. I think my splitting headache was Marine's way of telling us to stop our progress. It's getting too dangerous to continue or I'm getting closer dangerously close to the end. That headache was really powerful.

- What? Now she doesn't want to be saved?

- David, we're heading for bloodshed and she doesn't want us to risk it," I said, terrified.

- Nothing else to do! Let's go! Finally, I'm going!" he announced.

- I'm going with David," intervened Aurora. My mission is to get her alive and bring her back to Organza. You, Alicia, need her to survive, so if you don't do it for Marine, do it for you! As for Caleb, I know he's going to follow you, so here we go.

- What about me? Where do I fit in?" asked Po, curious.

- This is not the time," she replied curtly. The rebel's tone left no room for response, even from this pest of a guy. He scowled and buried his head in his shoulders without saying a word.

- So, are we agreed then? Shall we continue the rescue mission?" asked David hopefully.

- Of course," I said, having regained control. And I'm doing it primarily for Marine," I said to the blond moth. The only problem is that the damn light bug has disappeared!

- Marine really doesn't want them to be found!

- Let's keep going in the same direction, we'll eventually find their trail. They can't be far away!" said David.

So we set off again without wasting another minute. With a brisk and confident step, we walked for more than a kilometre. Suddenly we came to a patch of forest which looked like it had been devastated by a tornado. Trees had been torn down, trampled and you could see huge footprints on the ground. These bear paws, of colossal size, had cut deep into the soil. I saw, with horror, bloody and dislocated bodies lying on the ground. I leapt to avoid a decapitated head. Slashed and disfigured, it was still recognisable. It had clearly belonged to one of Hajgar's clones. Why the carnage? Why had the beast attacked them? It should have obeyed the finger and eye of our terrible enemy and he would never have given his allies to his monster. What had happened here?

Suddenly panicked, we began to check the corpses one by one. They were all bald and fierce. They were only Syphonians. Reassured that we did not find the body of our friend among the victims, we left this vision of horror after having recovered the weapons still in their possession. Then we continued in the same direction, because we were sure now, we were on the right track.



- Go!!!

Her scream rattled my skull and I fell again, this time barely caught by Po.

- Are you all right?" he asked.

- She warns us. She doesn't want us to go any further, but if we don't do anything, we will have lost the advance.

- Let's get on with it then!

We continued for a few minutes. My whole body was telling me to turn back. My legs were heavy. I felt as if I had to fight against the elements. All my hair was standing on my head and the bile rose in my throat. I was panicking to an extreme level. I had never experienced this before. It occurred to me that what I was feeling was, perhaps, my emotions added to Marine's. My whole body was aching.

- We're close," I whispered to my friends. I can feel it.

Our step became lighter, softer, more discreet. We wanted to keep the advantage and catch them by surprise. We already had little chance of getting away with it, we needed at least that. Suddenly I saw her and stopped my progress and thus that of the group. Chained to a huge and wide tree, Marine looked very thin. Her cheeks were sunken and she had dark circles around her eyes. The eyes themselves, reddened and swollen with fatigue and stress, looked at me. I could see intense panic in her eyes. She did not move, however, but begged me with her eyes to flee as fast as possible. Then she stirred silently, trying to loosen her bonds.

Behind me, no one dared to move. Now that we were facing her, we were lost, shocked at her condition. David made a move to join her, but Caleb blocked him.

We didn't know how to free her. Our initial plan was to surprise Hajgar and his troops. But the most worrying thing was his absence. We knew that it was all about the beast, and we knew that the beast was now a sword of Damocles. But this attack, however atrocious, was a surprise to us, as it was not far from our present position. Had the monster lost its mind? Was it attacking every living thing that moved? Did Hajgar have the misfortune to cross his path, without distinction? Had Hajgar suffered the same fate? It's mind was supposed to be controlled by its heartless and ruthless master. The latter wanted only one thing: power, and he held it as long as he had Marine and the Brain under his thumb. We were of no use to him. So we were all in his sights. But was his hound still on his side?

I hoped that his attack, if it came, would be quick and painless and that the beast would start with me. I didn't want to see my friends torn apart in front of me ending up as heaps of flesh and bones, as we had witnessed with our enemies. I tried to regain my composure and stop thinking about what might happen. For the moment, we were all together and within a few metres of our friend. So close

to our goal, we still had a clear advantage, given that the last surviving clones had died in the clutches of the Malgrive a few moments earlier. Only we were left, facing Hajgar and his watchdog. His huge, shaggy, sharp-toothed monster with the power of invisibility. I shook my head to clear the nightmare images that were coming back to me. I turned to my friends.

- We have to split up and get them on the back foot," Aurora whispered. It smells like a trap, but we have no choice. David's going around, go free her. We've got your back.

David left as quietly as possible and made a diversion to find himself behind the tree where the held his soul mate. Thanks to his power as an Arboriculturist, he moved through the flora without a sound.

The rebel distributed the weapons to us. A crossbow for Po, and sharp knives for Henry and me. Caleb needed no tricks, his sheer strength could overcome any enemy, even a Malgrive, as he had told me. Henry and I stood back while the three of them went to circle the area. Others were stationed at strategic points to surround the area. We were spaced out pretty good and this vision gave me hope of victory.

David would soon reach our friend and he could easily untie her. If he managed to We would then take the ship back to safety. If we deprive our enemy of Marine's powers, he would have no chance of winning, even with the Malgrive at his side.

My heart suddenly stopped. A disproportionately large bald head poked out of the back of the tree to which Marine was chained. A demonic smile distorted her face.

- Hello, young people! Ah! And Henry, my friend, nice to see you again! You are persistent, we can't not take that away from you.

He then gently placed his long bony hand on the telepath's tired face. The body of my friend suddenly stiffened and her head tilted to one side. Her hair became luminescent. I had to squint to continue to see the scene that was unfolding.

- I'm not going to bother my baby with insignificant people like you. Besides, it's my time for some fun." He said slowly, with a terrifying smile on his face.

I dared not move. Paralysed by fear, I waited for his sadism to unleash itself on us. I imagined my friends to be in the same state as me, but I was wrong. A sledgehammer rushed by The love of my life was hurtling towards the light like a cannonball, literally into the lion's den. He was rushing towards our enemy and nothing seemed to be able to stop it.

- CALEB!" I shouted in terror.

I closed my eyes by instinct, but the impact did not come. An intense light penetrated my eyelids, and then nothing.

At first I was surprised by the silence around me. There were no more birds chirping, no more I could not hear the rustle of leaves swaying in the wind, no more cries or whispers. I could only hear my breathing and my heart beating in my eardrums. I slowly opened the I looked around, afraid of what I was about to discover. What I saw left me stunned. I was standing alone, in a sort of colossal cave, with orange-red walls. It had a high ceiling, but strangely dark. My friends and Hajgar had disappeared.

- Caleb? I called. David? Po? Are you there?

Only the echo of my voice answered me. The others had simply disappeared and I had landed

I don't know where. Suddenly I felt dizzy. I felt tiny in this new, immense and unknown environment. I didn't like being locked up, and despite its gigantic proportions, my claustrophobia woke up. It was cold and it's dark, reddish light gave me the creeps. Large rocks in balance seemed about to let go and let gravity do its work. Behind me, there was only a wall. I had to move forward if I didn't want to be crushed like a bug. I had to find an exit and find the others. What could have happened? And where were they

XII

I continued my exploration, dodging stones and stalactites falling from the sky as I went. I had to throw myself to the side several times to avoid being crushed. I couldn't walk along the wall of the cave, it seemed to be crumbly too. So I walked slowly forward, looking up at the ceiling. I finally came to an open area with a flat surface. The ground was sandy and some white smoke was escaping from it, in a random fashion, from several gaps. I counted six in total. I walked along the rocky wall to keep a safe distance from their fumes. A shadow passed suddenly in front of me.

- Hey!" I called.

But it had already disappeared behind a large rock. I hurried on and headed for the place where I had seen it vanish. Behind the rock was a relatively narrow passage. I slowly made my way through. My heart was pounding and I felt sick to my stomach. I was following a shadow without taking any precautions. I was not brave, as Aurora surprisingly thought, I was unconscious. The passageway was narrowing visibly, I would soon not be able to move forward normally. With my back pressed against the wall and my hands on the rock, I now moved forward with difficulty. How had the shadow managed to move so quickly in this narrowed gallery?

The irregularities of the walls cut into my skin and tore my clothes. My forearms, my palms, but also my back and my stomach, were now bruised and painful. I finally reached the end of the crack and took a deep breath of air as I stepped inside. I was able to squeeze myself in, but not without difficulty. I was freed from this vice and saw the damage. My whole body was sore and damaged, and I was in pain. And my clothes didn't look any better.

Suddenly a laugh enveloped me. I looked up and found that I was once again in a cavity with very little light and just as huge as the previous one. Large pointed rocks of different sizes seemed to stick out from the floor of the entire area. It was easy to conceal the fact that it was not as high as it seemed to be. It would therefore have been easy to hide behind one of them. This setting was even more frightening than the previous one. I could not understand where I was and how I had ended up in this strange place, when only moments before I was in the forest with my friends, facing Hajgar.

- Who's there?" I asked, keeping my guard up.

The laughter became sharper. A shiver ran down my spine. It was like the laughter of the clowns at the circus. It gave me the creeps. They were meant to be fun and friendly, but in reality they were terrorising many children, including myself.

- Who is there?" I repeated. Show yourself!

- Hello Alicia!" exclaimed a small, high-pitched, disturbing voice.

A large, curly red head poked out from behind the sharpest rock. I had a movement of back. A deformed and grotesque-looking clown stood before me. His make-up was running, as if he had been basking for hours in the hot sun. He slowly approached me, his progress made difficult by his ridiculous and disproportionate shoes.

- Don't move!" I stammered in panic.

I recoiled again, which gave him the green light to run towards me. I turned around and took hold of my legs. I couldn't turn around and go back the way I came. I would be wasting too much time in a

narrow path, but from my position I could not see any other way out. I had no choice but to climb up one of those huge rocks. I banked on the fact that with its ridiculous and cumbersome disguise, it would be unable to follow. While continuing to run in a zigzagging fashion, I looked for one that would allow me to get to safety quickly and that would give me a clear view of a potential exit. My choice was a stone that was less flat at the top. However, it seemed to have very few holds for to climb it. So I relied on adrenaline and my desire to live to make it up there, and quickly. After distancing myself as much as possible from the being that had inhabited my darkest nightmares as a child, I threw myself on the rock and set out to climb as fast and as high as I could. My hands were sweaty with fear and running, and I slipped several times, but miraculously I managed to pull myself to the top before the clown could reach me.

- But come back! Come and play with me!" he squealed, fists on his hips and eyes looking up at me.

- I don't want to play. I don't feel like playing. You can go home!" I tried, without really knowing what to do.

hope.

- Please, please, please," he moaned.

- Don't insist. Find another friend.

- But you are alone, much more alone than I am," he said in a voice that had become deep and serious. They have all abandoned. You are worthless to them.

- What are you talking about?

- They went home and left you alone. You risked your life to help them, and this is how you are thanked!

His voice, previously high and shrill, became dark and hollow. It echoed all around me.

- You are lying!" I exclaimed angrily. I was with them just a few moments ago! They don't didn't leave, we got separated. I don't know what happened...

- I'll tell you," he began, sitting down cross-legged. They abandoned you after wiping your memory.

- I don't believe you. There was this strange light and everyone disappeared. We were just separated. They haven't left," I repeated, as if to convince myself.

- But no! You idiot! They've fried your brain again! And now, your only friend is me!

- It's... it's impossible!" I shouted, tears welling up in my eyes.

- Oh, yeah? You don't believe me? So, tell me, where are they?

- I don't know what your game is, but I don't believe you! If what you say is true, I wouldn't be in a scary cave with a grotesque clown! I will be at home surrounded by my family and I would have no memory of them, as if they had never existed. And then I make them They would never betray me like that!

- Are you really sure? I remind you that they were going to leave without saying goodbye! And then, perhaps you wanted all this! You couldn't bear to be alone and unhappy, so you asked them to make you forget about the whole thing. But, apparently, there was a problem, your mind was far too damaged to withstand another attack! And now you're stuck in this place with me. You've gone mad because of them. But I will take care of you.

- What you're saying is wrong! They couldn't have done this to me. No, no, it's not possible.

Tears streamed down my cheeks and I could not control them. Did my friends really risk sending another burst of power into my already damaged mind? Was I going to be trapped forever in the labyrinth that was this cave? And, what's more, in the company of my worst nightmare?

- I told you, you're stuck with me," he said with a sly smile.

- My friends are waiting for me somewhere," I replied, trying to regain some of my strength. Tell me where I am and how to get out of here!

- You figure it out," he replied, before bursting out laughing.

He got up and hopped around the cave singing and disappeared from my sight. My head was aching from all the thinking. I really didn't understand what was going on. Trying to get my thoughts in order, I took stock. I found myself locked in a cave with a clown and my friends had simply disappeared. I tried to stay focused but even so, my mind wandered to the clown's speech. What if they were really gone? Had I really asked them to erase my memory? It could well have gotten out of hand.

Taking flight, thinking I was going to move on, when in reality, this further assault on the my mind was one too many. Unknowingly making the situation worse, and this place was perhaps my state of unconsciousness. Plunged into a coma forever in the company of a clown, as my one and only companion. I had really won everything...

