

# MONSTERS DON'T EXIST

Mehdi B.

©2023, *Monsters don't exist*, Mehdi B. All rights reserved. No parts of this ebook may be reproduced without the written permission of the author.

## **Disclaimer: Sensitive Content Warning**

This book contains material that may be disturbing to some readers. It includes scenes of graphic violence, horror, and potentially distressing themes. The contents are intended for a mature audience and should be approached with caution. Reader discretion is strongly advised.

# Table of Contents

Chapter I: The White Screen

Interlude: Judge a book by its cover

Chapter II: The Tunnel

Interlude: Still waters run deep

Chapter III: A Turbulent Night

Interlude: The hungry dreams of the bread market

Chapter IV: The Mine

Interlude: There's a Monster Under the Bed.

Chapter V: The Prison

Interlude: Letter to the Police, June 17th

Chapter VI: The Escape

Interlude: There's Someone in the House

Chapter VII: The Taxi

Interlude: All things come to those who wait

Chapter VIII: Darling Number Twenty-Three

Chapter IX: The Awakening

Chapter X: The Palace of the Strange

Chapter XI: The Prodigal Son

Chapter XII: Astral Journey

Chapter XIII: The Grand Finale

Epilogue

Notes from the Author

## Chapter I: The White Screen

"I'm going to blow my brains out," Jordane thought, staring at the white screen of her laptop. She felt frozen, sitting in the cold, dull ambiance of the café. Around her, a few customers absentmindedly sipped their drinks. At the counter, the staff repeated their gestures like zombies. She had a document open, not getting past the title of her article: the black vertical bar blinked obstinately, urging her to continue writing. The computer switched to sleep mode, and the screen went off, reflecting the image of a young woman with an impassive gaze despite her worry. She avoided the intensity of her green eyes and placed her hand on her thigh to stop her leg from nervously shaking, her foot tapping in rhythm with the taunting cursor. She grabbed the paper cup on the table, sniffed the now cold black coffee, and set it down with disappointment.

A shadow passed in front of the café door, and the chime rang as a man entered: Jordane recognized the newcomer and closed her laptop with a hurried movement. She ran her hand through her chestnut hair as if to distract herself, and the young man's face lit up when he saw her.

"There was a time when we'd meet at the bar, with my beer already served and the next round ordered in advance!" exclaimed Raphaël.

"That was when we were students and could sleep it off in the lecture hall the next day," she retorted to her best friend. He sat down opposite her, absentmindedly picked up the almost empty coffee cup, sniffed it suspiciously, and set it down with a look of disappointment.

"Are you okay? You seem almost worried," he asked, removing his jacket.

"Great," she lied, "but why don't you tell me what you found today?"

He paused, and his smile faded:

"Uh... it's not looking good."

He pulled a crumpled notebook from the inner pocket of his jacket. Jordane grabbed it and flipped through the first pages, where a list of names was inscribed: all crossed out. Raphaël noticed her discreetly touching her necklace, and he added:

"I found nothing in the hospital or town hall files, but that doesn't mean she doesn't exist: maybe we're just not looking in the right place..."

"No worries," she cut in with a smile, "I haven't had my last word!"

"You have a plan? I'm intrigued..."

"Turns out, while you were having a good time with the librarian, I managed to find a guide to take us near the mine. And tonight, we still have to go through the tunnel, so there's that."

She shivered unconsciously at the mention of the tunnel.

"First of all," Raphaël retorted with a mock offended tone, "I did not have a good time" - he marked the last words with imaginary quotes - "but risked, perhaps literally, my behind to get the information. I pulled the 'my laptop's out of battery' trick to plug my USB into the old lady's computer, and she agreed. But I'm so popular with the older ladies that even though I only needed to charm her for the brief five minutes it took for my Trojan horse to download on her machine, she kept me talking for half an hour!"

It's no wonder he's successful, Jordane thought: with his six-foot height, athletic build, ebony skin, just the right amount of scruffy clothes, and semi-long dreads on the top of his head that made you want to playfully fix them.

"All that for not much, apparently," she teased.

"Yes," he hissed, scratching his head. "From her PC, I accessed the building's network, then the town hall with the birth certificates, but no trace of an Inès that fits. I checked the hospital records, but I found nothing even about the accident."

Jordane nodded knowingly: she had known Raphaël for quite some time and knew he was an excellent hacker. Even though she didn't understand much of what he tried to explain about computers, she was well aware that he took his position in a cybersecurity consulting firm very seriously and was passionate about it. By day, he advised companies on managing their firewalls or VPNs, and by night, he committed serious offenses - she was pretty sure one could go to prison for such things - to assist her in her investigations. She wasn't sure if he did it because he enjoyed the risk, liked playing amateur detective with her, or simply because he liked spending time with her; in fact, she had never asked him why he agreed to accompany her. Maybe she should ask him sometime.

"What?" Jordane asked, snapping out of her reverie.

"Are you going to be okay with your article?" he repeated.

"Yes, of course, I always land on my feet," she reassured him. "We still have tonight and tomorrow."

Jordane worked for a magazine titled "Tales from the Crypt." As the name suggests, this quickly popular magazine contained articles on everything related to horror: sections like "Unsolved Mysteries" dealing with murders or disappearances that still baffled investigators, "Someone Under Your Bed" where a talented narrator told terrifying ghost stories, "Love, Murder, and Beauty" being the gossip part of the true crime world, with photos, stolen letters, or interviews with celebrities of the dark world - whether a serial killer or a self-proclaimed vampire - and Jordane's section: "Urban Legends Near You." It involved investigations into urban legends across the country: Jordane did her work so meticulously that at the conclusion of her articles, she often managed to find the origin of the myth. The campus werewolf? She managed to photograph the large dog roaming the park. A ghost in an abandoned house? Just kids meeting up for urban exploration - Raphaël had been decisive in tracking down the pranksters via a Wi-Fi signal. But this time, she had unearthed a gem. She was preparing an article that would be a sensation.

"It should have been a sensational article," she corrected herself, because at the moment, things didn't look promising. A few days ago, while tearing her hair out to find the subject for her next article, fortune graced her with an unexpected - or rather poisoned - gift, as she was beginning to realize. It was Mélodie who handed her the letter, impassive with her earphones plugged in, while they were the last two in the office. Raising her eyebrows and miming a "thank you," Jordane opened the envelope and unfolded the letter on her impeccably tidy desk, except for the four coffee cups stacked inside each other. The content was brief, handwritten: a certain Inès had read her articles and asked her to help prove that a monster inhabited her town, Duli, and was preying on its residents. No one wanted to open their eyes, no one wanted to listen. Classic. A godsend for her.

Excited, she reserved Raphaël's week with a text message and started digging into this mysterious Duli. She discovered that the town they were in tonight had a charged history. A history begging to be told; but every good story had a thread, an Ariadne's thread tying all the pieces together. And she thought she had found it, with this stranger who had introduced her to this town: digging deeper, she even discovered that Inès had her own story, the kind only whispered about in the dark, under a blanket or with a mirror behind.

She had discovered the story of "Crazy Inès," but of course, her Cinderella had failed to send an address or a number: so she took Raphaël with her, determined to track her down and talk to her, willingly or by force; but the more she searched, the more she wondered if Inès even existed. She was a ghost - maybe she was the monster of Duli? Jordane wondered if the letter was just a hoax.

If that was the case, she couldn't settle for what she had so far; her story lacked substance. That "something" that would make it a sensational article and propel her into her editor's spotlight. For now, it didn't even deserve a skull out of five on her horror-o-meter. But perhaps this Inès, who had called for help, was indeed somewhere and was scared. Maybe she was indeed the one from the nursery rhyme, and in that case, she knew she would succeed in helping her, monster or no monster in Duli.

She noticed Raphaël trying to yawn discreetly, so she decided to get a grip and move forward: "Come on, let's explore this famous tunnel."

They got up in unison, and Raphaël began heading towards the exit. Jordane packed her laptop in her bag - a sharp pain in her stomach as she visualized the blank page that would confront her the next time she turned it on - and dashed forward without looking: she was abruptly stopped, crashing into a wall that wasn't there a few seconds ago. She heard a grunt of surprise and had to look almost to the ceiling to see a face both confused and amused.

The first thing she noticed about the man she had bumped into was that he was a good head taller than her. Then, that he had really impeccable nostrils.

"Sorry," she mumbled to the giant.

She took a longer look at him: he must have been in his forties, but had a serene, wise face, contrasting with his sharp gaze. He wore a combination of a wool sweater with a pattern and chino pants that he seemed to have stolen directly from a mall mannequin. Designer collection. Only his tousled blond hair and old-fashioned mustache brought his look to life.

For a moment, he seemed to be looking at something between his collarbones.

"No worries, miss," he assured her with a bard's voice, "it's my fault: I'm too busy spotting door frames and chandeliers to watch where I'm putting my feet..."

He tapped his head to illustrate his joke, flashing a smile, and she had to avert her eyes to her toes to escape his intense gaze.

"Have a good evening," she excused herself, fleeing through the café's exit door.

She joined Raphaël, who had started crossing the road towards his old, half-wrecked Mercedes. She risked one last look over her shoulder: Mr. Giant was already ordering at the counter, indifferent, as if he had completely moved on.

Jordane hated that death trap of a car, older than her and with more kilometers on it: too many times she had seen her life flash before her eyes on a tight curve, or when Raphaël wanted to overtake a truck on an uphill. Once, the car lost a hubcap on a mountain curve, and she was convinced they had lost a wheel. At that moment, she wondered what it felt like to go through a windshield, or to feel the burning engine crash into her legs, cutting her in two. Later, she wondered if she would haunt the curve as a hitchhiker, and if she would make a good ghost. Since that day, she had decreed that she would be the only one to drive that hearse if they were to live past thirty.