- Hey! Mr clown? Come back!" I called out to him, a thought in my head.

- What can I do to serve you, my dearest?" he asked me, coming out of nowhere, his large head protruding from the back of the rock.

- You told me that I had to find the solution to the problem on my own, so... does that mean that there is a solution to all this?" I asked, scanning the cave with a wave of my hand.

- I don't know.

- You are lying to me.

- Why would I lie to you? You are my only friend.

- You tell me that my friends used their power over me and that this put me in a coma. And into madness too, apparently. Is that it?

- Perhaps.

- I can get out of here then. My coma is not irreversible, I'm not stuck here.

- You're going to stay with me! You can't get out of there!

- Of course I can! You told me so.

- Did I say that?" he asked sheepishly.

- Yes! Now explain how to do it!

- No!

- Listen to me, you grotesque clown! I don't believe you! My friends would never have left without to check if I was okay. If I had really asked them to make me forget their existence, they would have refused to do it if it had been for the first time. They would have refused to do so if it were to put me in danger! So now tell me where I am?

- You are nowhere and you are alone," he said, losing patience. I am your only friend. Come and play! he barked in a distorted and ridiculous voice.

- Am I nowhere or am I stuck in my head? You have to know!

- Stop with your questions! You're confusing me.

- If I'm nowhere, that means you're nobody, you're nothing!

I continued thinking this was working perfectly.

- Yes!!! he shouted. I am your fear, I am here. I exist!

- What did you say?" I questioned him, puzzled. Are you my fear?

- I didn't say that, you're making it up! Stop confusing me! I'm your friend, the others left! You I'm the only one left now!

Then it clicked, like a light that finally comes on after hours and hours of immersion into the darkness. I had been thrown into a world of nightmares where my greatest fears seemed real. This place, far too big and far too dark, could not exist. Let alone this nightmarish being. Everything was coming together in my head. All my phobias were in a single place created from scratch. The light glimpsed through my eyelids at the moment Caleb went straight into the lion's den. It could only be the work of Hajgar. Once again using Marine's powers to lock me in my mind,

with my childhood phobia and surely many others. It must have been the same for the others. So I wasn't in a coma, but this place seemed much worse. And the others, whom did they have to fight? How could I have doubted them?

I had to find a way out of it. First, I had to get down from my elevated shelter and face this long-standing irrational fear. I put my good resolutions up by praying with all my might that I was right about how to get out of this situation. I didn't know how to deal with it yet, but I hoped that I wouldn't end up in a situation where I was paralysed by this burlesque buffoon.

My feet touched the ground and I felt my legs shake under my weight. I had to I had to come to my senses and regain my self-confidence. Even if my memories were faulty, I was facing a huge beast hungry for human flesh. So this ridiculous little clown wasn't going to make me fear!

I turned around and looked for him. He had disappeared. It seemed too simple from a sadist like Hajgar. I was not mistaken. The red head appeared before me.

- Finally, you want to play!" he exclaimed with a smile.

- No! I came down to tell you to your face that you don't scare me! I said falsely confident. My sweaty hands and trembling body were not in my favour. I was numb, terrified.

- I don't believe you," he replied, humming.

He moved his dripping, sticky face towards mine. He nodded his head, inspecting my face. my every expression. I didn't move an inch and tried to keep control of my expression and breathing. The white of his make-up was dry and cracked in some places and pasty and oily in others. others. His blood-red smile spread across his upper cheeks. My head was telling me to run away, but my body would not cooperate. I took advantage of this "betrayal" to face my demons.

- Maybe you're right," he admitted, pretending to turn his back on me, "maybe I've got you a bit lied. Then he threw himself at me.



The impact and weight of his body on me took my breath away. My head hit the ground hard and black spots danced before my eyes. I had to fight to keep from losing consciousness. His face was only a few millimetres from mine. A wide smile distorted his face even more. I saw an absurd face and a strangely long and sharp tongue came out of its mouth. I saw two rows of fine, sharp teeth. He licked my left cheek, from bottom to top, like a dog happy to be with his master. His hands were holding my shoulders, so I could not struggle. I turned my head frantically from right to left, to dodge another attack.

- I taste you, then... I eat you!" he said, still singing. I taste you, then I eat you, he repeated. A strange feeling came over me, as if something had broken inside me. I couldn't end up like this! Eaten by a ridiculous phobia. Hajgar would gloat at having done me in so easily. Thinking of the others who must be in as bad a position as I was, not to mention Marine still in the hands of that madman, something snapped inside me. Suddenly I wasn't afraid, I didn't feel anything. I turned slowly towards him.

- You are grotesque and you will be alone forever. I pity you, you are nothing! I am no longer a child! You have no reason to exist anymore!

This time my words were real. I felt them deep inside me. And saw the look in his eyes, they hit him full force. Instantly, his big head buckled and he melted away, only to leave only a slimy, multicoloured pool.

I allowed myself a few moments to recover, sitting and contemplating the coloured mud,

and slowly stood up. The puddle had magically disappeared, and my fear with it. However, it still seemed too simple. My instinct was that it wasn't over. I had to go on and find the way out of this huge and endless coffin. To do this, I was going to have to fight other demons, I was sure.

XIII

I went around the cave, probing every wall, every crack, but I saw no passage, except the one I had taken earlier. Dejected, I retraced my steps and scraped myself once more on the rock face as I climbed out of the narrow gap. My feet were in the sand again, contemplating the dangerous smoking craters.

I was exhausted and on edge. Having to turn back and find myself in that giant sauna took a serious toll on my morale. I knew now that I was in a prison all by myself, straight from the imagination of Hajgar's sick and twisted mind. The solution to my predicament, still unclear. I was thinking about my friends, who must have been in the same situation, or worse. I gathered some courage, lifted my shoulders and walked into the vast expanse. I'm going to have to be on my guard in this vast space. What would be the consequences if I got hurt here? If I was disfigured by burning steam, would I be disfigured when I woke up? I didn't want to find out.

Cautiously, I moved forward slowly, watching the stones above me. I didn't want to end up flattened. On my left I saw an unexplored fault. I walked through it slowly, keeping to the attentive to the slightest sound or movement that might disturb my progress.

After my interview with the clown who had haunted my childhood nightmares, I was wary of what could fall on the corner of my head. I came out of the tunnel into a cave identical to the previous one. I continued, passing from cave to cave for what seemed like an eternity. They all looked exactly the same and there was nothing in the unchanging landscape to indicate any way out. Losing hope, I sat down on the ground, buried my head in my knees and began to sob silently.

- *Marine. Please, wherever you are, show me the way...*

I felt alone and lost. I no longer had any control over my life. I was the puppet of this monster and I couldn't find a way out of this nightmare. Continuing to mope, I didn't immediately notice the presence that turned me around. I felt a slight flick on the back of my head. I abruptly raised my head and discovered with joy and relief the firefly that had previously guided me to Marine was back. The bug ran at me again. Aurora was right, there was still a little bit of Marine in my mind, and she was helping me.

- It's okay, I'll follow you," I said in his direction.

I stood up, and after drying my tears with a wave of my hand, I let myself be guided. She took me to the far wall and froze.

- What are you doing? You can see there's no way out here," I said.

The firefly did not move. It was just a point of light frozen in front of my eyes.

- You didn't have to come to me!" I hissed through my teeth, running out of patience.

"Why don't you move anymore? What's wrong with you?

I was losing my temper, but it didn't seem to upset her. She didn't flinch.

- What do you want in the end? What should I do?" I asked him, still without success.

The bug remained motionless against the reddish-green wall. Despair came over me again. Marine had heard my call, but she didn't seem to want to help me. Maybe she too was stuck in her nightmare world and couldn't handle both at the same time. There must have been a reason why she brought me there, to that particular wall. Now that I knew the direction to take, I had to find the solution by myself. I understood that Hajgar had confronted us with our demons, our phobias. Marine was showing me the way, I had to do the rest.

- Well, let's sum it up! I exclaimed loudly, while pacing back and forth.

"The clown was my childhood fear. But what does this wall mean? I asked myself, always out loud. Is this another of my fears?

"Firefly? Do you have an opinion on the matter?

But she remained impenetrable. I would have to find the solution on my own. I went around the cavity, but I could not see anything that could be used as a tool for digging an opening. I then tried to hold my palms against the obstacle that I hoped would separate me from an exit, but I had been locked up for hours, maybe even days. It was difficult to get an idea of how much time had passed. I didn't feel hungry or sleepy. I was exhausted psychologically and my body was sore, but it didn't help me to have an idea of the time elapsed. I couldn't calm down. I had been separated from the others for far too long, with no way of knowing if they were okay. Marine was in a bad state. What was going to happen to her if she didn't get urgent care?

Lost in my thoughts, I found myself caressing the wall with my palms. Its texture resembled sand rolling under my hands. I began to dig with my fingernails and discovered that the soil was loose. Suddenly possessed, I ploughed frantically through the earth. A start
A tunnel formed and without thinking I hoisted my upper body into it. It was more difficult to dig while lying down and I was afraid that the gallery would collapse and the earth would be too deep. In an uncontrollable panic, I ploughed the earth like a madwoman. I suffocated at the thought of ending up buried alive in that self-made grave. The seconds, then the minutes seemed like hours. Suddenly, my hand went through and a light struck me. I pulled myself out of what could have been my grave. I dropped to the ground and my nerves gave out.

A flood of tears poured down my cheeks. I tried to calm my breathing and resume my mind. Hajgar was very good at psychological torture, I couldn't take that away from him. I finally stood up and shook off the excess dirt that covered my hair, my face and my clothes. I had overcome my second fear, claustrophobia. I looked around and found myself back in the forest. The cave had disappeared behind me. There were only trees as far as the eye could see. I didn't think I was out of the woods yet, but at the very least I was no longer locked up.

XIV

I decided to go straight ahead and follow the path. This path looked like a trap, but the world remained a trap of its own. And as I understood it, in spite of myself, I had to survive my fears to get out of it. So, I might as well get to the bottom of it.

I walked for a long time without noticing any noise or change of scenery. Everything was monotonous and unsurprising. No birds were chirping, no branches were cracking. I could only hear my footsteps echoing on the dirt road. Suddenly I heard a familiar sound. An adrenaline rush went through my body. Excitement mingled with relief as I recognised Caleb's deep, yet gentle voice. He seemed to be far enough away. I started to run as fast as my legs would carry me. I came to an open field with a huge spaceship in the middle, breathless and sweaty. I looked up at the huge metal hulk and felt dizzy. I quickly looked down at my friends. I was so happy to see them again that tears of relief escaped from my eyes and I could do nothing. However, I soon realised that something was wrong. They were gathered together, next to each other, straight as an "i" and they were staring at me without moving. This strange attitude chilled me and prevented me from throwing myself into their arms. Then I noticed that Marine had regained her rosy complexion, her dark circles had disappeared and her beautiful warm brown hair had regained its full volume. A pretty green and gold ribbon was tied in it.

- I'm glad you managed to get to us before we left," Caleb said to me with a monotone.
- What? Are you leaving? Now?" I asked in a panicked tone.
- Yes, it's time," continued Marine in the same detached tone. We have to go home.
- But where were you? Were you also locked in the cave?
- We don't have time to argue," Aurora cut me off. We are expected.
- But... but what am I going to do?
- It doesn't matter," says David without even a glance at me.

The tears that were now rolling down my cheeks had become tears of despair. A The terrible anguish gripped my chest, so much so that my breath was taken away. My friends remained stoic, without saying anything, like lifeless, soulless robots.

- You're just going to walk away? After all we've been through?
- Be glad we're saying goodbye," said Po.

Panic and despair overtook me. I was no longer in control of my body, which was full on trembling. I felt like I was at my lowest point and none of them reacted. I was feeling low and none of them were responding. At this very moment, I knew that I could have died of grief and that my death would be a general indifference. A little voice in my head was telling me that it was all a bad dream, a witchcraft, like my one-on-one with the clown or that damn cave from which there was no escape. But this time

it was different, I couldn't calm down. I couldn't catch my breath, because I knew that the nightmare I was experiencing right now was inevitable in the real world. Even though I was convinced in my heart that it was just a set-up, just another obstacle to overcome in order to wake up, it would happen soon. Whether I stayed in a coma or woke up, I would experience the same scene, so why bother.

My chest began to ache, and my breath became ragged. The air was getting more and more stuffy. I felt a sort of hiccup that made me suffocate. With my hand on my chest, I felt like a fish out of water. Would my death in this world be effective in the real world? Knowing the sadism and Hajgar's malevolence I had no doubt. So this was how it was going to end.

I had lost. Black dots were dancing in front of my eyes, I was going to pass out in a few seconds. I collapsed, hitting the ground heavily. The last image I saw was of Caleb who was slowly walking towards me. His emerald eyes shone with mischief and a sly smile was on his face. on his perfect lips. Then the blackness came over me.



I suddenly opened my eyes. My nose in the foam, I struggled to catch my breath. I had The impression was that I had come to the surface, but had been underwater for far too long. I took a deep breath of air. My lungs ached. Having narrowly escaped death, my body was in a state of shock. Noise around me forced me to get back on my feet more quickly. Still traumatised and panting, I pulled myself up by the nearest tree trunk. My eyes stopped for a few seconds on the scratches on my hands and arms. Why wasn't I dead? I had felt myself leaving.