She ran to catch up with Raphaël and snatched the keys from his hands: “Not even in your dreams, young man!”

She started the car - it obeyed without even stalling, victory! A plume of black smoke rose from the rusty exhaust, and as the sun was already setting on the horizon, they delved into the winding streets of the town of Duli.

\*\*\*

She had been driving for only a few minutes when she already left the “living” part of the town behind: she could see the first empty houses with windows barred by large planks, overgrown gardens, and trees dead for years. An apartment building had its entrance blocked by a large plywood board, spray-painted with a skull using construction marking paint. Old cars were parked on the side of the road, some with deflated tires or broken windows.

Indeed, Duli was perplexing: with the construction of the coal mine about twelve kilometers away, forty years ago, the town had sprung up as if by magic. With the number of jobs the mine created, the influx of workers eager for employment increased Duli’s population from one hundred and sixty to over five thousand in just ten years. Greedy for speculation and salivating at the promise of profit, entrepreneurs had bet big on this opportunity, developing new neighborhoods and building endless housing. The town, which once had only a gas station and a betting shop, now had a small hospital, several supermarkets, an orphanage, a sports field, and the construction of a shopping center was underway.

However, while the town spread on the surface, its rotten and poisoned roots were going to kill it in a single day: the first accident occurred on March 21st, thirty years ago. An accidental methane explosion caused a large part of the gallery to collapse. Nearly fifty miners were trapped in the dark, dusty bowels of the beast, both entrances blocked by rubble. Thirty days of fruitless clearing and two floods later, the mayor was going to make the painful decision to abandon the search: the general consensus being that the miners had died from lack of oxygen, crushed or drowned. But the most traumatic event of that day would befall the population that very evening. The explosion had occurred next to the storage of hazardous product filters from the mining: the shock wave destroyed the structure, and the products poured into the groundwater. Slowly but surely, a terrible malady insidiously infiltrated the town’s drinking water supply, like a curse, a soft whisper of death: arsenic.

That evening, Audrey Varcia, with fifteen years of service as an emergency telephone operator at the fire station, locked herself in the locker room crying after the nineteenth call from terrified parents screaming that their children were dying before their eyes, struck with horrendous convulsions.

In the end, in addition to the miners, thirty infants, fifty children, and seventy elderly people perished from acute arsenic poisoning. Four hundred people were hospitalized in serious condition. Five years later, tragedy struck again: a riot broke out in the prison just outside the town, leaving all the inmates and staff dead. Only one inmate had survived, but apparently, he had committed suicide years ago. From then on, many people moved away to escape the specter of tragedy, and the town transformed into an empty shell.

Lost in her thoughts, she followed a long curve that gradually plunged into the forest, definitively banishing them from what remained of civilization.

As soon as the car came out of the curve, Jordane shivered when she looked ahead and saw what she had come for, what she had been working on for days...

The tunnel.

## Interlude: Judge a book by its cover

Richard was meticulously working on his craft in the garage of his house, enjoying the tranquility of the place: his wife had left for work an hour earlier, taking their two kids with her, their school being on the way to the hair salon where she worked. As he had the day off, he had decided to use his time wisely by addressing the rodent problem that had started to alarm him: the garage was his sanctuary, a retreat that allowed him to recharge away from the everyday problems by quietly working on his various projects. Unfortunately, sacrilegiously, he had spotted small dry droppings under his workbench for several days, and yesterday he even saw a mouse dart across his personal space, taunting him with its zigzagging gait and shrill squeaks. Since this was his domain and no one else's - his wife Christine didn't even enter it, preferring to park her car in their driveway - he had gone to the hardware store that morning and bought a glue trap to get rid of the pests. Applied and meticulous, he finished securing his sticky mat with lead weights, lost in thought, a sweet strawberry scent emanating from the rodent bait.

He spent a lot of time lost in his secret thoughts, daydreaming night and day, Christine knowing very well after fourteen years of marriage that when he had his thoughtful look, it wasn't even worth trying to talk to him. After fourteen years of marriage, they seemed to know each other perfectly, falling into the routine that the birth of their two children had brought, not having slept together for over a year. Occasionally, Christine had tried to encourage him, sliding a hand into his pants when they were alone in the bedroom, joining him in the bathroom while he showered, but Richard, or rather his lower half, struggled to respond. She had even bought a provocative outfit that she tried to get him to take off, but her vain attempt made her realize something: at forty-two and after two childbirths, he simply no longer desired her. After this blow, she cried for several weeks, alone in the toilet or in her car like a fool, then slowly came to terms with it, and lived to maintain her family life and raise her children.

Richard finished setting up the glue trap under his workbench and observed his work: the next rodent that dared disturb his pilgrimage would pay with its life. He then left his garage, ensuring all his tools were cleaned and perfectly arranged in their proper place, and closed the heavy iron door with the large padlock for which he alone had the key. He was about to return to the house, whistling cheerfully and still lost in his dreams, when his phone rang: not his personal phone, but the work one. He picked up his button phone from his belt and answered:

"Dagard Constructions, listening."

"Hi Richard," said a voice on the other end, "we have a problem with 12 Tilleuls Street: the electrician had to reshuffle his schedule because of a problem with a big client, and instead of coming next week to lay the cables, he's going to have to come in two days, that's his only window. We won't have finished the heavy work in two days, there's still the slab to break."

"No problem," he replied, "I'll postpone the site at 32 for a week, give you Anthony for two days, and I'll be there with the jackhammer in an hour. If you don't mind working overtime tonight, I'll pay you 150 percent of the hour rate, plus 50 percent under the table."

"Works for me, boss, see you later," replied the voice before hanging up.

Richard headed towards the driveway and joined his pickup truck, which had the jackhammer from 32 on its bed, waiting patiently to be used. He got into the vehicle and turned the ignition to set off through the empty and quiet streets of his residential neighborhood.

During the fifty-five minutes it took him to get to the emergency site, he spent ten on the phone reorganizing his staff, equipment, and suppliers to land on his feet - he turned out to be very good at that - and allowed himself to let his mind wander for the rest: being so thoughtful happened to him from time to time, and it was a sign that he needed to start a new project in his garage to occupy his hands and mind.

When he arrived at the site of the house, he was greeted by two panicked employees and an upset client who was afraid that the work would be rushed to accommodate the electrician on time. When he got out of the car, he dictated his orders and detailed the planning for the next two days to his employees, who were reassured to have such a methodical and organized boss. Then, he headed towards the client: he explained the situation with such simplicity and fluidity that the client's features visibly relaxed.

He promised a quality intervention with the tools and reinforcements and resources he brought, discussed his plans for the interior of the house, and even cracked a joke that made the client burst out laughing. An hour of discussion and two coffees later, Richard left with a friendly handshake and a complicit pat on the back. He got into his pickup with the now empty bed, waved to his employees who would be toiling for the next two days, and disappeared down the quiet road.

On the way back, he did some shopping to prepare the family dinner for the evening - spaghetti bolognese - bought various tools he needed for projects, a memory card for his digital camera, and finally returned home around noon. He stored the groceries in the fridge, took his new tools, and headed to his garage, deftly unlocking the padlock with his free hand. Upon entering, he felt a draft of cool air and noticed the small window he had inadvertently left open.

"How could I forget to close this window?" he reprimanded himself aloud.

Going to close it, he realized that some paintbrushes, which should normally be perfectly sorted and aligned in a bucket just under the window, had fallen onto the table or even onto the floor. Around them, he saw little muddy footprints. At that moment, he heard a noise behind him: he turned abruptly, but the empty room didn't seem to hide a burglar. The noise resumed, however, a kind of agonizing wail, and Richard realized that the sound was coming from under his workbench. He approached slowly and crouched down to observe the scene: his trap had worked, but not on the intended target. Mewing in terror, a cat had gotten both paws stuck in the glue and was trying to free itself in vain, unable to move the lead-weighted platform. The poor feline was black in color and wore an emerald green collar: Richard recognized the pet cat of one of his neighbors, Myrtille, who often explored the neighborhood, her daughter even leaving some ham leftovers in the garden to attract and cuddle it. But this time, the cat had spotted the garage window left open - a first, Richard had to admit - and had been lured by something, and the man thought he knew what it was: on the other side of the trap, in a corner, was a small pink object. Approaching, Richard realized it was a mouse's paw. The victim had been attracted into the trap by the sweet aromas and got its paw stuck. Shortly after, the cat must have heard little squeaks from outside and decided it was snack time. The foolish creature then approached the mouse and got itself mired, caught in the trap of a larger predator. Richard imagined the mouse panicking so much, stuck a few centimeters from its greatest hunter, that it gnawed off its paw to escape.

Grim.

The cat continued its desperate mewing, flailing about: it wouldn't be able to escape before Richard poured turpentine solution on its paws to dissolve the glue.

"Hold still, kitty," he said tenderly, trying to stroke its back. "Otherwise, you're going to hurt."

He tried to pet it more to calm it down, then gradually directed his hand towards its head. He wrapped it around the cat's neck, completely covering it, and squeezed firmly. The cat panicked, tried to struggle, but the man squeezed tighter and tighter, his eyes empty. It spat, hissed, twisted trying to catch some air, but its movements became slower, weaker, turning into spasms until they stopped completely. Richard released his grip, and the dead cat collapsed on the ground. The man stood up, out of breath, and adjusted his pants to remove a discomfort in the fabric: he had an erection.



## Chapter II: The Tunnel

Jordane was so excited that she barely had time to release the handbrake of the old car, parked in a recess in front of the tunnel. She rushed into the middle of the road and faced the monument, supposedly a witness to a horror story. She took out a professional camera from her handbag and snapped several shots of the tunnel looming before them. But it was only when Raphaël slammed the car door that Jordane froze, struck by the atmosphere of the place.

The road they were on was crossed by an old, abandoned railway line - another relic of the mines - that passed overhead through the tunnel. Around them, there was only a wasteland, an apparently abandoned warehouse, and a field leading to the forest.

The silence was absolute.

There was not a soul for miles, and solitude gripped them with its icy hand. The tunnel itself was not very long: about twenty meters, and one could see the other end. But since it was unlit, a part was plunged into darkness. Jordane took out a small object from her pocket: Raphaël, who had stayed near his car, recognized her dictaphone.

"It's now..." Jordane glanced at her watch: "8:15 PM. I'm standing in front of the tunnel. The atmosphere is really impressive. It's dark, and we're alone. A deathly silence, nobody for miles. The perfect place for a nocturnal encounter."

She slowly approached until she reached the entrance. She stopped dead, measuring her next step with gravity, as if entering the tunnel would swallow her into a parallel world. A world of vampires, werewolves, and the undead.

She took a step forward.

She didn't know what to expect, but she felt as if she was leaving the world of the living, the heel of her boot echoing in the tunnel, like a bell toll announcing the arrival of spirits.

"There's an energy here," she commented. "No wonder legends are born here, and no one dares set foot here after nightfall."

She continued to move forward slowly, observing attentively. Graffiti, mostly indecipherable, adorned the worn and cracked walls. She spotted an older one than the others, in faded red paint, which she photographed. It read "Inès the Mad's tunnel." Jordane continued forward until she found what she was looking for, in the dark part halfway through the tunnel: a large sewage outlet, almost bigger than her. She turned on her camera's flash but hesitated to take the photo: what creature of the night would the light reveal? Would she see a face disfigured with a sinister grimace the moment her flash lit up the dark lair that every resident of Duli knew?

She stared at the gaping hole, perplexed. Would she end up like Inès the Mad if she took the photo?

No, that legend had been fabricated from scratch. Inès probably hadn't even existed.

The camera's shutter clicked, the flash revealing the bottomless inside of the pipe like a fearful glance into the abyss of the night: empty.

Jordane cast a furtive and ashamed glance at Raphaël, like a child realizing there's no monster under their bed - yet, there really had been one under hers, long ago. But he was absorbed in his phone, leaning against his pile of mud.

With the photos taken, there was only one thing left to do: a little ritual. According to the legend, reciting the incantation Inès had pronounced that night would attract the sewer monsters. With luck, Inès herself might show up.

Here is the story of Inès:

Inès was born to her father Ulrick and her mother Olivia. Not much was known about her father, but everyone in Duli knew Olivia. They called her Mad Olivia. She had led a respectable, even exemplary, life until the birth of her first daughter, Inès, gradually plunged her into postnatal depression. At first, Ulrick chose not to see the symptoms: Olivia talking to herself, Olivia crying alone. Inès slipping in her bath. Inès falling from the changing table. Until one day, returning from work, he found his wife and two-year-old daughter unconscious in the kitchen, their heads in the oven. This time, after the ambulance left his house, he had to face the truth: something was wrong with his wife.

And that's how Olivia started her back and forth trips to the local psychiatric hospitals.

Inès grew up with her father in Duli. Her youth was not easy: when the news spread throughout the town, other children quickly began to mock her. Sometimes Olivia appeared in front of their house: Ulrick would simply call the hospital to have her taken back and wait for the ambulance, locking the doors. But it was harder when she appeared in front of Inès's school: the children had time to throw stones and shout at her while she just looked at them, dazed. The principal would end up calling the police, and Inès would return home still reeling from the other students' taunts.



Then, at the age of twelve, the mine accident occurred. She was not affected, her father being a merchant in the city center, but she was steeped in the heavy tension shared by the town's inhabitants, who still hoped the trapped miners would be saved.

But two months later, hope had vanished, and the entrance was sealed. All sorts of things were said about the accident: rumors circulated everywhere.

That's how one evening, Inès was about to return home by bike, as usual now that she was old enough to come back alone. She had to pass through the tunnel but always dreaded that moment: she had to cross the unlit zone, halfway through, then pass in front of a large sewage pipe, which seemed twice her size. Behind the heavy grate, one couldn't see what was hidden in the darkness, in the depths of the underground.

A monster could take advantage.

It would reach its hand through the bars of the grate and grab her leg: then it would devour her alive, cutting with its sharp claws and shredding with its pointed teeth. At twelve, Inès still had a lot of imagination, and it didn't always help her.

Regardless, she had found a way around it: when she approached the tunnel, she would speed up her bike, pumping with all her might, and she would cross it completely motionless, even holding her breath, hoping she had taken enough momentum to pass the sewage pipe. That way, the monsters would think it was a rock rolling down the road. Or a car. In any case, not a tasty little girl alone on her bike. But that evening, Inès was distracted: indeed, a year after the coal mine disaster, the rumor at school was that the trapped miners were still alive. That they were lost in the city's underground networks and that, blinded by complete darkness, they had turned into night creatures, wandering, devouring rats to survive. So, she decided to whistle a little tune to distract herself.

Lost in her thoughts and song, she forgot to gain momentum to cross the tunnel. She realized it at the last moment and tried to speed up. But, stuttering and changing gears while going too slowly, the chain came out of its gear. She tried to straighten up but failed miserably and sprawled out on the ground just between the two exits.

She raised her head, nothing broken. She sat up, grumbling, when she realized where she was: if she turned her head to the left, she would come face to face with the wide-open mouth and regular steel teeth of the drainage. She wanted to scream but immediately clamped her hands over her mouth. Maybe if she made no noise, the underground monster wouldn't see her. In the dim light, she saw her bike lying on the ground. She wondered if she should grab it and flee with it at full speed. But no, she couldn't: the chain, unhooked, lay a meter away. It taunted her, shining faintly in the dark, reflecting the light of a street lamp at the exit. No, she had to start running all at once, running with all her might and never looking back. Her father would come to retrieve her bike tomorrow.

She swallowed hard, daring not to move, daring not to make a sound. But monsters don't exist. Her father had told her a hundred times, and her father was often right.

"Monsters don't exist."

So why did she feel a breath behind her? No, not a breath. A stench. A foul stench enveloped her, wrapped around her.

"Monsters don't exist."

A smell of decomposition. The same smell as when a wild cat had come to die in their garage while they were on vacation, its belly writhing in all directions, maggots coming out of its empty sockets and decomposed mouth. The same smell, but stronger.

"Monsters don't exist."

"Help me..." she heard behind her.

"Monsters, don't..."

"I'm stuck... It's dark..."

Inès's heart rose in her chest. But monsters don't talk. They scream, and they growl. So she turned around. Behind her, the sewage pipe hid its secrets behind its black veil, only streaked by iron bars. She saw nothing.

"I'm hungry..." moaned the voice that had swallowed her.

Inès cautiously approached.

"Who are you?" she managed to ask, her voice trembling.

Squinting, she saw a slight movement in the hole, but she wasn't sure what she was seeing because it was really dark.

"The explosion... I was lost down there... I'm hungry... And there's no one left..."

"Do you live in there?" Inès asked.

She felt sorry for the voice.

"Help me," it begged. "Take my hand and pull me out..."

Something gently emerged from the darkness, approaching the bars. It was the hand of a human, not a monster. There were five fingers, and not a single claw. But it was dark, and she couldn't see well. So, she reached out to grab the hand to help the poor soul out.

Except it was the hand that grabbed her. Inès screamed: partly because she was surprised, but mostly because she realized the hand was half-decomposed. It was black with dirt and disease, thin, and the nails had been torn off. The hand, gripping her arm with superhuman strength, pulled her against the grille. All she could do was scream, cry, and struggle, but the hand did not let go. In a few seconds, her arm was completely out of sight, and her head was stuck between the cold bars. When the man opened his mouth, the stench hit her full force. The smell of death. The man's mouth was drooling profusely, the blackish, slimy saliva dripping between his few remaining teeth. His eyes were atrophied and half-closed, like a mummy. She saw this decomposing face approaching hers, mouth wide open. She noticed that the man was wearing a helmet on his head. A helmet with a broken headlamp. Like a miner's helmet.

The story goes that she managed to escape. She went home to tell her father everything. A monster had tried to eat her. But her father was skeptical, so she started talking about it to others, and then, everyone around her became skeptical. People began to believe she was like her mother, and rumors spread.

She was never seen again. It's said she ended up in the psychiatric hospital, with her mother. There are also rumors that if you pass through the tunnel late at night, she appears to warn you, that there's a monster lurking.

"Come on, just this little step, it's easy..."

Jordane was too old to believe in monsters. She knew monsters were human, and alive. There was enough violence in the world that there was no need for supernatural creatures. She had been studying urban legends for years, and never once had she seen ghosts or monsters. The haunted church of Saint-Antoine? A patient from a psychiatric hospital who snuck out at night, thinking she was a nun. She had even managed to interview her - the article received a five-skull rating in the magazine, and a copy hung on her fridge. In any case, there was always an explanation. Especially since in this story, everything was bogus: they had leafed through the registers, no Inès or Olivia had ever existed. Nothing in the staff files they had stolen from nearby psychiatric hospitals either - Raphaël had kindly offered to help a nurse fix her computer, after it was mysteriously disconnected from the network. He had also cleverly scanned a public works employee's access card with his phone while infiltrating the cafeteria, but the plans they had recovered showed that the mine galleries and the sewage system were at their closest point five kilometers apart, impossible that an explosion could create a hole that would join the two networks, and for a miner to get lost under the city.