A few metres away, I saw Aurora, who seemed to be in the same state as I was, flayed, dirty and in a bad way. I was out of breath. Then I saw David painfully getting up, helped by Caleb. They were holding each other. Both of us near the tree where Marine was tied up, before we all went into a coma. But she was gone, and so was Hajgar. Caleb made his way as best he could towards me.

- Are you okay?" he asked.

- Yes, I'm fine... And you?

- It's getting better," he said, giving me a hug.

Suddenly, with a terrible anguish, I tore myself away from his embrace and frantically searched for my teacher. He must have been not far from me when we were hit by the light. Hajgar would not have bothered with another prisoner. But could he have betrayed us again? He who desperately wanted to go to Organza with our enemy?

I was aching all over, but I forced myself to move on, I had to look for him. Aurora, still in tears, was helping Po to get up. He was bleeding and had multiple wounds on his forehead and chest. As for David and Caleb, they only looked shocked.

- Do you see Henry from where you are?

They all nodded, none having the strength to answer me. Helping myself to the branches and that I found on my way, I went in search of him, while Caleb went off in another direction.

- Henry!" I called weakly.

There was no sign of him. I continued to walk slowly, dragging my weakened body and sore. A rustling of leaves ahead of me caught my attention. I went back a little further.

This time, I drew on the last of my resources. I had a bad feeling about this in my stomach. I pushed back the branches with one hand and held on to the trees with the other. I struggled out of a thicket of branches and ferns and came upon a scene that I did not immediately understand. It took my brain and body a long time to analyse what my eyes were seeing. The inert body of my teacher. A frightening amount of blood had escaped from a gaping wound. With both hands on his abdomen he had tried in vain to stop the bleeding. I froze for a moment in shock.

- Alicia...

He was still alive. The adrenalin took over and my body finally decided to move. I rushed to him and knelt by his bedside.

- Henry, no no no! It can't be. What... What happened?" I asked while sobbing.

- I... I got out of there...

He coughed and blood gushed from his mouth.

- Help, I shouted. Come and help me!

The tears rolled down my cheeks, my whole body was shaking. I had no control over anything, I was shocked and did not know what to do to help him. In panic and terror I squeezed his wound. He had already lost a lot of blood and it was still leaking out of this hole.

He took my hands in his, making them sticky. He squeezed them with all his strength.

- I'll be fine. I was able to go out, because I'm not afraid anymore. I lost the love of my life and my daughter.

He coughed again, and another reddish trickle came out of his mouth.

- The only person who has given me the will to live again is you. And you forgave me," he continued. in pain.

- Did Hajgar do this to you?

- When... when I realised what was going on, I threw myself at him. You were all in suffering.

- You shouldn't have...

- I have paid my debt...

I buried my head in his neck and cried. I heard a noise behind me. The others must have caught up, but nobody was moving. I knew why. There was nothing to be done, Henry had left us.

XV

Strong arms pulled me from Henry's body. I struggled with what little strength he had. I had left. I screamed and kicked the man who was holding me against him.

- We will avenge him, I promise you!

His voice was calm, but full of rage. I realised that this was not an empty promise. David joined us and hugged me too. My gaze fell on Po. He who had been so hard on Henry, was a sight to behold. His wounds were nothing compared to the sadness and guilt that could be seen in his eyes.

- We can't leave him like this," I sobbed.

- I'll take care of it. I'll call you when it's ready," says Caleb with a straight face.

- Come on, I'll make a fire," David invited us.

He took me by the shoulder and we followed him a little further. We sat down on the ground, our feet on the ground. The others were staring into space, some part of their mind probably still stuck in the place where they had been held prisoner. As for me, I cried. Again and again. Streams of tears were welling up in my eyes, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Henry had been naive to believe Hajgar's fine promises, but he had never had bad intentions. On the contrary. And his life had been so sad... I was angry with myself for not being more forgiving and especially for not being more grateful to him. He had told me that we spent time together talking and I had studied under him before this whole thing started, but I didn't know him. Did I not know him? What kind of selfish person was I? What kind of selfish person was I? It was normal to feel guilty after the death of a loved one, but I knew for sure that I had I've got a lot to be angry about.

I couldn't help but stare at Caleb. I could see him digging with his bare hands with determination. He was using his last bit of strength to pay a final tribute to our friend who had sacrificed himself to save us all. Without his intervention, we would have all succumbed to Hajgar's trap and would still be stuck in our nightmare worlds or worse.

David took a canteen out of his bag and we passed it around after a few sips. I took the opportunity to remove some of the blood that remained on my hands with a little water, then I took a piece of cloth from the floor and tried to remove the last traces of it. David gently took the tea towel from his hands and wet it briefly before moving slowly towards me. He lifted my head to him and wiped my face. My gaze in his, I was desperate not to collapse, while thanking him inwardly.

- Here," Aurora said to Po, handing him a stone.

It was oval and its green colour seemed to swirl inside it.

- You're definitely a big boo-boo man," she teased him gently.

Po took the object and slipped it into his inner left pocket. I guessed that it was the stone that

came from their planet, the one that had put me in a coma after the fight with Hajgar. It was the very essence of Organza. It had healed my friend Po of the terrible wounds inflicted by the Malgrive, it would therefore be easy to get rid of them.

- Thank you. He sent me back to fight that damn beast!" said a disgusted Po.

- I've been reliving my brother's death over and over again," Aurora confessed, tears welling up in her eyes.

- Nature was turning against me, I was trapped, I couldn't reach Marine, David explained in turn.

- My friends gave themselves up one after the other, as if to exorcise their fears, but it was beyond my strength.

- Alicia?" Aurora invited me.

- The real nightmare is now.

I stood up abruptly and joined Caleb.

Crouching down, he packed the earth that now covered Henry's body. I put my hand on his shoulder.

- Thank you," I whispered.

- I blamed him for what happened to Po, but he largely earned his redemption. He was a good person. He did not deserve such an end. He stood up and took my hand in his. We stood staring at the last resting place of our friend. The others joined us after a few minutes. David stood next to me, I put my arms around my shoulders in a supportive gesture. Po and Aurora, standing slightly back, stared at the grave in silence.

- What do we do now?" I asked, completely lost.

- We must continue, whatever the cost. We cannot abandon Marine and our people, Aurora explained.

- We're no match!" exclaimed David.

- Oh yes! If you're afraid of your own powers, we're in trouble," said Po.

- Don't mess with me!" roared David.

- Or what?

David threw himself at Po. Punches came from both sides, but Po quickly got the upper hand. David was crushed to the ground by the weight of his opponent. He could no longer defend himself. Po took the opportunity to strike again and again. Before Caleb could intervene to separate them, some roots emerged from the ground and encircled the swimmer's wrists. He tried to free himself, but nature was stronger. Another root tore through the ground and grabbed his ankles. He was hanging by his feet, bound and gagged.

Red with anger, David stood up, wiped his bloody lip with his hand and dusted himself off to remove the dirt and leaves from his clothes.

- So, what does the fish say now?!

- You've become a man, my friend," Caleb said, patting him on the back. You impresses me. You almost freak me out!

- Let him go!" ordered Aurora, red to the eyes.

- In a minute.



When things had finally calmed down, David set about untying Po. Po was sulking in his corner, vexed at having been ridiculed by his friend, who was supposed to be the weakest of the group. I gathered our things, we had to leave as soon as possible to pursue Hajgar and Marine. They were heading, without a shadow of a doubt, for the last functioning ship. With the powers he had at his disposal, thanks to Marine, he would make mincemeat of the last of the rebels who were against him. We had to stop him from leaving, otherwise it would all be over. The group would be stuck on

Earth, and their planet would fall into the hands of their enemy, who would have full power by keeping Marine under its yoke.

Suddenly a shiver ran down my spine. Anxiety pulled me violently from my thoughts. That An image froze in my mind. A huge beast, with fangs bloody.

- Guys," I whispered, not daring to move.

- What?

- It's... It's here.

My whole body began to shake uncontrollably, as if suddenly remembering our previous confrontations. My survival instinct was completely overridden by the presence of this invisible monster. I didn't know if I should run away or stand still. Either way, if it wanted to, it would have no trouble tearing out my throat. All four of them froze. They knew immediately what was happening.

- Don't move," Caleb ordered me.

- Do you really think I can move? Even if I wanted to, my body does not answer me anymore...

I felt his breath on my neck again. Tears of anguish sprang to my eyes.

I felt nauseous. At any moment she could give me the final blow. She would have no trouble ripping my head off with a single fang, dismembering me completely or tearing my skin off until the bleeding took its toll. Instead, it simply gave me what seemed to be a headbutt to the lower back. This gesture drew a small cry of surprise from me and I fell forward. What was she playing at? Maybe she wanted to play with her food before she finished, like a cat playing sadistically with the mouse it has just caught.

David concentrated and pulled long, thin roots out of the ground where I had indicated the presence of the beast. They closed like huge hands, but met only with emptiness. The monster had dodged the attack. I was expecting a retort, but nothing happened. Caleb pushed me energetically behind him, obstructing the Malgrave. He spun around, making sure I stayed behind him. But a second headbutt hit me in the lower back.

- I don't know what she's playing at," I tell the group. She could have slaughtered us all by now.

- I don't care about his little game, as soon as we have an opening we shoot it down!

- I don't think that...

Before I could finish my sentence, there was a crack of a branch and the swimmer threw himself on his invisible target. Without touching the ground, he flew ahead of us, desperately trying to cling to the beast. The rodeo lasted a few more moments, then he was thrown off. He fell heavily to the ground. Struggling to get up, he swore.

- Would it kill you to try and help me?

His little game went on and on. I started to get bruises all over my body from being hit so hard.

- There's definitely something wrong with her," I tell them, still hiding behind Caleb.

- She just wants to play with our nerves," Po intervened from an attacking position.

- I agree with Alicia," David admitted.

- Yes, her behaviour is not normal," continued Aurora. She's not the type to play with her victims. But, arguably, she has lost her mind, given what she has done to those on her side, she continued, referring to Hajgar's clones.

- What do we do then?" asked Caleb.

- We're not going to go around in circles for hours, waiting to see if she attacks or not.

The other ugly one can't be far away. We mustn't get stuck here too long." concludes Po.

- What do you suggest?" asked Caleb.

- Leave me with her," I suddenly intervened.

- Sorry?

Caleb was so surprised by my proposal that he stopped turning and faced me.

- It's me she wants, isn't it? And I'm the only one who doesn't really "count" for anything that happens next. If anything happens to me, it will give you time to run away and chase Hajgar." I said in a determined tone.

- No way!

- She's right!" the blonde pleaded. We've wasted enough time... sorry, Alicia... burying Henry.

We have to get out of here.

- I'm staying with you!

- She's been letting us talk quietly for several minutes, do you really think she wants to kill us? I've been trying to tell you all along that her behaviour is not normal. She doesn't mean us any harm, I can feel it.

- I won't let you take such a risk! You don't have to sacrifice yourself for us.

- He's right," Po conceded. I'm staying too.

- You never listen...

Tired of waiting for them to back off, I slowly made my way to where they were, hypothetically, the beast was located.

- Be careful," Caleb whispered to me, but without intervening.

He trusted my instincts. I may not have had powers like my friends, but they had rarely played tricks on me. I unfolded my arm and held my hand out in front of me, then waited. Instinctively my breathing stopped and I stood still. Again I heard the cracking sound, and saw the branches break as the Malgrive advanced towards me. My heart missed a beat, my hands were clammy and my whole body was shaking. I wanted to run away, to cry, to scream, but I froze with my hand in the air, hoping with all my might that I was right to trust myself. Finally I felt a little tap on the palm of my hand. The beast had given me another headbutt. What did it mean by that? My hand began to frantically caress the empty space in front of me. To the touch the beast's hair was rough and greasy. The ground of moss, branches and earth crushed under its weight. It was now lying in front of me.

- Do you think it's hurt?

- I don't think so. There would be traces of blood on the floor.

- What's its problem then?" asked the fish, still upset about losing his rodeo.

- I think I know," said Aurora. As I told you, on our planet the Malgrives are not dangerous. These are dangerous because they were raised, tortured and trained by Hajgar. but normally, they are very docile and very useful.

- How come it's back to being harmless?

- Not so harmless," David interjected. I think all the clone corpses we've seen before to come across Hajgar would tell us otherwise.

- Which proves that it has changed sides, I said.

I continued to comfort the Malgrive with a lot of stroking. At times, he pushed me around slightly so that I don't stop.

- Or that it has lost its mind," Po interjected sceptically.

- That's why he told us he wanted to do the dirty work himself! He knows that he has lost favour of his baby, as he says," Caleb understood.

- Yes, it is! I think that when we overcame our fears, Marine and I, told it to attack its master, there must have been a reset in its brain.

- Or maybe it was just tired of being abused!

- Don't get attached to it too quickly and don't trust her," Aurora said, always on the alert.

- Hajgar wants us dead, so I don't see how this is part of his plan, I said.
showing him where the Malgrive was lying.

- I don't know, but remember that this damned beast almost killed your best friend, and Po!

- I know that! But everyone deserves a second chance! We blew it with Henry." I continued, with tears in my eyes. We won't make the same mistake twice. And you can imagine the advantage that we've just won now that the Malgrive is on our side?