So, she could record herself saying the incantation, and nothing would happen.

She walked forward until she reached the middle of the tunnel, where she plunged into darkness. She looked back: she couldn't even see Raphaël anymore, she could barely make out the light of his phone screen. She looked to her left: the gaping hole was still there. Nothing moved in it. She looked in front of her: nothing in sight down the whole road. Just her, in the tunnel, in the darkness. A gentle wind tickled her neck. Or was it a chill. Goosebumps.

"Come on girl, have courage."

What did she have to lose?

She triggered her dictaphone, and the click made her jump.

"Monsters don't exist."

She held her breath: nothing happened. Nothing moved. Only the graffiti mocked her.

"Monsters don't exist."

Already, her voice trembled a bit more. What was she afraid of? This story didn't exist. Just three more times.

A scratching sound came from her left. It seemed to come from the drainage. Her body stiffened.

"Calm down, old girl, it's in your head... Or maybe it's a rat... These pests swarm in the sewers," she thought to herself.

"Monsters don't exist..."

The scratching again, louder.

She began to panic. Paralyzed, she dared not turn her head to the left. She looked straight ahead. The void. The night. The silence.

The scratching again. Twice.

A thought crept into her mind:

"Everything is pure for those who are pure." No, not that, not now, she thought. Please no...

She tried to calm down; if she panicked, the door she had taken so long to close might reopen and unleash her demons in pursuit.

"Monsters, they..."

The woman who was approaching her seemed to come out of nowhere. She appeared to be about her age, maybe a bit older, and she was wearing a somewhat outdated brown leather jacket with a pair of white jeans. She had impeccably pulled-back ocher-black hair in a ponytail, a square face but an absent look, like a sleepwalker. Jordane felt a cold breath form in her stomach, then climb up her spine to make the hairs on her neck stand on end. Her throat dried up instantly, and she was unable to move. She realized she couldn't even breathe. The woman continued to walk as if she hadn't seen her; but she stopped at her level, right next to her. Jordane heard her teeth chatter and her legs starting to give way beneath her.

"Do not approach the hole, there is a monster inside."

Her voice was distant, like in a dream, but it echoed in her head. Time seemed to stop, and Jordane was unable to produce any intelligent thought.

"I know," she heard herself say as a perfect spectator of her own body: she heard her voice from afar, as if it was kilometers away, or years from the scene.

The woman seemed to nod, then continued on her way behind her. She did not move, still unable to process the scene; it was when a hand was placed on her shoulder that she began to scream.

"Wow, are you okay!?" Raphaël cried, jumping out of his shoes.

She stared at him, panicked: yes, it was definitely Raphaël. She looked behind him, but there was no one there.

"Did you see her?" She stammered.

"See what?" He replied, puzzled.

Jordane frantically looked around her. Had she dreamed? Yes, that was the only plausible explanation. She had made it all up, she watched so many horror movies that her imagination had played tricks on her. There was no need to look any further. That was it.

Was it?

"The rat," she lied. "The rat that snuck into the drain."

"Nope, I didn't see anything."

She caught her breath and managed to calm down a bit.

What a fool, scaring herself like that...

"It's okay," she continued, "anyway, I'm done. Let's go eat something."

"That's the spirit! Off to the steakhouse! Are you treating?"

"Definitely not."

They both headed towards the car, Raphaël with a determined stride, Jordane a little too fast to be natural.

"You know," he resumed, "the only rat I see here is you. How could you book single beds? How did you even find a hotel that offered them? You're pretty strong..."

"The boss watches my expense reports, egghead," she retorted, her voice lighter.

And as they walked away from that place they would never see again, the streetlights began to turn off, plunging the site into oblivion until the sun dared to reappear the next day. Indeed, the next people who drive through this tunnel will surely pass by a graffiti that Jordane had not been able to see because of the darkness, just above the sewage pipe. It had been written a long time ago, and some letters had been erased over time, slightly modifying Inès's incantation. It read:

*MONSTERS DO EXIST*

## Interlude: Still waters run deep

"Honey, can you take Alizé to her singing lesson tonight at 6 pm? I have to cover for a colleague this evening."

Christine was dressing in the walk-in closet while her children had breakfast. She addressed her husband, Richard, who was shaving in the en-suite bathroom. She only heard an irritated sigh in response, but decided she wouldn't settle for that answer today:

"Rich," she repeated a bit louder, "can you..."

"No, Christine," he retorted sharply. "I'm busy tonight, I have a site to supervise."

She slipped on her last shoe and stepped uncertainly towards the bedroom door frame, wanting to confront him since he had said he was free that evening and that work was on "autopilot," as he had boasted, but her courage had its limits. She knew she'd lose her composure if she spoke to him face-to-face. From where she stood, she could see the entrance to the bathroom in the reflection of his mirror, watching his shadow move slowly in front of the sink.

"You told me you were free tonight? That you didn't need to work and your employees could handle everything on their own..."

"Enzo called, I have an emergency to handle," he replied calmly.

"Liar," she thought: she hadn't seen him take a call either last night or this morning. The truth was he had his own schedule and shirked all responsibility, leaving her to handle all obligations and chores. But was she mistaken? She hadn't been by his side all evening: she had helped Alizé with her homework while he drank a beer in front of the TV. He could have stepped away for a few minutes without her noticing.

"But wait," she thought, "isn't Enzo supposed to be on paternity leave?"

He had called the house a week ago to announce the news to Richard since he wasn't answering his cell phone, and she was the one who had picked up and congratulated him on the happy news.

She bit her lip, hesitant to confront him with a lie that would anger him; but this time, she really needed him to take responsibility since she had to close the salon: her colleague was having problems with her stepson and had an appointment at the police station for an identity theft issue on the internet.

"Isn't Enzo on paternity leave?" she asked timidly, stepping back unconsciously.

She saw his shadow freeze for a moment in the bathroom, and her heart raced.

"What are you talking about?" the voice in the bathroom said. "Enzo is working this week, what are you making up?"

Christine frowned. Was he lying? She had indeed received his call last week. Or was it two weeks ago? A spike of anxiety rose in her: had she been mistaken? She was quite tired lately, maybe she got mixed up and he had called earlier? Was it even Enzo she had talked to? She lost confidence in her own judgment and resigned herself to dropping the battle: maybe she had confused the dates...

"Fine," she replied, "I'll call her aunt to pick her up."

She heard Richard put down his razor, and she saw him in the mirror exiting the bathroom and advancing towards her furiously. Her eyes widened in fear, and she pressed herself against the wall of the dressing room, horrified: Richard's outbursts were explosive, and they always ended badly for her. He stood in front of her, menacingly close: his lips still covered in shaving foam, curled back, showing his teeth in a beastly manner.

"Your sister!?" he yelled. "Why involve that meddler when you can't handle your responsibilities? All she's going to do is tell everyone we can't raise the kids and need others' help! You wanted kids, so take care of them!! And I shouldn't have to suffer your incompetence or scheduling issues!"

Anger rose in her, and she clenched her fists so hard it hurt; but she was too scared to look him in the eye. She stared fixedly at a pair of shoes on the floor but managed to respond, without taking her eyes off her pumps:

"I have to cover for a colleague... I'm just asking for help this one time, I've been running around for work and the kids all week..."

She felt Richard's breathing quicken, and without daring to look up, she knew the vein on his forehead was pulsating. He moved even closer to her, almost touching, and she suddenly regretted starting this argument.

"Your job..." he said. "How many times have I asked you to quit? With two kids, you should be taking care of them full-time!"

"But I love my job," she replied, tears in her eyes and her voice trembling, "seeing my clients and colleagues is what gets me out of bed in the morning, they're the only people I see outside of this family..."

"You call that a job?" he said contemptuously. "I earn four times your salary, we don't need it! All you do is style the same people over and over! What's the point? And if you were any good at it, you might have ended up owning your own salon, but no! You're just an employee, doing a crappy job, paid like crap, and you can't even take care of your family! It's pure pride and selfishness on your part. You're a bad mother who puts herself before her children. And you have the audacity to dump your responsibilities on me!"

"You're being unfair, I need this job," she replied. Her voice was just a whisper. Tears blurred her vision.

Richard straightened up, stepped back, and sized her up from head to toe. Then, he finished the dispute with a final blow:

"Why are you wearing a dress to go to work? You think someone is going to look at you? At your age? You're a mother, get a grip."

Then he went back to finish shaving in the bathroom; Christine slid to the floor and began to cry silently, her head in her trembling hands.

## Chapter III: A Turbulent Night

Jordane and Raphaël managed to find a presentable tavern in the city center. Upon entering, they sat at a table and ordered the chef's specialty.

"Do you think you have enough material for your article?" Raphaël asked.

"Mmmh blurf mmmh blurg," Jordane replied, her mouth full of her hamburger.

"Sorry?"

She swallowed her steak-bacon and repeated her answer while focusing on folding her napkin, a sign to Raphaël that she wanted to hide her troubles:

"Don't worry, even if this letter is bogus, we still have some great photos, and I'll embellish a bit about the mine. It'll work out."

They spent the next hour discussing various topics, as was their habit. As the tavern gradually emptied, they decided to move to the bar for one last drink. It was nearly closing time, so the bartender waved away Jordane's wallet and offered the last round on the house. He opened a cupboard under the counter and took out a label-less bottle with a colorless liquid, explaining it was a homemade plum liqueur he reserved for the last stragglers before closing. He poured four glasses: one for himself, two for the ghost hunters, and one for the last remaining customer, slumped at the other end of the counter alone.

They all raised their glasses in the tradition of late-night drinkers and downed the shot, groaning in pain in perfect unison. The phone in the back room rang, and the bartender excused himself to answer it.

"You're not from around here, are you?"

The last customer, a man in his fifties who seemed to have lost a long and hard battle against alcoholism, stared at them as if they were a new species of humans. He wore a three-piece suit that might have been purple or blue decades ago but was now frayed in several places. His hair was slightly slicked but hung loosely to one side of his face. As he seemed relatively sober, Raphaël took the trouble to answer him.

"How did you guess?"

"We're not used to seeing new faces, especially your age. Just passing through? Work or pleasure?" he chuckled bitterly, before adding, "No, it's not possible, no one comes to this godforsaken place for pleasure."

"I work in journalism," Jordane replied nonchalantly.

Indeed, her gossip radar activated: if this man was an old-timer, which he seemed to be, he might have some juicy information.

"Ah, then you must be here for the Palace of the Strange," he replied with a feigned innocence.

"The Palace of the Strange?" Jordane immediately inquired, intrigued.

A carnivorous smile crossed the man's face, but the two youngsters were too far to have seen it.

"Yes," he continued, "the Palace of the Strange was a kind of amusement park, built years ago, back when Duli was still a city full of opportunities..."

He kissed his fingertips and raised them to the sky in a grotesque manner, miming a "rest in peace."

"Unfortunately, it closed the very day it opened, due to a terrible accident... Yes, it was something... We waited for a reopening authorization for years while the park slowly died and fell into oblivion, but recent rumors suggested that the mayor had decided to dismantle it... Such sad news... Such a historic monument..."

Jordane's radar now screamed at her to inquire more about this subject. How had she never heard of this? Perhaps the locals were ashamed of this secret... Yet, an accident at an amusement park's opening should have made headlines. Her instincts told her she needed to question this man. Maybe he had information that could help.

"Do you know the story of Inès?" she blurted out.

The man's eyes seemed to twinkle. He stood up and approached the duo with a heavy, slightly limping gait, like a sinister undertaker. He took the stool next to Jordane and passed his hand through his hair, moving it to the other side of his head. Jordane noticed his eyes were gray and piercing, those of a predator. A deep unease engulfed her, and something inside her suddenly growled to get away from this man. To run and never come back.



"Crazy Inès? Of course, she worked for me. A charming girl. That was what... Eight years ago... Nine years."

Jordane's heart clenched in her chest: was this man saying that Inès had existed?

"You knew her? Are we talking about the same person? Her mother..."

"Olivia's daughter, also mad," he interrupted. "Yes, the very same. Everyone knows the story."

Jordane swallowed and her eyes lit up: her survival instinct began to lose its strength, slowly suffocated by her curiosity.

"Is she still living here today? Where did this legend come from?" she asked, excited.

"I couldn't tell you where she is today, whether she's still alive or not. What I do know is that I hired this young girl for a while to help with the park. It was a long time ago. Charming, as I said, and she put her heart into her work. Yes, yes, an exemplary employee... As for the rumors about her, I'm sure they were baseless. Her mother was really sick, but we now know it's not the kind of illness that's contagious. But I never questioned her about it. It's personal, you see. And she was an employee. But I can assure you it wasn't as sordid as the legend says... Just grotesque fabrications of weary villagers craving distractions. Why are you interested in her, if I may ask?"

"Well," Jordane replied, almost hypnotized by his story, "I'm studying Inès's legend, and I was starting to believe she was entirely fictional."

"Well, I can assure you she existed, I must have several documents with her name on them: work contract, physical assessment, letter of motivation, and so forth. As for her 'misadventure,' no one but her can enlighten you. But if there's one thing I've learned, miss, it's that reality is often stranger than fiction."

"Incredible. And what was your profession?"

Jordane felt a glimmer of hope rise in her chest. Her fear had completely vanished, replaced by fascination. Her interlocutor casually flipped his hair to the other side and leaned in, as if to confide in her:

"I was the owner of the Palace of the Strange."

\*\*\*

"This story stinks," Raphaël commented as they drove in silence for about ten minutes.

Jordane didn't hear him, lost in her thoughts, her gaze following the ghostly white line dividing the road in two. Their strange interlocutor had claimed to know Inès. More than that, he said he had official documents in his possession. With these documents, they might even be able to find him, and she could ask him what the letter he had sent meant... And the icing on the cake... The Palace of the Strange. An abandoned amusement park that had closed on its opening day due to a mysterious accident. It was too good to be true, sure. But even if he was mocking them, this new intrigue would feed her article and might save her career.

"Are you sure we can trust this guy?" Raphaël repeated.

This time, Jordane snapped out of her reverie. Indeed, that guy was shady. They had been struggling for days with this story, and he just showed up out of the blue, potentially the only man in town who had the answers to their questions?

"The documents are still there," he had told them. "They are in my old office. I have a meeting with the mayor's assistant in two days to go over the accounts and safety certificates. You're welcome to study any documents you find useful." He then scribbled an address and directions on the back of a blank lottery ticket for them to follow.

They had no reason to trust this stranger, but Jordane was consumed by curiosity. And she was also desperate to save her article.

"I don't trust him," she finally replied. "Tomorrow morning, we'll thoroughly check out this guy and the Palace of the Strange to see if his story holds water. If it does, we'll go check it out."

"Fine, but even if this story is true, there's no way we're accompanying a shady guy we barely know to an abandoned amusement park..."

Raphaël was right. They had taken many risks during their adventures, but this was asking to end up chopped into pieces and buried under a ghost train. Or worse, mummified and turned into a horror attraction.

"Come visit me the day after tomorrow," he had said. "I'll tell the mayor's assistant you work for me, and you can explore at your leisure. But come early," he added as he left, "especially don't find yourself in the Palace of the Strange at night, you might never find the way out."

Jordane shivered at the thought of their last exchange.



"I know," she replied. "If we have enough evidence tomorrow morning, and it feels right, then we'll go there tomorrow afternoon, by ourselves."

"You and me, in an abandoned Palace of the Strange that's been closed for almost ten years?" Raphaël asked, smiling.

"Unless you're too scared," Jordane teased.

Raphaël laughed: "What could possibly go wrong?"

\*\*\*

They arrived at the hotel just after midnight and decided it was best to rest: a long day awaited them tomorrow. They wished each other good night and went to their respective rooms. While Raphaël collapsed into his bed without ceremony, Jordane sat at the small work desk in the corner of her room, took out her computer, and typed for several hours, meticulously crafting her impeccable prose.

If her day seemed wasted because they hadn't found the lead she hoped for, she was determined to make up for it by working harder before allowing herself to rest.

When yawns began to pry her jaw apart, she called it a day: she removed her makeup, brushed her teeth, her mind blank. Then she put on her pajamas and dove into bed. She checked her messages on her phone - nothing at all - then lay still, seemingly hesitating. "It's not right to do this," she thought to herself, then almost gave up, about to turn off her phone. Her finger hovered over the messaging app icon.

"Damn it," she hissed.

She guiltily opened the messaging app, but it wasn't her name in the address; it was her colleague Mélodie's. She had gotten her password from Raphaël - password2002 - and had sworn not to use it excessively, only in an emergency, but fear was eating her up: she was convinced that if her upcoming article wasn't exceptional, she would be thrown out and replaced in the blink of an eye. So, she needed reassurance, just a little, hoping she wouldn't see an email from her boss offering Mélodie her column. She saw nothing of the sort, just unimportant emails, and was about to stop when she stumbled upon an email exchange between Mélodie and Bastien, another colleague:

"Are you coming to the drink after work tonight?" Bastien had asked.

"Who's going to be there?"

"Pretty much everyone, my mom's watching the kids."

"Even Jordane? That'll be fun lol."

"Uh... I might have forgotten to ask her... Let's just say she wouldn't have come anyway."

"Well then, I'm in! I don't really like her, you never know what she's thinking, and when you point out she's wrong, boy, what a nightmare! Always justifying herself!"

"Hey, don't drag me into your stories! Just come tonight, I'll pay the first round as long as it's not too crowded!"

If Jordane was hurt by this exchange, she almost showed nothing.

"What happens to the cat that's too curious?" she thought to herself, then forced herself to sleep.

Her night had just begun and was already turbulent: she was caught in a nightmare like she hadn't had in a long time.

She found herself in a bed, but it wasn't her hotel room. She had been awakened by something, but she didn't know what: silence reigned in the dark room. She looked all around: wardrobes filled with toys, children's clothes scattered on the floor, she was in her old bedroom. Her eyes fell on the open window above her headboard: was that what had woken her? She got up and timidly inspected the street. Deserted. She got out of bed and put her bare feet on the carpet. Everything seemed normal, absolutely ordinary, yet her heart raced. She was scared, but she didn't know why. It seemed she had forgotten something important, maybe the reason she had woken up so suddenly. A reflection of the moonlight caught her eye, somewhere on her desk: she approached it slowly, while behind her two white orbs shone under her bed.