- I'm still reluctant. The wisest thing to do would be to kill her now. We must not take the risk. The beast moaned and cradled its big head in my arms, causing me to topple onto my buttocks.

- Po! Can you please take *your* cowhide for a ride?

- Why 'my' cowhide?" he stammered, blushing.

- Oh, it's okay! You don't think you've both been burned for making eyes at each other?! The preacher is a lecturer who cannot deliver on his own commitments.

Aurora turned purple. I had gone too far, but she had it coming. She, who was always the first to lecture us on what we were allowed and especially forbidden to do according to the plan. In the end, the woman, who was a member of the archaic laws of her planet, fell in love with a man from another large family. According to the cerebrals, of which she was a part, dominated their planet. And their clans were not to, under any circumstances, mix. So a brainy woman who fell in love with a swimmer would be very wrong. She had forbidden Marine and David to be together, as well as Caleb and me. I had no doubts about myself until then, but I could no longer stand his hypocritical little boss behaviour.

- What do you mean? Po, is it true?" asked David in amazement.

- I... No... Of course not," he replied uncomfortably, his eyes darting back and forth between his interlocutor and the leader of the rebels.

- How did we miss something so huge!" exclaimed Caleb.

- But no! There's nothing going on between us at all," Po tried to defend himself.

- Stop it! I've never seen you stammer until today and Aurora, usually so talkative, doesn't dare don't open your mouth anymore," David pointed out.

- Come on! We'll walk a bit," Po capitulated, taking the hand of his blonde, whose complexion had changed turned crimson.

They slowly walked away. Their silence confirmed my suspicions, which made me furious. The miss perfect, who used to lecture us on morality, had herself succumbed. A few years ago she used to preach to me about her rules and prohibitions, even though she didn't follow them herself.

- Ahahah! You've managed to slam Aurora's beak. Congratulations," David said, snapping me out of my reflection.

- I'm sick of her bringing it up all the time when she's no better than us!

- I don't understand why you didn't tell us sooner!

- I wasn't sure. But from the way they both reacted, there was no doubt. And, I thought that she would put herself in our shoes and end up being supportive.

- At least we have gained some peace and quiet!

- The couple from hell!" exclaimed David, bursting into laughter. A real pain in the ass! You're a naughty girl!

His eyes glistened and his cheekbones flushed, and he burst into a fit of laughter, which soon became contagious. Relaxed and breathless, the three of us were amazed to see the Malgrive appear before our eyes. Our laughter suddenly died down and we stood silently, admiring the beast in front of us. Its mouth was that of a wolf, but his body was more like that of a grizzly bear that had been in trouble with a porcupine. The hairs on his back seemed to stick together, forming a multitude of sharp spikes.

Only his eyes betrayed his intentions towards us. Sad and gentle at the same time, they couldn't lie. I understood that the Malgrive, by becoming visible to us, was letting us know that it trusted us. We now had an important ally. And no matter what Aurora said, it would stay by our side.

XVI

Po and Aurora returned after fifteen minutes. David's mood had had time to change at all. At first he had been happy to have a new ally, and a big one at that. Then when he saw that they were slow to return, he became furious, because this escapade had us wasting precious time. He was pacing back and forth, muttering incomprehensible words. I could feel his negative energy and could easily imagine it sending the two lovebirds into the sky.

We had already had to stop for a while to pay our last respects to Henry, and I knew that he was boiling inside, wanting only to get rid of his body. Wanting nothing more than to find his beloved and make Hajgar pay for all his crimes. I didn't blame him for thinking that way. I understood everything, absolutely everything, there were so many obstacles between him and Marine. And the death of Henry was but one of them.

Even though I was aware of the urgency of the situation, our minds were different. Marine was still in the hands of our ruthless enemy, and my health was deteriorating, it all seemed so far away, a blur. Seeing my teacher and friend leave us when we had just croaked? What a mess! I was going to miss Henry terribly. I was certainly in a state of shock to think like that. This feeling of always being trapped in this spiral was driving me crazy. I didn't have time to settle down, to mourn, I had to move on again and again. I had to go on and on, without looking back, no matter what, leaving our dead behind. I was aware that we had to put an end to this carnage. Moreover, now we had a great ally. The Malgrive, which had miraculously changed sides, would give us victory. I was sure of it. That was the only reason I was going to get up and move on again. As Aurora approached, the beast had made itself invisible again. So we were on the same page, we did not trust the rebel.

- Don't worry, she won't hurt you," I whispered.

My words were greeted by yet another headbutt, which made me smile.

- What's the plan?" David asked me.

- Why are you asking me?

- You've gone up in the world since you've got the hellhound following you around!

- Seen from this angle... But I'd rather delegate for now.

- The best thing would be to go to the ship," Aurora took the opportunity to intervene timidly.

- What's on your mind?" I asked him to continue.

- I thought about it for a long time and I think that Hajgar may well have been going through our heads while he was sending us to our nightmare worlds. And since I know where the ship is, He must know too.

- That's great! That's really great! It was really smart to walk around with the
The coordinates are available to this lunatic," spat David.

- I'm sorry! I asked the rebels to give them to me before I got here. I thought so
to be able to reach them more quickly, if things went wrong.

- Well, we can say that we are there. Things couldn't have gone any worse!

- We are not very far, Aurora informed us. But with the time we have lost, he will probably arrive before we do.
- The time we lost?" I asked, my voice trembling. "What are you talking about? Henry's sacrifice or your little romantic getaway with Po?
- That's not what I meant... I... Look, Alicia, I made a lot of mistakes. When everything will be over, we'll talk about it, okay?
- Give the coordinates to the Malgrive!
- Why?
- He trusts me, I think I can get him to take me to the ship.
- I don't know if this is a good idea..." Caleb began.
- Don't worry, you're coming with me!
- That's fine by me!
- And we're still left behind?" asked Po, annoyed.
- No, you're going to have our backs instead," I explained.

"Hajgar will be blocked. We will pass him easily thanks to the Malgrive. He moves less quickly than we do as he has to drag Marine along. And you three will be behind him. Therefore, he will be sandwiched. So, even if it goes wrong for us, you will back us up." Aurora's words had woken me up. I felt as if I had taken a big slap of energy.

- Another great plan from our little human," David said, putting his arm around me. neck.
- I must admit that I'm not doing too badly! What am I going to do with my super gift when you will no longer be there...
- Stop being depressed and start doing something," said Po. I'm in the mood for a fight.
- You can make yourself visible," I whispered to the beast. Don't be afraid, we won't hurt you. We need you.

The branches cracked one by one, and the Malgrive came up behind me. I could feel it's breath in my throat. But for the first time I was not afraid. I turned and stroked him slowly. After several seconds, he appeared before me.

- Aurora will give you a location, and I'd like you to take Caleb and me there. Could you do this?

The beast gave me a blow with its enormous snout, a sign that it accepted. Aurora moved slowly towards me, and looked at me, scared to death. I nodded to her to encourage him. Then she put her hand on the dog's head and his hair began to sparkle. She quickly withdrew her hand and everything became darker again.

- It's okay," she said.
- Do you know why she chose me over any of you?" I asked curiously.
- She must no longer trust our species. You are the only human in the group, and if she wants to redeem herself, she can only do so by your side.

I nodded, and Caleb on his heels, approached my mount. He helped me climb on as if I was as light as a feather. The Malgrive had put his quills away, they had retracted onto his back, which now looked smooth and slippery. Caleb positioned himself in front of me. Po and David gave us some of the recovered weapons from the bodies of the clones, and then I held on tightly to him, but we kept slipping, finding no comfortable and safe position. It was then that the beast offered us a good support by bringing out two hoopoes. We grabbed them firmly, regaining stability.

- Here we go!

The beast leapt up, and without Caleb's presence, to whom I had clung with all my strength, I would long ago have tumbled through the air. A flood of adrenaline washed over me and tightened my grip, gripping Caleb's jacket even tighter. I put my head against his back and closed my eyes, praying that our mad rush wouldn't last too long. I could feel my stomach lurching. I had to turn around and the galloping of our mount was beginning to hurt my lower back badly. It was hurtling along at full speed, wrecking everything in its path. The local ranger would wonder what had degraded his forest in this way? But he would never have the answers to his questions.

Just as I was about to ask for a break, the Malgrive slowed down and we came to a open field. It was completely empty. Not a tree, not a branch, and above all, not a ship. Caleb helped me off the beast's back and we looked around.

- Doesn't that remind you of anything?" he asked, leaning towards my ear.

- A dome?

- Winner!

We waited for a while, but nothing happened. So we called the rebels, asking them to open the dome. But still nothing. My companion was getting impatient.

- What are they doing?

- No idea.

- Hello! Is anyone there? Would you be so kind as to open the door for us? We don't really have the time to play!" he shouted at them.

I turned around, looking for a clue, for possible traces of fighting, or anything else. My gaze fell on our new friend, who was sitting quietly, staring at me with all his height.

- Um, we really need some rest.

- What?

- Do you really think they'll open up to us?" I said while pointing at the Malgrive.

- Indeed ...

He groped with his foot for the dome and put a hand on it.

- Well, guys, open up," he said wearily. The Malgrive is on our side. It's a long story and I suspect that the picture doesn't make you want to open the damn shell, but Hajgar is coming and he still has Marine with him. We've got a great ally now, so don't fuck around...

A few seconds passed and by magic the barrier slowly rose. As it did so, the dome revealed a small group of people, as well as a huge spaceship. Its ramp was wide open. They were ready to take off at the slightest problem. Despite the fact that I had just been confronted with the same thing in my world I was breathless with nightmares. It was identical in every way to the one Hajgar had recreated in my mind. I could never get used to this unsettling vision that reminded me how different my friends and I were and how we were destined to be separated.

- What are you doing here? And how did you dare to bring this thing with you?

a tall, dark-haired man with a serious face, pointing at our huge watchdog.

- Atheon," greeted Caleb.

The welcome was not very warm. We were met with a mixture of dark and frightened looks. They expected to see Aurora accompanied by the queen. So a human and the big arm of my colossus arriving on the back of a Malgrive was a shock to many. Everyone remembered the carnage that had taken place in the previous shelter. Poor Chloe had been the victim of the first beast, which Caleb had finally managed to stop. So our new friend normally didn't have a kill on his record, at least not on our side. But I couldn't help wondering if it was he who had attacked us at the warehouse, and who had ended up taking Po's bloody, lifeless body.

- We're ahead of Hajgar," Caleb said nervously to the man who seemed to be replacing him. Aurora in his absence. He still has Marine, well uh... Queen Aria," he stammered.

- The Malgrive has brought us here, following Aurora's orders. Her, David and Po are in the lead." I explained to the five rebels who were surrounding us. Hajgar is between our two groups, if our calculations are correct. He should attack soon.
- We won't be able to do anything against him," Athéon despaired.
- How can you say that? There are more of us and we have the Malgrive with us." I exclaimed in dismay at his words.
- We can't do anything against him as long as the queen is by his side. And then he could kill us all with a single attack. You don't realise how powerful the queen is...
- Yes," conceded Caleb. We've paid for it!
- You are aware that you should have taken care of him before you came to us. You put us all at risk by bringing him here.
- We had no choice," I said
- This is our last chance," Caleb cut me off. We have to try something! We have not been able to beat him until now, because he had, in addition to the queen's powers, his clones and the Malgrive. Now his army has been decimated and his faithful dog is on our side. There is hope for a victory.
- What is your plan?" he asked, still sceptical.
- This time we don't have one," I replied. We'll have to improvise.

XVII

Minutes passed, then hours. Waiting for a possible attack, the adrenaline did not stop pumping. So much so that we were all beginning to tire of being so, non-stop, on the alert. We began to despair and especially to fear a bad move by our enemy. The rebels had put the dome back in place, keeping our lives and especially the ship safe, and also so we would see him coming and by the time he used Marine's powers to dismantle our protection, and we would be ready to attack. The final battle was approaching and the tension was palpable within the group.

Caleb took advantage of this moment to tell me more about the stakes of this fight. He was so nervous that he kept pacing back and forth while explaining to me what would happen if we did lose. If Hajgar won, their world, Organza, would be at his mercy. But we would not be there to witness it. The only person he had to keep alive was Marine, the Queen of the Cerebrals. She was the most powerful of them all and thanks to her, or rather thanks to the hold he had on her for several months now, he would be able to reign supreme over the four clans. The Swimmers, the Arborists, the Miners and even the Cerebrals, will not be able to do anything more against him. This *Syphoner* will then have absolute power. In his twisted and vengeful mind, to be born on a land where all beings have incredible powers, except him and his fellow creatures, must have been a injustice. He had decided to stage a coup and take over the government by force. He began by killing Etion, the Woirgard whose mission was to recover and look after my four friends as they enter their twenties. Indeed, their parents, sensing the threat was getting closer, had taken the difficult decision to take their children to safety of Earth. He hoped to bring them back when their powers were at their peak, so that they could rule and end the war. But it was Hajgar who had come, and his aim had not been to bring them back to Organza, but to kill them and seize power.

Our last task would be to prevent him from achieving his goal. The little human that I was, swept up in this violent tornado, had no choice but to fight on the side of each of the Woirgards, ready to sacrifice their lives for the sole purpose of saving the Queen. Recovering her would single-handedly put an end to the war that was raging on Earth as well as on Organza. But for the time being, we were waiting and the stress was on.