She stood in front of the desk littered with doll accessories and grabbed the shining object: it was an open powder compact. Beside it lay a folded letter with "For Jordane" written on it. It was the letter Inès had written to her. She held the little makeup box in front of her face, admiring the reflection of her young self. To her left, the two white orbs that had been staring at her emerged from the shadow, revealing a large lizard. The creature crawled out from under the bed and leaped out the window, making the glass clatter in its haste. Jordane jumped and barely had time to see the window slowly return to its initial position. When her gaze returned to the small mirror, she saw a woman watching her from the back of the room. She turned around sharply, but she was alone.

"What woke me up?" she thought. "It was something important, but I can't remember..."

Was it the woman from the tunnel she had just seen in the mirror's reflection? Was it Inès? Her eyes returned to the letter: it was now open, and she could read its contents:

*"Go away, leave here while you still can!"*

She dropped the paper when she heard a voice echo somewhere in the house. She approached the door, stealthily at first, then began to hear whispers.

"Something important," she thought. "Something important is going to happen, but I can't remember what."

She placed her head against the smooth wooden door. She heard someone breathing just behind it. Then someone knocked against the door, knocking it down in one blow.

"That was it..." she thought. "That's what woke me up..."

Then the thing began pounding on the door like a madman. She crawled trying to get away, but the door almost came off its hinges under the thunderous blows. She managed to get up and ran to hide under her sheets, but instead, she caught a glimpse of someone watching the entire scene from outside the window, and she saw the sinister face burst into laughter, like a spectator from another world.

On the other side, the blows got stronger, shaking the whole room. The doorknob jumped in all directions, and when it finally opened, she woke up.

She was now in her hotel room, sitting at the small desk. Except she was still in her dream: otherwise, how to explain that her immobile body was engulfed in spider webs?

Jordane freed herself from her silken prison and saw the entrance door to her hotel room, barred with a heavy chain. Her gaze returned to her hands, and she realized she was holding a dictaphone. Her heart began to beat in her chest: her fingers clenched around the object, and she was seized by a terrible premonition. With trembling hands, she turned it on despite herself.

A static noise came from the device, then her voice was heard:

"It's now... 8:15 pm. I'm standing in front of the tunnel. The atmosphere is really impressive. It's dark, and we're alone. A deathly silence, no one for miles. The perfect place for a nighttime meeting."

A knot formed in her stomach. Why was she listening to this?

"You can feel the energy here. No wonder legends are born here, and no one dares to step foot here after nightfall."

No no no no no... She didn't want to listen to this...

"Monsters don't exist," she heard herself say in the device.

She tried to turn it off, but it wouldn't respond.

"Monsters don't exist."

She threw the dictaphone across the room, but her voice still echoed, much louder now.

"Monsters don't exist."

She threw herself into bed and hid under the covers.

"Monsters, don't..."

She began to curl up into a fetal position, putting her head under the pillow, whimpering miserably.

It was about to happen. If she was hearing this, she knew she was about to go mad. But for now, she only heard the static. The static that was getting louder, as if a malevolent hand emerging from the darkness was turning up the volume of the dictaphone. But for now, nothing was happening, nothing would happen, no.

"Do not approach the hole, there is a monster inside."

And Jordane wanted to scream. She tried with all her might, but her throat refused to produce any sound. Tears flowed down her cheeks.

"I know," she heard herself say again in the dictaphone, "there's one under my bed right now."

This time the scream came out, and she woke up with a start, sweating and in tears.

Jordane spent the following hour trying to distract herself to fall back asleep. She used all her strength to slide the bed against the door, blocking it, as she used to do as a teenager to be able to sleep. But tonight, it didn't seem to be enough. She watched several videos on her phone, compulsively checked her emails and messages - nothing, nada, zilch - and wrote a few lines for her article. However, with every noise she heard, whether it was the floor creaking, footsteps in the corridor, or the mini-fridge in her room humming, a surge of adrenaline overwhelmed her: her dream still haunted her, and she was too scared to sleep.

But the worst part, what truly frightened her, was a thought lurking in a tiny corner of her head. She made every effort not to formulate it because if she did, she wouldn't be able to think of anything else. Every time she felt she was about to think about it despite herself, she buried her head in her pillow and forced herself to recall the ages at which her favorite musicians had died.

She was now drafting the chapter of her article describing her experience in the tunnel. Maybe if she wrote it while fear kept her awake alone in her hotel room, it would be better. Anyway, it was...

*... What if...*

"Kurt Cobain... 27 years old!" she yelled at her mind to silence it.

... the first time she was writing in an unfamiliar place: usually, she wrote on her couch, laptop in hand, with a steaming cup of coffee within reach. But occasionally, when she had the courage to go out, she took a table at the *Collectivo Café* and spent several hours writing, editing, erasing...

*... I must replay...*

"Amy Winehouse... 27 years old."

... since every word counted. Sometimes, Raphaël joined her - they lived in the same neighborhood - and worked across from her, writing strange symbols and convoluted formulas. She once thought that he too was writing little stories where every word counted. Him to crack the safe of a company's server, her to crack that of her readers. They had found a game to celebrate their reunions at the café: the first to arrive gave a bogus name to the waiter for their drink, and the other, upon entering and seeing their comrade at a table, had to find the name of the character that completed their duo. For example, if Raphaël was at a table with a cup labeled "Mario," Jordane joined him with her cup labeled "Luigi" - the waiters didn't even bother rolling their eyes when they gave them their names anymore.

Batman? Robin.

Calvin? Hobbes.

Turner? Hooch - Jordane had laughed seeing Raphaël arrive with "Hooch" on his cup.

However, she rarely spent time at the magazine's office: firstly, the premises were small and noisy - there was always someone on the phone in a single open space, it was impossible to concentrate - and she didn't click with her colleagues; she had attended one or two parties, but she spent her time listening in silence, unable to join in the conversations.

Only one of the girls was kind of nice, showing interest in...

*... I have to...*

"Jimi Hendrix... Uh... Damn..."

*... I have to listen to the recording.*

She glanced at her jacket on the chair: the strap of her dictaphone dangled in the air. She hesitated, but she knew she would never be able to sleep if she didn't check: so, she cautiously picked up the device and held it in her hands, thoughtful.

"Anyway, I just scared myself," she tried to convince herself, "my imagination played a trick on me, and nothing happened."

So why couldn't she press the button?

The queen of horror scared? No, she wouldn't chicken out! She pressed the button and listened.

"It's now... 8:15 pm. I'm standing in front of the tunnel..."

As the recording played slowly, a sense of unease began to envelop Jordane. What had been just a dream now seemed to take on more and more life. Her pulse began to race, and as she had done several times when she was little, she hid under her blanket. She made sure to wrap her feet well, ensuring they didn't stick out of the bed, so nothing could grab them. Her head in the darkness, suffocating in her own hot and ragged breath, she continued to listen attentively.

“Monsters don’t exist.”

She heard it once, then twice, then three times.

“27 years old,” she thought to herself. “Jimi Hendrix, died at 27 years old. What’s with them dying at that age? At 26 years old, I better not get into rock...”

Then, she heard: “Monsters don’t...”

Here we go. Now, another voice would be heard. That of a ghost.

But all she heard was static: there was nothing.

“Jo, girl, you’re really just an idiot...”

And after scaring herself, she slept like a baby.

## Interlude: The hungry dreams of the bread market

Richard sat alone in his pickup truck, looking at his reflection in the rearview mirror on a crisp winter day. In twenty minutes, he would enter the town hall to receive his trophy: he had been elected Citizen of the Year for his meteoric rise in society, services rendered to the community, and the example he set for all the young men of the town. It was the highest honor and greatest distinction one could achieve in the area. He had worked tirelessly all year to earn his title, prepared a simple, humble, but brilliant speech. He wore his finest suit, and his family awaited him at the table of honor in the reception hall. All eyes would be on him. But when Richard saw his own image in the small rectangular mirror that warned him, "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear," he saw only a shadow wearing a mask: as long as he could remember, he had always been an empty being.

He had never felt any emotion, nor could he connect with another human being. As a child, he didn't know when to laugh and often found himself the only one with an impassive face in front of a good joke. In the playground, he didn't know what to do when a child cried in front of him. He didn't understand why people cried, what it meant, or what it was like to be sad. Most of the time, he just walked away; one day, Eunice, a girl in his class, scraped her knee playing on the swing. While a student ran to get the teacher, Richard approached the crying girl, more upset about tearing her tights than the injury itself, and had an epiphany: people cry when they experience something unpleasant. He couldn't empathize with her, felt nothing for her; he had never experienced anything unpleasant, but he had read the word in a dictionary and grasped its meaning.

He also knew that people liked to laugh and that a smile expressed joy; he had never laughed in his life, nor had he ever felt joy. But he knew that, for some reason he couldn't fathom, laughter was contagious. So, believing he was doing the right thing, he started to laugh out loud to bring joy to the little girl. He tried to laugh with all his might, but instead of seeing faces lit up with happiness, he only saw horrified expressions. Eunice cried even more, and Richard was punished for the week.

After that experience, he became more discreet: he learned to mimic others. He learned to survey a room, recognize facial tics and grimaces. He listened, watched. Then he gradually dared to respond, to speak. The more he practiced, the more his responses hit the mark: by the time he was eleven, he even made his first friend.

The child in question was named Véro, and Richard didn't particularly like him. He didn't dislike him either, but he simply thought nothing of him: Véro's father owned his own masonry business and lived in the nicest house in the neighborhood. Richard gravitated towards Véro because he realized that his attitude and confidence made social interactions much easier. He spent time with him, listened, and watched him speak, practicing mimicking his replies in front of the mirror at night while brushing his teeth.