The rebels did not stand still. The only one who looked calm and relaxed was the Malgrive. Lying in the shade, he was sound asleep, and would only get up to drink water from an improvised bowl in a bin.

Athéon was in deep discussion with another rebel, while others were on a mission to watch over the dome. The other Woirgards were busy sorting and counting the few weapons and ammunition they had. Only one ship had made it through the Hajgar attacks, before crashing to Earth. Aurora had lost a lot that day, as her brother was among the victims, as well as many of her rebel allies. We had given

them the weapons we had recovered from the dead clones, but it didn't make much difference. If Marine could put the five of us into a coma and create a nightmare world for all of us, while she was in an alarmingly tired and undernourished state, a few weapons were not going to save us. So we relied heavily on our new watchdog and even more on luck.

Hajgar, accompanied by our friend, should have arrived long ago. Had he understood that his Malgrive had joined our camp? Did he feel in danger? What was he waiting for it to the attack?

- How do you feel?" I asked Caleb gently, passing him a small bottle of water. and a packet of chips courtesy of the rebels.

- I feel like exploding!" he replied, his fists clenched and his knuckles turned white.

- It will all be over soon," I tried to calm him down.

- You can't imagine how much I'm looking forward to smashing his ugly little face in! After all that he has put us through!!! Po almost lost his life and Marine was also seriously injured and what she went through, I don't even dare to think about it. Then, if we had let him, he would have started with you... He would have killed you without a second thought from the start.

- Calm down," I said in a breath, placing my hand on his clenched fist. I know all this, I know but we have to stay focused. We will have one chance to end this. If we don't stop him today, we will never stop him. So please pull yourself together and stay focused on the goal. And when we win, you can do whatever you want with him!

- I'll deal with it," he replied, his jaw clenching and his fists tightening.



Sitting on the grass by a tiny stream, Caleb and I remained silent. There was nothing more to add and apart from Hajgar, our only topic of discussion was their imminent departure. So I preferred to contemplate the show without saying a word.

As if he had read my mind, Caleb sought my gaze. He clung to it and his eyes I was overwhelmed by his emerald eyes. I couldn't look away and his hand closed around the back of my neck. He pulled me to him and his full lips met mine. His tongue caressed mine, At first shyly, then more intensely. Both his hands grabbed my hips and I was able to move. I found myself on top of him, sitting astride him. Our kiss lasted longer. My hands stroked his hair, and his hands went up and down my spine. My whole body quivered under his caresses.

- Sorry to interrupt, but the rest of the group has arrived," said Athéon.

With my cheeks on fire, I pulled away from Caleb, who didn't seem the least bit shaken. He helped me up and took my hand in his, with a firm but gentle grip. We went to the group, and as we now expected, we discovered Po, David and Aurora.

- What's going on?" the leader asked quickly, breaking away from the embrace of a small blonde slender.

- We waited hidden for an hour in the thicket, but as nothing was happening, realised that something was wrong," David explained.

- Hajgar should be here! Why isn't he here?" screamed Aurora, completely losing her mind.

- Calm down!" I told him. We've been here for hours. We've been watching the place from the dome and he's not here at all. It was expected that he would arrive and that, thanks to Marine's powers, he would remove our force protection to try to take over the ship. But nothing! Strictly nothing.

- Hours of snogging instead..." said Athéon.

Aurora swallowed a sharp retort, probably remembering our last conversation.

- And that doesn't worry you more?" she asked with pursed lips, pretending to ignore the pike thrown by his officer.

- Of course I do!" intervened Caleb. But what did you want us to do? We're stuck.

Aurora remained silent, her eyes unfocused as she pondered the situation.

- Where could he have gone?" she asked, more to herself than to us.

- Only he knows...

David shoved his hands into his pockets and walked away, feeling very sorry for himself.

- What can we do?" I asked, devastated by my friend's pain.

- There is nothing to do but wait!

- In any case, if he wants the ship, he'll have to show up," intervened Po for the first time.

- Elira, Athéon! Give me a summary of the situation," ordered Aurora to the little blonde and her right arm.

They went to a small tent made of sheets and wooden poles, leaving us stranded.

I really felt that we were trapped, with no way out. We were no longer in control of the situation, if we ever were. Our only solution was to wait for our enemy and suffer his attack. We had no plan, no idea of what to do. We had no idea where he was, and even worse, no idea what he was planning. He could have appeared from any angle. Perhaps he had gone for help. Would he have other clones or other Malgrives at his beck and call? If so, we were lost. I shook my head to chase the pressure that was building up inside me, and it was important that I kept my cool. We all had to stay calm. We had to come up with a plan, whatever it was, or else we would have to go back to our roots, at the very least a draft.

- What do we do then? Do we wait quietly for him?

- Do we have a choice?" asked Caleb in a serious tone.

XVIII

I left Caleb and Po to talk and walked away. I was exhausted and had no idea what to expect. I could do to counter our enemy. I felt weary and useless. From what I had been told, my last plan in the old dome had been a success. I was surprised that I had so much imagination and ingenuity. I didn't think I was capable of such a stratagem, and yet that had been the case, since I had, on the one hand, found a way to counter the monster's power of invisibility and, on the other, discovered how to use her against her master. But today I felt trapped, surrounded on all sides. We were once again trapped in this shell. Our protective sanctuary was once again becoming our prison. The only difference, and not the least, was our new ally. The Malgrive was no longer the monstrous beast, lurking in the shadows, waiting to eviscerate us that we had previously encountered. Even if, for my part, I had only glimpsed him in my dreams, my memory still failing me. Hajgar still had the advantage over us, despite the absence of his damned clones. We had never been in a strong position, even when we thought we had won a battle. He had several cards up his sleeve, several moves ahead.

Our enemy should have arrived hours ago, but he was *clearly* not showing his face. the end of his ridiculous bony nose. I didn't see what we could do but wait. David had withdrawn from the group. Aurora had taken her place as leader and was talking to the rebels making big, energetic gestures. For the first time I felt out of place among them and watched them from a distance. I didn't want to take part in the conversation to try, I tried in vain to come up with a plan. My morale had taken a big hit. Getting to the ship was a good strategy and my idea could have been successful if Hajgar had behaved in a logical way.

Our trap had probably been too predictable. Our enemy was intelligent and a good strategist. He had to acquire many tactical skills to make up for his lack of powers. Of course, he could steal those of other Woirgards, but in order to achieve this, he had to put in place a Machiavellian plan of extreme difficulty. Moreover, I knew that their inevitable departure was getting closer and closer. And that is also why my brain had switched off. Of course I wanted to save Marine, but that also meant that I was going to have to say goodbye to them. Moreover, I had been hearing a kind of buzzing sound recently. As if I was locked in a bubble, I found it difficult to concentrate and think. So I preferred to isolate myself from this pressure and above all not to participate in all these conversations without hope. I joined David, who was sitting nonchalantly on the grass. He was throwing small pebbles in the water of the brook, his eyes in the dark.

- How do you feel?" I asked him as I sat down beside him.
He simply shrugged his shoulders, without answering me.

- I know this is difficult for you. I'd be just as lost if it was Caleb who was between her hands. It's terrible what he's doing to her," I continued, "but we'll get her out. For now, we're a bit stuck, but we always find a solution, don't we?" I say as if to convince myself.

- I'd like to believe you ... But the first one who is always looking for a plan and takes matters into their own hands is you and I don't see you having a big discussion with others." He said, throwing another stone into the water.

Her reflection stung my heart.

- Yes, you're right," I admitted. I'm a bit out of ideas. I can't really think straight. With Henry's death and my migraines, I find it hard to concentrate.

- I'm sorry. I'm unloading on you, when Hajgar almost killed you. It's a miracle you be with us again. And you were always there to help us. Thank you," he added, squeezing my hand.

- Don't apologise, we're all a bit confused and lost. The end is approaching and we don't know if we will emerge victorious. Then, even if we triumph over this monster, will it really mean that we have won? You and I have a lot to lose in both cases. We will live, yes, but will we be happy?" I asked with tears in my eyes.

I felt really down and out, devastated. I didn't want to lose them. They had all been, my only friends and love. I still hadn't recovered my memories, but I remembered the empty feeling I had felt in the months after my coma. The only person that might have made their departure less painful had died at Hajgar's hands. There was still my parents, of course, but my father didn't know anything about it, and I wasn't sure if I had completely forgiven my mother so I could to trust her again.

- Yes, our future is not very rosy," David added, pushing the dagger further into my heart. But do we really have a choice?



I felt the need to be a little alone in all this chaos. I had left David to his

The group, joined by Caleb and Po, were still discussing a pseudo plan. I took out the little prepaid phone that Caleb had given me when we met at the lake. I needed to talk to my mother, to hear her voice. Even if I hadn't digested all her wrongs, I needed her, I needed her to hold me, as she did at the whenever I felt sad. One look was enough for her to know my moods. Plus, I had to tell her that Henry, our friend, had died. I didn't know if I could do it, I didn't know what to say to him on that call, but having the opportunity to say it out loud gave me hope of a jolt. I had to wake up from my slumber. I no longer had a choice.

I dialled his number from memory and waited. First ring. My heart was racing and a lump formed in my throat. How was I going to tell her? Second ring. My stomach was jumping up and down and my heart was threatening to leave my rib cage. Third ring.

- Hello?

- My... mum? It's me... Alicia.

- Sweetie? Are you all right? Where are you?

Worried, she blurted out questions at breakneck speed.

- Yes. Listen... I need to tell you something. Well... I'll try.

- When are you coming home? Hello? Alicia?

- Yes. Mom, I'm here! I really need to...

- Alicia, can you hear me? It's crackling, I can't hear anything. Alicia? The doorbell, I...

The connection was cut off. I was lost in a corner where the network must not have been very good pass. No wonder my call was interrupted. My sad news and shock would have to wait.



As I expected, even after several hours of heated and high-spirited discussion, not a single draft plan had been found by the group. Everyone was under a ton of stress. The pressure was so great and the level of fatigue so high that the decision was taken to introduce guard tours.

We formed seven pairs, so that a majority could rest in case of an imminent attack and I was also able to keep a close eye on the area around the dome. I posted myself at a strategic corner near the edge of the forest, accompanied by the Malgrive, who had not let me out of his sight since it joined our camp. I wish I could have spent time with Caleb, while we still could, but there weren't enough of us to allow ourselves this whim. So he had joined another pair, that included a young ebony-skinned rebel, Nabji, who had volunteered to go to our hideout. The third pairing was composed of Athéon, the blonde's right-hand man, and David.

The other rebels had gone to rest. The only one who made a scene was, well obviously, Aurora. So I watched my area with a big watchdog who, even when he wasn't glued to me, managed to keep me in his sights. It was reassuring to have such a companion to rely on. I had managed to turn the heart of the beast that once haunted my darkest nightmares. From a terrifying monster with a thirst for flesh and blood, it turned into a big, affectionate dog. It too would return to his planet. Hopefully it would not be punished for the terrible things he had done under Hajgar's rule. The thought pinched my heart. I would have to tell Aurora and especially the Queen, my friend, that she would promise to look after him once he was there.

I beckoned the Malgrive to lie down and sat down next to it, resting my back on his side. His fur was rough, but its plump, fleshy body provided a warm, cozy cocoon. I huddled against him to protect myself from the wind that had just risen. Night was falling slowly, creating terrifying-looking shadows. Large, twisted arms seemed to stick out of the surrounding forest.

Feeling sleepy, I sat up slightly and rubbed my eyes to wake up.

No rest for the moment. With all these nightmarish adventures, and Henry's death, my body and mind were sore and at the end of their tether. The closer the end of the story came, the less I could stand. I didn't have the strength to fight anymore, nor the desire. But my friends were counting on me. I had to devote my last strength to them, even if it meant losing my life.

The Malgrive began to stir gently behind me. Then he squeaked as if in pain. I turned around and began to stroke him gently.

- What is it?" I asked, worried.

He had curled up, almost putting himself in a fetal position.

- Did you hurt yourself? What's wrong with you?

He headbutted me in the elbow, causing my arm to swing upwards, then wedged his under my arm. I had the terrible impression that he felt in danger and wanted to hide.

I was beginning to feel nervous too. If a beast as ferocious and powerful as the Malgrive was afraid, it was because a terrible threat was approaching. And the only threat I knew of was Hajgar. As if to confirm what I thought, the imposing dog disappeared from my sight. He had used his power of invisibility. Aurora had told me that the Malgrives had developed this gift to escape the Woïrgard people who were hunting them. I leapt to my feet, ready to go and wake the whole camp, when a rustling sound made me turn around abruptly.

- Stay where you are beautiful and we'll whisper! No need to alert everyone. We have to We have a deal to make together.

That nasal voice. At the first intonation, I knew that Hajgar was there, a few meters away from me.

Although he remained in the shadows, I could see the outline of his frail figure. Tall and lanky, I would have been no match for him in a fair fight. But that he did not know. The dome was still active. I was going to try to buy some time and learn more before things went wrong. I was going to try to buy some time and learn more before things went wrong.

- Why do you think I'm going to agree to make a deal with you?
- Because I have good arguments. That's why. Henry didn't mind," he said to hurt me.
- What do you want from me?" I asked him, pretending to ignore his remark. Not wanting to give him this pleasure.
- I would need you to order the Malgrive to shred, quarter, devour all the people, without exception, who are under this dome. He only has eyes for you now. I am a confident that he will obey your orders.
- You think I'm going to let you escape by taking Marine and killing everyone on your passage?
- That's kind of the idea, yes!
- Are you that desperate?" I asked, looking down on him. You don't have your henchmen by your side anymore, you are all alone now. Even your Malgrive has abandoned you!" I shouted, putting my hand on the beast.
- Desperate? No. On the contrary, I hold all the cards. I've had plenty of time to I am prepared for any eventuality. And as far as the Malgrive is concerned, it's just a number for me, you can keep it. Now it's up to you to decide who lives or dies!
- What are you talking about?" I asked him, suddenly worried. Are you going to hurt the Marine if I don't obey you?
- No! Of course not! What an idiot! I just realised something. A really interesting thing. You and Marine are connected. A part of her is always in your head. She can talk to you, show you things and most importantly, she can see with your eyes. What has already been very useful to find you in this big shell that makes you invisible.

- So I got inside your head, little one. And now that I've got rid of the old man, I know that you have only one person left to confide in... One person who can make your life less sordid and lonely. Everything was going very fast in my head. I was getting dizzy and felt like I was taking a big hit. slap in the face. It could only be one person.

- It's a fast-paced affair up there, I think! You may be a walking corpse, a patient on her death bed. You seem to be doing pretty well in your senior year! So you guessed that I visited your little mother!

- Where... Where is she?" I ordered, my fists clenching.

- Shhh... Keep quiet if you care about her. And look! I can't see you, but I know that you do. So enjoy the show!

At last he came out into the light of the torches set up from beyond the dome. The vision he offered me was worthy of a horror film. He was holding a gaunt, cadaverous Marine, barely able to walk, by her hair. Her body was in spasms and her eyes were rolling back in their sockets. The sight broke my heart.

But I couldn't help looking for my mother.

- Where...is...my...mother?

Tears blurred my vision, but a wave of new energy had risen within me and had gave me the vitality I lacked to get up and continue the war against this ignominy. Just then a second figure emerged from the darkness and stood at Hajgar's side. This woman, with the face of a doll frozen in time, tall and very elegant, held the rope that bound my mother's wrists. This vision seemed surreal. What was a perfect and rich housewife in the middle of the forest with that madman?

My gaze went from this impeccable-looking woman to my mother, who was gagged and tied up like a common animal. Her eyes were red and swollen and her make-up had dripped off, leaving blackish marks on her wet cheeks. Dried blood stuck to the top of his head. The woman gave a sharp tug on the rope and my mother fell to her knees. Her eyes pleaded with me. The woman hit her on the head with a heavy blow and she collapsed.

Several Woirgards, alerted by the noise, gave the alarm and I heard them give the order to grab the weapons. Hajgar's new sidekick took advantage of this moment of panic to slip away without a sound. A vague hope rose in me. Reinforcements were coming. But Hajgar did not flinch, I wondered what else he had in store for us.

- You see! I hold all the cards! Will you do business with me now?
he asked with a smile.

XIX

I froze for a long time. This monster was asking me to choose between my mother and my friends. I could not resign myself to losing her, but neither could I be an accomplice to a massacre. All these people were there to fight, to make a difference on their planet. They wanted the reign of terror to end. Many unfortunate and innocent people had died in because of this degenerate and his henchmen. Several rebels were positioned beside me, their trembling weapons pointed at Hajgar. None of my friends were among them. I only recognised Elira, the Woirgard who seemed to be quite close to Aurora.

I thought quickly, my brain racing. Once again, I had no idea what to do. A headache shot through my skull, forcing me to my knees. I took my head in my hands and squeezed with all my strength to try to annihilate the pain. But, nothing could be done. The pain became harder and harder to bear. Blood spurted from my nose, mouth and ears. I could feel the warm liquid running down my neck and arms. Despite the buzzing sensation, I had not thought about my conversation with Aurora, putting aside the fact that I was on life support and that at any moment my brain could fail me. I could sense the Malgrive, still invisible, bump my arm with it's head, the rebels, however, did not move. They were too preoccupied with their enemy or with the vision of their queen, none of them came to my aid. Gradually everything around me became dark and silent. So I was going to die in the end, with general indifference. My head hit something hard and dusty. I could no longer move, let alone scream. I stood there in the dust, bleeding to death. A light white surrounding me, and I thought that my end had come.

- Wow! Fortunately, I keep in touch with Marine. I have a feeling that things aren't going very well. well my pretty.

"Come on! Let's stop playing! I need you, this is no time to give up the ghost! I am I was amused, but all good things must come to an end.

The white light hit me hard, making me fall backwards. Images came to me I suddenly realised that all my memories were coming back to me at once. I saw my first meeting with Marine at the orphanage, our first fight about Caleb, his multiple separations with David, the long philosophical discussions with Henry, my first date with Caleb, our first kiss... Everything quickly returned as if to resume its place in my mind.



I slowly regained consciousness. I heard a hubbub, cries that seemed to come from

on all sides. I noticed that there were only two rebels left by my side, still straight and impassive. I could have died a second time before their eyes with the same indifference, but it was worth fighting alongside them! The others had to go and see what was going on on the other side of the dome, where the noise rose to a crescendo. Were we under attack? Was Hajgar just a diversion? We could expect anything from him. I could still feel the presence of the Malgrive at my side, but it did not move, probably paralysed by fear. Another one who was not aware of his size and strength!

Then my gaze fell on Hajgar's big, bulging eyes that stared into space and seemed to float in the dark night. I struggled to my feet and saw my mother lying a little farther away, still inert. And Marine was in no better state. Lying at her torturer's feet, her elbows on the ground, she seemed to be at the end of her rope.

Hajgar, on the other hand, stood straight, shoulders high, as if he had already won the war.
- You owe me one!" he said. I just saved your life. It was a close call, it was a hell of a close call. What the hell is going on in there," he continued, tapping his skull with the tip of his skinny index finger. I had made a beautiful carnage. I'm surprised you're still with us...
- Because you think I'm going to thank you..." I hissed, still surprised that I owed him my salvation.

I knew that if I got through this I would owe it to Marine, but I didn't think at the time that she would be the puppet of this monster.
- It would be the least I could do! You would be drowning in your own blood if I hadn't repaired the damage. Damage that I have, admittedly, caused, but it still counts, doesn't it?
He provoked with a smile, still looking into the void above me.
- Is my mother still alive?
- My friend just knocked her out. She had to go for a walk. She's looking for someone. I couldn't not manage everyone.

A memory suddenly came back to me. I knew this woman, this icy woman. She was called Catherine De La Croix. She was David's mother. That is why they all went to the opposite!



My gaze shifted from my mother's lifeless body to Marine's emaciated one. Her emerald eyes crossed mine. We stared at each other for a few seconds and I thought I saw a small spark reborn in his eyes.

Tiny fireflies appeared in her hair.
- What are you doing, you bitch?" shouted Hajgar.

He slapped her with the back of his hand. I heard the rebels' weapons being cocked, but None of them attempted an attack, as Marine was far too close to the target. She fainted under the violence of the shock, but this diversion allowed the Malgrive, now reassured of my condition, to slip away, after having signalled his intention by a small blow with his head in the small of my back. I silently prayed that he would quickly go and get some "useful" help, for the rebels did not seem to be determined to fight. Simply pointing their guns and not trying anything was ridiculous. I understood that he did not want to risk hurting their sovereign, but there were, however, limits. How had they survived so far with so little courage and risk-taking? These statues were beginning to get on my nerves.

- You're going to kill her if you keep this up," I shouted at him, out of my mind. And you two, are you going to move?

I asked the two rebels.

- Don't worry, once everyone is dead under this damn protection, I'll remove it and remember to get the stone before I leave. Your friend will get her fix, but in small amounts. Just enough to keep her alive. But you must decide quickly! Order the beast to make a killing, before your girlfriend dies. Otherwise, I'll have to kill your poor mother.

You're going to lose them anyway," he continued as he moved alone towards our protection, leaving the free but unconscious Marine. All of them. Either they will die today or they will leave. Leaving you alone on this planet. So you'd better have your little mummy left. What are you going to say to your father if she dies? Will you have the courage to admit to him that this is your fault?

- I... I can't.

- Very well, you leave me no choice.

He walked slowly towards my mother, pulling a dagger from the back of his jacket. It was large and jagged. I imagined it sinking into the poor inert body of the one who had given birth to me, The one who had always been there for me, and who had, of course, made mistakes, but always with the aim of protecting me. It was undoubtedly this weapon that had ended the life of my late teacher and friend.

- NO!" I screamed, with a heartbreaking cry.

I heard footsteps behind me and felt a hand rest firmly on my shoulder. I raised

I looked up and found Caleb beside me, and the other two rebels still standing at the same spot. place.

Hajgar stopped and turned around, looking for us.

- It's frustrating not to see you... Well... I have good hearing. Listening to those gruff steps and heavy, I would say that your loved one has joined you. So now you have the opportunity to eliminate three at once," he said. If you do that, I'll let her live," he said, glancing at my mother.

You have a whole planet to yourself, you'll find someone else, don't worry!

- What is he talking about?" asked Caleb.

- He wants me to order the Malgrive to go on a rampage.

- Don't you want to come and fight fair for once? Just say the word and I'll join you. It'll be just you and me," my boyfriend spat at him.

- I'm not that kind of person. I'm not much for that sort of thing. I prefer manipulation and cunning. He barely had time to finish his sentence when a hellish hubbub was heard, followed by shouts. The rebels on the opposite side of the dome seemed to be in a heated discussion. We did not understand any words, but the dialogue was punctuated by hysterical screams that seemed to come from Aurora if my hearing was not lacking. I could recognise her high-pitched voice among all the others.

- What's going on?

- I don't know," Caleb answered with a grunt. Your dog came looking for me before to see what was going on. I followed him without question," he whispered. I didn't take the time to tell the others, something was going on. I don't know what it is, but it looked serious.

- I'll tell you what's going on," said Hajgar. While we were talking quietly. My friend went around to find her son.

As he spoke, we watched in horror as the dome slowly rose.

"I told her that if there was a problem, she should play the kidnapped mother card, which needs a safe place. And given what's going on right now, I'd say she's found her little boy and he convinced the blonde to lift the protection. A nice diversion in short!

- What the hell is this nutcase talking about?
- David's mother is with him, she's on his side," I spat, disgusted.

Caleb gave me a look of anguish, incomprehension and sadness. Hajgar had took the opportunity to redirect himself towards Marine. As the dome was gradually disappearing, he had to get back on track quickly.

My blood froze and my breath caught. If he ever laid a hand on her again, it would all be over. We were still trapped in this dome, the protection taking a long time to withdraw.

Hajgar floated a little more towards Marine, he was only a few centimetres away from her. I

I began to shout her name, to bang on the dome with all my strength, but she remained, inescapably, unconscious. But why did it take so long for the protection to be lifted? What was going on there? It must have been due to fatigue or doubt. But the protection provided by Aurora's place seemed to rise only a few millimetres. We still could not get through and Hajgar was ever closer to his target. I felt Caleb shudder beside me, ready to pounce. I held my breath as he went off like a cannonball when the height of the protection finally allowed it. Hajgar, close enough now, put his hand on my best friend, just as he was about to say "I'm going to have a good time." Caleb was about to reach them. He stopped short and faced his worst enemy. I could no longer see Hajgar or Marine in his build, but I could see his clenched fists shaking with rage. I

I didn't hear what they said to each other, but Caleb turned around after a few seconds and walked forward towards me.

- We have to gather in the centre of the camp," he said through clenched teeth as he passed me without a word.

I stood still for a few moments, as if turned off. I had no idea what he was talking about.

But if Caleb abdicated, all was lost. With a heavy heart, I followed him in. He was silent, convinced that Hajgar had won.

XX

I walked slowly, following Caleb, who blocked my view with his large, muscular body, two other Woirgards behind me. I only wanted one thing at that moment. To snuggle up in his arms, to bury my face in his neck, and to stop thinking. Not to think about the horror we had been through and especially about what lay ahead. Hajgar had Marine, and although she was in a terrible state, she was still the most powerful Woirgard. Even if she was out of shape, she could wipe us out with a flick of her hair.

I was also concerned about my mother's condition. We had left her lying unconscious in outside the camp. Hajgar did not need her anymore, her fate did not matter to him. Lost in my sad thoughts, I did not see Caleb stop and bumped into him. I stepped back slightly and I looked up at his upper back. He seemed to be frozen, his body tense and straight. I saw him His fists clenched and he turned his head slightly in my direction.

- Stay behind me," he said in a whisper.
- But...

He gave me a dark look, which made me back away. What was going on? I saw Hajgar pass me with a big smile on his face, which distorted his already ugly face into a sneer. He was dragging my friend behind him. Her face was expressionless, as if she too had lost all hope. She did not look at him either, leaving her gaze irrevocably fixed on the ground. I tried to back away to clear my vision, but I ran into a wet snout. A meteoric rise of adrenaline rush overwhelmed me. Had my new friend joined the ranks of our enemy, or had I been forced to leave? Did he even mean his presence? I had not seen Hajgar use my best friend's powers, but a simple gesture would have been enough for her to get into the head of the Malgrive and to be subject to it once again.