Richard was invited to his parents' house several times and was impressed by its size and the number of beautiful objects he had never seen before. Véro's father was rarely home, but when he was, he made his presence felt, and everyone obeyed him, even other adults: Richard's father, a jobless drunk, lowered his head when talking to other adults.

But it was through him that he discovered an incredibly effective tool for survival in the outside world: lying.

"What does your dad do for a living?" Véro had asked him one day.

Richard was about to answer, but an alarm rang in his head: he had realized that his own father was what the kids in his class called a "loser." He clearly wasn't part of the same world as Véro's father, who had thirty-five employees, a holiday home in a ski resort, and two vintage cars - their car could have been a vintage too, if it wasn't so rusty, had rims, and the exhaust pipe didn't fall off the grille every other day. He had the terrible premonition that if he answered honestly, Véro would realize they didn't belong to the same world, and he would be excluded forever.

"My father is dead," Richard replied. "He died in a fire saving two children from the flames."

Véro said he was sorry, put a friendly and comforting hand on his shoulder, and Richard pinched his thigh as hard as he could to bring a tear to his eye: it was almost too easy.

However, his friendship with Véro would soon end: Richard continued to spend time with him, studying and imitating him. He also took advantage of him by going skiing in their second home or playing the latest game consoles: if he had to describe his best friend with an adjective, it would be "practical." But one day, after Véro turned twelve, he talked to him about a new concept: he confessed he was in love with Rebecca, a girl in their class. Richard had done his research, learned what "love" was, and concluded two things: he didn't need it at all, but it was a vital subject for other boys. So he did what he did best: he observed and imitated Véro. His friend tested his charms on other girls to gain confidence; Richard tested his charms on other girls. Véro courted Rebecca at recess; Richard courted Rebecca. He learned so quickly - much faster than Véro - that it was he who ended up dating her. His best friend, upon learning this, punched him in the face in front of the whole class. He was expelled from school, and Richard never saw him again: but it didn't matter, as he had learned everything there was to learn from him.

After that, he continued his daily life, becoming more and more sociable and slowly building a false image of himself based on his lies and pretenses. He broke up with Rebecca after two weeks because he found her annoying and boring, but he realized that even though he didn't understand and share her emotions, he liked to play with them. He enjoyed making up lies, and he felt a small warmth in his stomach when he saw her cry because of him - he deliberately flirted with her best friend in front of her or passed sweet notes in class, making sure she found them and read the message before passing it to her neighbor. But no matter the rare opportunities he had to do what he loved - lie and manipulate - reality caught up with him every night as soon as he lay in his bed with the lights off: he was empty.

Richard had crafted a stage persona, a highly popular actor in his class, but beneath the mask, beneath the makeup, there was nothing. An infinite void tormented his stomach: it was as if his insides were a desolate cemetery filled with old, erased headstones in front of open and deserted graves, and acid slowly and painfully eroding him. He didn't know what love was, nor friendship, but he knew suffering: powerless against his torment, he found it unjust that he alone had to endure this ordeal. At night in his bed, after spending hours listening to his entrails liquefy, his own grave digging deeper due to his suffering and loneliness, he would fall asleep concluding his thoughts always in the same way: "I want everyone to suffer as I have suffered."

Richard's watch beeped: it was time to make his appearance in the town hall - one o'clock - and be applauded by a hundred people. He noted he had been lost in his world for over twenty minutes: for a few weeks now, he had been spending a lot of time in his thoughts, and if he wanted it to stop, he was going to have to embark on a new project.

He got out of his car, donned his best and most fake smile, and strode towards the metal double doors covered with "Annual Gala" posters featuring his name at the bottom. As he entered, he crossed paths with the mayor's assistant stationed at a table, evidently tasked with greeting the guests. When she caught Richard's eyes, her expression brightened:

"Richard!" she exclaimed excitedly. "The man of the evening in the flesh!"

She stood up, circled the table with small steps in her high heels, and kissed him on the cheeks in a way that would surely make his wife blush.

"How is the most successful entrepreneur of the moment and the biggest donor to the cause of sick children doing?"

"Much better now that I see you in such a lovely dress," he replied with a wink that made her giggle.

"Next time you refuse one of my construction permits, I'll rip off your bra and strangle you with it, you stupid bitch," he thought, smiling.

He advanced further into the packed ballroom of town dignitaries. He was greeted with general acclaim, and some people rose from their chairs, their plates still filled with salad or lobster, and glasses full of champagne. By the time he reached his family's table in front of the stage, he had spotted every face and could put a name and profession to each.

He planted a theatrical kiss on his wife's cheek - "she looks particularly tired and wrinkled tonight," he thought - then climbed the steps to shake hands with the mayor.

"If I had to describe him with an adjective, it would be 'useful,'" he thought.

The mayor began his speech with the help of the microphone, focusing on the small paper written the night before by his assistant:

"Tonight, we are all gathered partly to enjoy an excellent local champagne to our community..."

Someone mimicked a rooster's crow in the hall, followed by a few laughs.

"... But also, as every year, to recognize the work and influence of one of our fellow citizens, contributing to the growth and upholding the values of our dear town. The man I am about to introduce to you tonight has risen among the best from nothing: Richard, whom we have all had to deal with at one time or another, grew up in a very modest family, graduated from our dear high school with honors - this time, someone shouted, "Go Cougars!" and the whole room erupted in a war cry - and started his own construction company at twenty-three. Since then, he has led a dozen people and built half the city, including the house of your servant! In addition to his professional success, his inspiring gift of perseverance reminds us all that we are more than our parents. Richard actively participates in the city committee, in charity work, and in the cultural development of our town. Ladies and gentlemen, please give a round of applause for Richard Dagard!"

The crowd complied with thunderous applause, women congratulating and kissing Christine. Richard stepped forward, first warmly thanking the mayor and then the audience. He pulled out a paper from his pocket and placed it on the lectern: he had prepared a speech that was meant to be personal and intimate but was actually a fabric of lies and hypocrisy. If he had to tell the truth tonight, if he had to bare his soul, he would take the microphone and say:

"Ladies and gentlemen, first of all, I absolutely do not want to thank my wife for her support. To tell the truth, I don't love her and never have. I don't hate her, I just have no interest in her. I married her to blend in, so you all would look



at me with a confident and reassured air. Of course, I take pleasure in manipulating and torturing her. It's a little game I like to play: how many years can I live, share everything with a person without ever being unmasked? How long can I lead my secret life right under her eyes? I have control over this human being, and it reassures me.

To be honest, she never supported me: the more I am surrounded, the lonelier and more distant I feel. The demon consuming and devouring my flesh demands a connection, the encounter with the being who will merge with me, but in truth, I love no one. I despise you all, you who are so weak and insignificant. I am so much smarter than you all. You deserve to be my slaves, to suffer in my place. Especially women, I hate women.

You want a speech? You want me to talk about myself? I don't exist. I am invisible. I am nothing. I only have my thoughts. I take refuge in my thoughts all day. I created my own kingdom, and there, I am the king: I do not suffer.

I created my first kingdom when I was seven years old. Even then, I hated women without knowing it. I had a house, a barn, and a well. At first, I imagined trapping a being in this well: it was more an undefined and almost ghostly white shape, sitting at the bottom of the darkness. At first, I just watched it. Then, around eight years old, I spent more and more time there: my life was increasingly dull, and I suffered more and more. So I returned to the well: already, I was no longer following in class, and I spent all recess hidden alone behind a wall. I drew circles on the ground with a stick, or in my notebooks with a pen. But my mind was elsewhere: I didn't know why, but I hated the white shadow at the bottom of the well and wanted it to suffer like me, so I threw stones at it. I poured water. Around nine years old, my academic results seriously began to drop, and I left all my drawings lying around: already, the shapes were vaguely feminine, and red scribbles came out of their mouths. My parents were informed, but since they couldn't afford to send me to a psychologist, my father just beat me up.

But I was smart, smarter than everyone else, and I quickly understood that I would be left alone if I completely hid this part of me. So, I attended classes, became the top of my class, and blended in with the others, pretending to have friends. Then, they left me alone; but I spent more and more time in my kingdom: at fourteen, the shadows had faces - faces I knew, girls from my class, teachers, the weather girl - and the well had been replaced by a secret room in a garage: at fourteen, I already knew what I wanted.

But by constantly living in my kingdom, hiding it from the world, it eventually consumed me: thought turned into fantasy, then into desire, then into need, until it became an insatiable urge. The more my power grew in my universe, the more I seemed to lose control in my real life.

At seventeen, I always had the same fantasy in mind: I relived the same scenario over and over, a hundred times, a thousand times, ten thousand times. I revisited the scene, studying every variation, every unforeseen event, to control everything from A to Z. During family movie nights, my parents didn't even see me practicing tying and untying the same knots on a string; or maybe, they pretended not to see.

Today, my fantasies completely control me, and I can only restrain them temporarily. I feel the time approaching, I am like a wolf sensing the full moon's arrival, and you will see: everyone will hear me howl."

Richard cleared his throat: he observed the room in front of him and recited the speech he had prepared.

"Ladies and gentlemen, first of all, I absolutely must thank my wife for her support, and especially her courage in putting up with all my quirks..."

Everyone adored it.

\*\*\*

"Honey, I think tonight you're going to get the full Christine experience..." She whispered in her husband's ear on the way home in the late afternoon, visibly drunk.

Richard responded with a light caress between her legs, which she seemed to enjoy. She was wearing a very classy and very short black dress, and her cheeks were slightly flushed from the champagne, or perhaps excitement.