He must have felt my body stiffen with fear, because he nudged me down with his nose of the back. That gesture he had made, again and again, when we were in the forest, to make me It was easy to understand that he meant us no harm. This calmed me down instantly. I regained some and waited for the rest.

- Mum, stay behind me, I can hear.
David's voice came to me, fierce and unmistakable. How would he react to his mother's betrayal?
- David... She's not afraid.
Caleb had spoken in a strangely calm tone.
- But, Hajgar...

- She's with him," Caleb continued, his tone unmistakable.

- What? Mum?" he asked, turning to her in surprise.

I moved around at that moment and could see David turned towards his mother.

- There are many things you don't know my son, and it's time you knew the truth on our people. You are wrong about everything. But I don't blame you. All they did was to lie, you lie!

- I don't understand... You know what I am?

- Yes, my darling. I am your mother. Your real mother. I followed you to this planet to protect you and to set the record straight when the time comes. And here we are. It's about time you discover the true history of the Woigard and especially that you open your eyes to who your real enemies are.

We were all stunned by these revelations. David, his eyes clouded with shock, stood with his arms still, while Hajgar came closer to him.

- Yes, young man, I am not the monster in this story. There are far worse than me. When your mother will have told you everything, you will join us and you will reunite with your girlfriend. David turned abruptly to his mother.

- How could you let him do this to her? Look at the state of her.

- You will soon understand that this sacrifice was necessary. We need her to restore the balance on Organza. And we would never have hurt her otherwise.

- Explain yourself!" he ordered her through clenched teeth.

- The Cerebrals have taken over," she began slowly. They treat the other families as their underlings. They are the only ones who count, and the rest of us, Miners, Swimmers, and Tree Farmers, we have become their slaves. We have no say in the policy they put in place. They have put themselves at the top of the pyramid and we are subjected to a oppressive tyranny. This is the only way to ensure that they are not humiliated. As soon as a rebellion breaks out, all participants are arrested and thrown into a cage, without a prior judgement.

- Aurora?" David asked her, turning his head slightly towards her, avoiding her gaze.

The rebel lowered her head and turned peony red.

- That's not really how...

- Is that why you have these stupid rules? I suddenly asked her, bewildered by what I had just said. to hear.

"We must not mix because these are the rules laid down by the Cerebrals? You work only for themselves and their politics! And that is why there has always been only the rescue of Marine who didn't matter to you? You don't care about saving Po, David and Caleb! Is that it?" I asked her, finally understanding his behaviour.

- I don't agree with most of these rules," she whispered.

- Most of them?" said Caleb, finally responding.

The threat he posed led to a coordinated movement among the rebels, who redressed all their weapons at the same time on the group, but especially on the Miner.

- You hid your game well," spat Po, his eyes glowing with rage or sadness, ignoring their gestures.

- No, not so much, actually. She made it clear that it was only the Queen who was important we were just pawns, a part of a larger society, valuable, but disposable help," Caleb interjected. She just needed us to get her way.

- I know everything seems to be against me, but look around you. It's not just Cerebral among rebels. And we were many more before Hajgar destroyed our ships," she said. tears welling up in his eyes.

- There are always sheep ready to follow the biggest of psychopaths. With a good He had the power to speak and, above all, the power to get into other people's minds," said Po, disgusted.

- No, I swear not! There are things that are wrong, I agree. But the biggest threat is him," she shouted, pointing at Hajgar.

- I'm not so sure anymore," says David.

- Please listen to me. If we fight him today, we can all go home together on Organza and settle this matter. The Cerebrals took over, because you, the princes, were not there. Your return will change everything. Each family will regain its rightful place.

- You're quick to turn your back on a girl who so loves the rules set by your clan." I said. How are you going to explain to them that you fell in love with a Swimmer? They'll put you in a dungeon where you'll just get a slap on the wrist as you're on top of the pyramid?

- We need to calm down," Caleb interjected. We must not forget all the evil that Hajgar has done. Po, Marine, Henry, your mother... he listed.

- You are right," I replied, coming to my senses. Hajgar is a monster," I said, looking at him. the person concerned in the eyes.

- Yes, the priority is still to stop him. We will deal with her and the Cerebrals later..." explained Po, visibly hurt.

The rebels suddenly changed targets and pointed their guns at Catherine and Hajgar.

- I know this is a complicated situation for you, but you should know that many people belonging to your various clans, as well as members of your families, have been locked up and killed by these people," Catherine explained, pointing at Aurora. Your father... your real father David, he was part of the death toll.

- You see Alicia, I don't know if she's better than him in the end," hissed David. Yes, he's made a mess of things, but if we had let her," he continued, pointing his finger at the blonde, "she would have willingly let them die. He has more murders to his credit, only because he was better prepared than her. And what happens on our planet...

- David looks at Marine and tells me that Aurora is worse than he is," I said to my friend, feeling that he was losing the ground underneath his feet.

- Were you really sincere with me at least?" asked Po suddenly, looking the rebel right in the eyes.

- Yes, of course it is! Don't listen to him. He'll turn your brain upside down. When he killed Henry, he tried to kill Alicia and Po too. And yes! Look at the state of Marine !!! You can't give her right!" shouted Aurora.

- You can't be trusted either," said David.

- Guys, calm down," intervened Caleb. Alicia is right, the priority is to stop him!

- Hahaha, how I love to see you pulling each other's legs. Now that things have been clarified, a choice will have to be made. The evil Hajgar who is simply trying to restore the balance by returning the scorned clans to their original place, or the beautiful authoritarian blonde who only used you and who had only the rescue of his queen in mind so that the Cerebrals would not be able to keep their place at the top of the bill. The clans are starting to rise up and without Marine they will quickly come down from their pedestal. You don't fully realise it yet, but you have lost a lot because of them, because of her. And then, if you come to your senses and you join me, I could heal Marine with the stone.

- One war after another," said Caleb.

Then it was chaos.

XXI

I could only watch the catastrophe unfold before my eyes. Caleb, in a gesture of desperation, rushed at Hajgar who was still holding on to Marine. He was stopped dead in his tracks by vines that wrapped around his waist and propelled him several metres away. I saw him crash into a tree and bounce heavily off the ground. My heart missed a beat as I understood that he was not getting up. But the battle was raging. The Woirgards were running in all directions, launching random attacks, and roots and even whole trunks passed in front of me. I was jostled by a fleeing rebel and ended up on the ground with my knees on the floor. I raised my head and frantically looking for David's mother to find out where these terrible attacks were coming from. When I met her gaze she was in front of me, a few metres away, and she was smiling at me with a victorious look.

Standing up straight, her arms crossed behind her back and her chin held high, she glared at me. The shock cut me off. I was still breathing when I realised that these terrible attacks did not come from her. My eyes misted with tears fell on David. A halo of light surrounded him and a multitude of roots tore up the ground at his feet, whistling through the air. They slammed and whipped through the air before slamming into the unfortunate people who crossed their path. His powers had finally been unleashed, they seemed to be at their peak. The words of his mother and Hajgar had, it seemed, done the trick.

Despite the ordeal Marine had endured because of them, he had joined them. I felt myself being pulled backwards, I backed away as best I could until I was behind a high rock. My new friend had taken me to safety before he ran off. Now that it had its faculties, it was back to being a big dog whose primary mission was to put a smile on my face. His destructive instincts had disappeared. I couldn't blame him to be afraid of our enemy.

I refocused on the battle that was raging. The rebels and their leader had first concentrated on Hajgar, being careful not to hit Marine. But they were swept away one by one by David and his mother, who was now also launching her plant attacks. Almost all the Woirgards were disabled by the two Arboriculturists. Some of them were hindered by vines while others lay unconscious with scarlet wounds on their faces and in their skulls. Aurora was hanging by her feet. I saw her hair appear to have a thousand fireflies in it but she was hit by a branch on the back of her head before she could launch her strike. She lost consciousness, still hanging upside down.

Hajgar, for his part, contemplated his work with a smile on his face. He did not bother to participate in the carnage. David and Catherine alone were able to defeat all the Woirgard present.

Fortunately for him, because Marine would have been useless to him. She seemed to be at the end of her rope. If she had used her powers even once, she would undoubtedly have succumbed. She lay unconscious at his feet, her chest only slightly heaving. Crouching beside her, he grabbed her hair. I could not help but feel that I had to do something to help her. I had seen them all suffer so much, and I didn't want to see them go through that. Henry, Marine, Po, my mother...

Fight for their lives and the lives of others. I could not stand by and watch. I got up and finally, I walked towards David with a determined step. Busy with the bodies of his victims, he did not see me coming at once. I stood in front of him and slapped him with all my might. His eyes found my own.

- What have you done?" I questioned with a sob. You've got the wrong target! Don't you see what they're doing?

A root whipped across my cheek, but I raised my head and continued. I met the eyes of Catherine and understood that it was a small gift from her.

- Marine is going to die! She's at the end of her rope. And because of whom? I shouted. Because of Hajgar and your mother! It's not the Cerebrals who have made us suffer so far, it's them," I said, pointing to his mother and the Syphoner.

A vine whistled towards me and wrapped itself around me. I felt my feet leave the ground and His embrace intensified. Breathless, I began to see black spots in front of my eyes. I knew that the attack was coming from Catherine and not from my friend, but he did nothing to help me. I tried to struggle, but I could do nothing against the strength of her power. I was shaken in all directions. Suddenly the grip loosened and I fell to the ground. Strong arms caught me before I crashed.

- Did you want to have fun again on your own?

Caleb was sweating and covered with wounds of varying degrees of depth. He put me down and stared at me.

- Are you all right?" he asked, concerned about my silence.

- No, nothing's right. We have lost David.

- I will bring him to his senses, willingly or not.

- They will kill you...

My hand desperately grabbed his shirt, but he turned his back on me and walked across the field where the fight was almost over. Hajgar had not moved, he was wisely waiting for the job to be done for him. The sight of him had become unbearable, I wanted to wipe him off the map, kill him with my own hands. After all the harm he had done, he could not get off so easily. I turned my back on the fight and ran as fast as my legs would carry me. I arrived at the place, which a few minutes before was the outside of the dome. I found my mother's body, still inert. I knelt beside her and kissed her forehead. I grabbed the serrated blade that still lay at her feet, the one that had killed Henry. I got up and turned around. But this time I came in from the right, and found myself behind Hajgar. Hajgar, his eyes still fixed on the fight, had not heard me. I rushed at him, holding my blade in the air. I could already see it sinking into his flesh again and again. But I did not have that pleasure. The ground opened up before me, stopping me dead in my tracks. I looked at the gaping hole, imagining myself falling and being buried alive.

- An attack from the back? Is that worthy of you, little one?" asked Hajgar, who had turned around to face me.

"Did you think Catherine wasn't watching my back? Or maybe it's the work of your friend?

- I will kill you. You've done too much harm to get away with it. David is lost, but he will quickly come to their senses.

My eyes were suddenly drawn to David. He was still fighting body and soul against the rebels. He was being attacked, but he was giving more blows than he was receiving. However, what had my attention was not David himself, but the shadow that was quietly emerging from the pond behind him. Po, soaked to the bone, with a dark look in his eyes and bulging muscles, rushed at him.

David was able to use his powers on the swimmer and they both sank into the water.. Po had more than one revenge on his friend, given the humiliation he had suffered in the forest. I watched them fight in the water for a few seconds, then returned to the foul and ridiculous face of my enemy. Now that one of the attackers was out of the picture, the rebels would be able to take over Catherine.

- I think David will come to his senses sooner than expected.

- Too bad, he had potential, but it's nothing. I still have Catherine and especially our dear queen.

- In her condition, do you really think she can still give you victory?

- Of course, you just have to stop before it breathes its last.

- You are a monster!

- I did what I had to do to get there, that's all.

- I will kill you.

- All talk. That's all you can do, talk, but you get nowhere. You are NOTHING. Just a

It is a human being of some kind who has ended up here by chance.

- The random human has already managed to hurt you, very badly. Do you remember the time you lost control over your beast? It was MY idea. And you know what else? I remember something you said to me earlier. He only listens to me, doesn't he? If I ask him to go on a rampage, he does it? MALGRIVE, KILL HIM!" I shouted, pointing at Hajgar.

Terrified, the latter turned around when he heard the beast's growl. I took the opportunity to step back and jumped to avoid the ravine below, landing behind him. Marine's hair began to light up, Hajgar was about to borrow her powers to launch his attack on the Malgrive.

I grabbed the dagger with both hands and struck with all my might. His hand separated from the rest of his body. Marine, no longer supported, fell and remained still. I could not move my hand beside the bony, bloody hand. Then a scream rang out.

XXII

I rushed to my friend the moment Hajgar realized the wound I had inflicted onto him. He was holding his bloody wound with his other hand, trying to put pressure on the stump. His eyes, unusually bulging, were literally popping out of their sockets. Vines then encircled his ankles and raised him several metres. He was suspended upside down, his bloody stump hanging in the air. The vines wrapped themselves around his skinny legs tightened their grip with every millimetre he walked. His bony knees creaked, causing him to cry out.

I turned my head to the right and saw, among the rebels still standing, David, soaked and with his face in blood, concentrated to the extreme. The little Arborist, once shy and afraid of his powers, had given way to a self-confident man, capable of the best and the worst. I knew now that we should be wary of him. He had lost his temper on several occasions, but I had never seen him so calm. I would have never thought that he would betray us in this way, even for a short time.

A dark mass suddenly rushed past me. Caleb grabbed a vine and pulled as hard as he could. He finally got his hands on Hajgar and pulled with all his might, tearing off all the vines and branches that were trapping him.

- No!" shouted Hajgar. Catherine! Help me!

But Catherine had just been bound and gagged. She could no longer help him. David and Aurora rushed to Marine's side, still unconscious. The rebel put her hand on the queen and the fireflies reappeared. I felt like a spectator in all this chaos. On the one hand, she was a friend who was struggling to live, and on the other hand, my love who was attacking our enemy. He struck, struck and struck again with his huge indestructible fist until his target looked like a shapeless pile of mush. When he had finished, a puddle of flesh, blood and bone lay before him. I retched and turned my head away.

I finally knelt down at Marine's side and took her remaining free hand, the other being occupied by David. Aurora was extremely concentrated, and drops of sweat were beading on her forehead. After long, interminable minutes, she relaxed all her muscles and her hair turned blond hue. She had drawn on her last strength to save our friend, their queen.

- I did what I could, but it needs the help of the stone and a lot of rest.

David took the still unconscious Marine in his arms and led her to the nearest tent. Reassured of his condition, I looked around for Caleb. Still kneeling, facing what was left of Hajgar, he seemed appalled at the state of his fists. The rebels surrounded him and one by one they patted him on the back, congratulating him on his work, but he continued to analyse his hands without realising the rest. I walked slowly towards him.

- Let him go," I said to the rebels, trying to get them to give him some air.

All eyes were on me. Outraged, they finally moved away.

- Look at me!" I said to Caleb, turning his head towards me.

I had stepped aside so as not to step on Hajgar's remains. Not out of respect, but mostly out of disgust, because Caleb had literally slaughtered him.

- Are you all right?" I asked him, seeing his lack of reaction.

- Is it over?" he asked, as if to himself.

- Yes, it's over. We have won.

XXIII

- Alicia!

I heard Aurora's voice calling me in the distance. I was still focused on Caleb and everything else. I was surrounded by blurred movements and incomprehensible noises. I felt as if my head was under water, everything was distorted. But her voice managed to reach me anyway. I stood up as best I could, keeping a hand on my lover's shoulder, a man, who no longer looked so indestructible.

- Alicia!

She now had both hands on my shoulders and was staring at me with a strange look on her face.

- Alicia? Are you OK?

- You will leave.

This sentence had the same effect as a cleaver. Saying it out loud was like a slap in the face. They were all going to leave, right now. I couldn't leave Caleb. He was in shock. He had just killed someone. Even if Hajgar was the worst kind of trash, I don't know if I could have taken his life. Caleb was going to have to live with this on his conscience and I couldn't be there to support him.

- We found your mother, she woke up. You won't be alone.

- Is she okay, then?" I asked him, relieved.

- She's fine. She's just exhausted. I think you and she deserve a holiday. You can rest now.

Yes, now that it was all over and they were leaving.

- Aurora, promise me you'll take care of them. We never really got along, it's true, and

Hajgar's revelations made me trust you and your judgement even less, but I do not

ask only one thing. Take care of them and make sure that everything runs smoothly on Organza!

You have another battle to fight there and I won't be there to see what happens to them.

So I want you to promise me that you will do everything you can to give them the life they deserve.

She nodded and hugged me briefly. In shock, I had no reflex to return his embrace.

- I'm going to see Marine. If her condition allows it, we'll get ready...

I nodded and turned back to Caleb. He looked up at me. Noticing my conflicted state. He came over and took me in his arms. His fists were still sticky with blood, but the only thing that mattered was his body against mine, the warmth that came from it. His touch. I was soothed, until I told myself that this would be the last time I would feel that good. He briefly wiped his hand on his jeans and gently lifted my chin towards him. Our eyes and our lips met for one last fiery, tearful kiss.

Without a word, we joined the others. My mother threw herself into my arms, looked at me from every angle. She looked at the seams to see if I had some kind of wound and hugged me again and

again. I gently pushed her away and headed for the tent where Marine was. David was still at her side but she was awake.

- Hello, beautiful," I said softly.

- Oh, Alicia...

She began to sob. Her condition broke my heart. She already looked better thanks to the rebels Cerebral palsy that gave her some of their energy, but she was as thin as a rail, her eyes were very narrow, and she had very little energy. Her eyes were black and had lost their shine, her hair looked more like straw and her complexion was pale.

I sat down beside her, after David had kindly invited me to do so by giving up his seat.

- I'm so happy to see you again," I said. I was afraid for you. What he did to you...

- Please don't talk about it. I don't want to...

- Yes, excuse me. How are you feeling?

- Better and better. I'll be fine, don't worry about me. I'm sorry, I didn't realise that you were in danger...

- No, no," I stopped her, taking her hand in mine. You didn't have the strength to realise, and you couldn't have done anything. And now everything has ended well. His lust for power drove him to fix my little brain.

- Yes, and to give you back your memory.

- Yes, also.

- I can do something about that if you want," she offered.

- What?

- I can erase your memories. Erasing us. With the help of others of course, but I can do it.

- Thanks, but I got a taste of what my life would be like stuck in my head. I'd rather not.

- What do you mean?

- The others will explain. There will be plenty of time to talk about it on the journey home.

- Are you sure about this? They're clearing the area," she said, "so I know they're not going to be able to do that, their departure was more than imminent.

- All right, then no. I don't want you to erase my memory. I prefer to live with the memory to have known you, to have experienced all that we have experienced, good and even bad, but I don't I never want to forget you again. I never want to feel that emptiness inside of me again, as if it were my own, The missing a part of myself.

- Even for Henry?" she asked.

- Yes, even for Henry. I owe him that much.

She nodded and continued.

- I'll try to talk to you. Maybe we still have that bond between us and despite the distance... It may work.

- I would love to," I said with a shy smile, knowing full well that it would be impossible.



The rebels finished clearing the area within minutes. If I had not seen it with my eyes, I would have thought that no one had been in this area for ages. That is of course if a gigantic ship was not in the middle of it.

Aurora waved at me, then climbed up after the rebels, pulling a Catherine still tied up and snarling. The five of us remained silent. The Malgrive had surely already boarded, for I did not see him anywhere. Heartbroken, I turned to face my friends. They were in line, next to each

other, in front of their ship, like in my worst nightmare created by Hajgar. But this time their eyes were sad and full of tears. Even Po was not an exception. I rushed to him and hugged him.

- You weren't always easy to live with, but I'll miss you, dummy," I said between two sobs. Keep an eye on Caleb, please.

- I will miss you too, you brave little human. Take care of yourself and don't worry I'll never let him out of my sight," he said, placing a kiss on my forehead. And thank you, thank you for everything.

Next to him was David. My wonderful friend with the heart on his sleeve. The one who was confident enough to send Po packing and he almost ended up in the other camp. I hugged him back.

- Take care of Marine, and promise to fight for her. You belong together," I whispered in his ear. I know you're lost, but do the right thing for her," I said, looking at him.

- I'll try. I can't promise you I won't make a mess up there, but I'll try." he said, pointing to the sky with his finger. With what we have discovered, it will be hard to live in harmony with all these beautiful people. But, sorry. I lost my head. I should never have turned against all of you. Against Aurora? In a pinch... but not against you. Besides, I have to take care of my mother.

- I understand, don't worry. I'm glad you came to your senses.

- I don't know the reason. My priority is to take care of Marine. As Caleb said, "one battle at a time".

- Good luck then, in the final battle with the all-powerful Cerebrals.

- That'll do it," he says, winking at me. My powers are actually pretty good." He continued, smiling.

- I love you buddy," I said, hugging him.

- I love you too.

I moved quickly to Marine before bursting into tears. I saw the faces of impatient rebels get out of the ship to see what the hell we were doing.

- No sooner have I found you than I loose you again," I said.

- You will never lose me. I'm part of you now," she winked at me.

She hugged me tightly.

- I have a favour to ask you, or rather to ask the Queen. Can you take care of my big beast? The Malgrive has paid its debt, I don't want anything to happen to it.

- Don't worry, it will be very happy.

- Thank you.

- I've taken care of some formalities, you'll see," she continued. And as soon as my studies are over, I'm confident that I will be well underway to have mastered my power, and then we will be able to communicate.

I did not have the courage to contradict her. I gently pulled myself out of her embrace. I wanted to be sure I had enough time to say goodbye to Caleb. Out of modesty my three friends boarded the ship, but not without a final goodbye and a final 'I love you'. I found myself alone with the love of my life. With hunched shoulders and sad eyes, he looked at me tenderly.

- The dreaded moment...

- Yes.

We were both speechless, not knowing what to say. I felt my throat catching fire and my heart breaking. I wanted to tell him that I couldn't live without him, that he was the love of my life and that there would be only him. But what was the point. We were already devastated, there was no need to add to it.

- I love you," I said simply. And I have since the first time I saw you.

- I love you too. And even when I looked grumpy and sullen, I already loved you.

- Go! Before my heart explodes!

He came towards me and gave me the most beautiful and unforgettable kiss. Then he disappeared into the ship. It blurred and then became invisible. I thought I saw the moon turn green. The silence of the room made it clear that he was no longer there. The birds began to sing again. I slowly joined my mother, who was lying by a tree a little way off. She stood up and took me in her arms. I let out all my pain. My body was jerking and I screamed. The tears kept flowing over and over again. We stood there, which I thought was a good thing. It seemed like hours, intertwined. My mother rocked me, stroking my hair. Once I was dry and exhausted, I got up with difficulty. We had to move on, the rebels had left us some food, but it was going to be a long way before I was back in the comfort of the car. A creak behind us startled us. I received a small blow on my lower back. A big smile crossed my face. I saw the beast looming up in front of us with wonder. A guttural sound came from its mouth. I jumped at his neck, while my poor mother gave a frightened cry. So it had decided to stay with me. Marine told me that he would be happy and safe, but I would never dared to imagine that he could stay with me.

After a long plea to my mother in favour of Malgrive, we climbed on it's back. We got back to the car and travelled the distance to our town for a few hours. Then The Malgrive, unseen for the occasion, followed us, outside the vehicle.

It was time for us to get back to normal life. Of course, we would have our new pet that would always remind us of how much our lives had been turned upside down, but in a way that was very extraordinary.

XXIV

After a few days, I understood what Marine had meant by "I took care of certain formalities". Indeed, everyone had seemed to find it normal to discover Henry's body buried in the forest. The brains of all the people of our small town had been manipulated. My friend had been given a nice ceremony and I had been given a beautiful surprise when I read his will. I had inherited the warehouse, his second home filled with all kinds of books and especially filled with memories. The Malgrive, renamed Pic, because it was not just a number to me, moved in with me. We were far from everything and everyone, so he could live freely without worrying about being spotted by anyone.

As for me, I resumed my studies. I passed my third year with flying colours. I had no merit. Apart from my studies, I had nothing in life. I didn't want to meet new people, even if it was my own or someone else's friends or lovers. It was far too early for either. And I don't know if I would ever be able to do it. I might be, forever, the lonely girl with her extraordinary dog.



Even though I knew deep down that, despite the strength of her powers, Marine could not reach me, I was still disappointed. I had high hopes that I would always be connected to them, and to know what was going on in their lives. I was hoping that Marine and David got to live their love story out and what had happened to Po and Aurora, the unlikely pairing of the two. And I refused to think about what might have become of Caleb. I didn't want to think about him in the arms of another. So I spent my time studying, going for long walks in the forest with Pic or at my parents' house, in the company of Mr. Grisouille, who didn't like my new dog smell at all. We had to inform my father of certain points, as Marine had not taken care of this "formality", and we had to explain to him the disappearance of my mother and especially our state when we returned. We had, of course, kept a lot of details to ourselves. He had already found it very difficult to believe us, and so as not to end up interned, we had made him meet my friend the Malgrive. After turning a blind eye several times, he had to come to his senses and believe our story. I was glad to have my father among the people who knew. I felt less lonely surrounded by my parents and my faithful companion. But life was long and meaningless without David, Po, Marine and Caleb. I was angry at myself for turning down Marine's offer. If I had accepted, I wouldn't spend every second, every minute of my time thinking about them. But, to clear the dark thoughts from my head, I thought to myself that if I had agreed to forget them, I wouldn't have Pico by my side. And then I would have lost everything.



One morning, during the holidays before I started my first year of my Master's degree, I was woken up, not by my huge dog in a hurry to go for a walk, but by a strange light. Pic liked to play with the curtains to let me know that the sun was up and it was time to go. Every day we went for a hike or a long walk in the forest so that he could get some exercise, because this big doggie was hyperactive. So when I was late getting up in the morning, he made me understand that it was no longer time to be idle. Thanks to him, I gained muscle, cardio and dexterity.

But when I opened one eye that morning, I saw, not daylight, but a firefly, just over my head. Thinking I was dreaming, I stood up abruptly and pointed my finger in the direction of the little bug. It dodged my gesture and came to hit me on the forehead. This aggression reminded me of our adventures and I realised that I was not dreaming. Marine had kept her word. She had to be trained by the best to achieve such a feat in only two years. I was amazed that this was possible. My heart raced. I was so happy to see this little light that had annoyed me so much at the time.

- Hello, sweetheart," I said. Good to see you again.