"What a nuisance," he thought.

They got home around six: Richard had barely closed the door when Christine's dress slipped to the ground. She let out a complicit 'oops' and headed to the master bedroom - the kids were at their grandparents'. Richard sighed but deemed it wise to indulge her whim this time: he felt that the rope was about to snap, and a cranky Christine would seriously hinder his plans if he wanted to embark on a new project now. He began to undress, made a detour to the kitchen to pick up an item, and entered the bedroom.

Christine was not very imaginative: she was rather down-to-earth, and her sexual preferences reflected that: if Richard explained his fantasies to her, she would scream at the top of her lungs and run down the street. But he wanted to give her the full experience to be left alone for a while, and he started with a massage. He took care of her, with hands, mouth, then made love to her tenderly. The performance lasted a good half-hour, during which one of Richard's hands was under the pillow.



"Looks like kiki is back in action," breathed Christine, throwing herself into her side of the bed, sweaty. "That was amazing, honey. Was it the reception that gave you strength, or my dress?"

"A bit of both," Richard replied.

Then, he waited for her to get up and go to the bathroom to shower before removing the item he had hidden under the pillow and which he held throughout their lovemaking to manage an erection.

"I have to finish something in the garage!" he called to his wife before leaving their room.

She replied something in a voice muffled by the sound of the shower, but Richard was already out: he returned to the kitchen and put the kitchen knife back in a drawer.

\*\*\*

When he entered his garage, he made sure to lock the door behind him, as always, to ensure his privacy: when he got married, it didn't take long for him to realize that he could never abandon his double life, and that he would have to create a personal space to continue working on his projects away from his family's eyes. In recent weeks, he felt powerless against his fantasies that were getting the better of him: the urges were so strong, the need so great, that the memories he had accumulated were no longer sufficient. He felt the emptiness inside him tearing him apart more than ever, the loneliness gnawing at his insides, and was desperately in need of a connection.

He went to a section of red brick wall at the back of the garage and pulled out a cabinet filled with various tools: facing the bare wall, the bricks looked perfectly uniform and aligned; but he carefully removed a group of four, revealing a small secret space in the wall. In the small hideaway, there was a plastic container: he removed it, being careful not to touch the numerous nearly invisible fishing lines forming a makeshift alarm. Each wire was connected to a detonator positioned just above the container, and if a third party were to discover his secret cache - especially the police - they would touch a wire, triggering the device that would ignite a thermite bar salvaged from a welding site, burning the contents of the container with a flame of over two thousand degrees.

Richard nevertheless managed to remove his treasure box skillfully, without triggering his security system: it was filled with various objects such as an ID card, a necklace, a watch, underwear, or sunglasses. Each object he considered unique and sacred was a souvenir belonging to one of his darlings.

A darling was one of the girls with whom he had shared a privileged moment, and whom he had worked on to try and find a connection: even though he had never experienced the fusion he had always hoped for, he had had with these girls, his darlings, almost-connections that allowed him to regain control over his real life and relieve the demon that tortured him. At least, for a certain time: this box contained the memories of his darlings eight to seventeen, not discovering the importance of souvenirs before darling number three, and having had to dispose of the memories he had accumulated before eight, as his mother had stumbled upon them without knowing what they were.

He knew that keeping souvenirs might seem like the most stupid thing to do, being evidence that would send him directly to prison without passing go, but his fantasies were stronger than him, and they demanded sacrifices so often that he bought time and temporarily relieved himself by taking souvenirs and reminiscing his favorite almost-connections.

Except that today, even by feeling and manipulating the bracelet of his darling number thirteen between his hands, he couldn't silence the howls of the demons that invaded him: he would have to start looking for his next darling.

He knew that now would begin a project of several months of intense work: first, he had to find love at first sight. He would now reserve his evenings to patrol by car in the region, go to supermarkets, cinemas, or bars, and observe. He would watch every woman, study her until he found the love at first sight that would allow him to finally experience a connection. It could take weeks, even months: he would nevertheless dedicate several hours each evening to it, an extremely serious and important commitment. Then, once he found his future darling, he would spend several more weeks tracking her to note all her actions and movements, until he was prepared enough to pay her a visit.

Richard stored his memory box and returned to the house, making sure everything was perfectly put back in place and his garage well locked. He found his wife in front of the television:

"Christine," announced Richard, "Frank just called me, he heard about my award and proposes a poker night: don't wait up for me tonight."

"Okay, honey," she replied without looking at him.

Richard was almost disappointed that she didn't make a scene, it would have added a bit of drama to his day: he was lying, of course, Frank didn't even exist. To peacefully take part in his project, he would have to make her believe that he would be doing overtime, or that he would sign up for an activity. Christine swallowed his lies with a disconcerting credulity: she was so stupid that she didn't notice that every time he was absent and particularly distant, a woman disappeared in the region. She didn't even have the presence of mind to accuse him of cheating: she was really naive,

but in the end, that was why he had married her, and it made his life much easier.

He then slammed the door behind him: a long evening of work awaited him.

## Chapter IV: The Mine

Jordane woke up around ten o'clock. A ray of sunlight was filtering through the curtains, now warming her cheek. She sat up in bed, her hair falling over her face: despite her misadventures at the beginning of the night, she had rested well - fortunately, because she had a long day ahead of her. She checked her phone and cursed when she saw she was late: she had arranged to meet Raphaël at nine. She jumped into the shower, dressed quickly, painstakingly straightened the bed, and dashed out of her room. Heading to the hotel cafeteria and finding no one there, she filled two cups of coffee and made her way to the back courtyard.

The hotel's green space was hidden from the world, encircled by a bamboo forest. There was a pool - covered with a tarp, as summer was still a few months away - several wooden lounge chairs, and multiple resin tables. The grass was clean and neatly trimmed, so Jordane took off her Converse and walked barefoot towards the back of the yard to join a person lounging in a hammock, a laptop on their stomach and earphones in their ears.

She stealthily moved behind her unsuspecting victim - fortunate for her, she only needed not to be seen, as her giggling went unnoticed - and picked up a dead leaf from one of the trees from which the hammock was hanging. With a meticulous and careful gesture, more akin to a bomb disposal expert, she tickled the ear of the poor soul. In a frantic and rather comical motion, he slapped his ear, emitting a garbled cry that resembled an Italian canticle, and almost toppled over. Raphaël turned to Jordane, who was trying to contain her laughter with both hands:

"May the great Cric eat me," Raphaël exclaimed with a smile, "if it isn't Jo, the sleeping beauty!"

"Good morning to you too, Rafiki," she replied, handing him a cup.

"Perfect, this is exactly what I needed. Jo, grab a chair, you're going to love this," he said, pointing to his laptop.

She went back and forth to the folding chairs and picked the first one she came across. She sat down and Raphaël handed her the laptop: on it, there was an article titled "The grand opening of the Palace of the Strange for Halloween." Occupying a good quarter of the page was a photo of two men shaking hands. On the left, the mayor of Duli, but younger than he was today. Maybe a good ten years younger - and definitely ten kilos lighter. He wore the falsely radiant smile of a politician on the campaign trail. On the right, at the other end of the handshake, was a man in his fifties, with a piercing gaze even in a newspaper clipping, his hair slightly slicked back. His face, rather in poor shape, bore a forced smile that made him look sinister and mysterious. No doubt, it was the man they had met at the tavern yesterday. Except in ten years, he hadn't aged a day. Strange.

Jordane skimmed the article: the Palace of the Strange was located outside the city, about a twenty-minute drive away, and construction had taken six months in total. Targeting a family audience, the park was to offer attractions, museums, exhibitions, and shows. The owner, one Oswald W. Lucas, was eager to welcome the inhabitants of Duli for the grand opening on October 31st. The article stated that he had built his fortune in the fur export business in a land far to the east, but had always been fascinated by all sorts of oddities. He often went to the circus, fairs, and magic shows with his parents as a child: having now retired, he had settled in Duli a year before starting the construction of his fairground.

"Interesting," Jordane noted. "This guy seems to have come out of nowhere..."

"I found an Oswald W. Lucas," Raphaël replied as if anticipating the question. "A luxury fur magnate, if you can call him that."

"I think these days we call them furies," Jordane interrupted.

"Don't put images like that in my head," he laughed. "Anyway, I found photos of him when he was young, it seems to match. I think he's clean, at least in terms of his background. Check the next file."

Jordane clicked on the next PDF and came across another article: this one, tiny with barely a title and description, didn't even have a photo. It was a border article filling the empty space next to a piece on the supposed danger of 4G antennas and Wi-Fi waves.

"Palace of the Strange, temporary closure due to an incident causing many injuries. Investigation ongoing," she read aloud.

"Looks like our good old park owner has greased the palms of Mr. Mayor and the press to hush up the matter, Jordane continued. Mr. Oswald, I'm starting to find you very interesting."

\*\*\*

They joined Ed in a small parking area at the edge of the forest: surrounded by tall pines, the area was delineated by logs laid on the ground and covered with dull-colored needles. They parked the Mercedes next to an old, faded pickup

truck, its bed filled with various old tools. After turning off the engine, Jordane got out first and looked up at the sky to admire the only patch of blue sky available to them: they were at the foot of the hillside that housed the famous Duli forest, whose tree roots alone knew the dark secrets of its mine. It seemed that with the first step on the winding path between the woods, the foliage of the trees would envelop them with their majestic and intimidating presence, brushing their shoulders or grabbing their ankles from time to time.

"Oh, what are you doing here?" she heard exclaimed to her right.

She walked around the car to find Raphaël crouched next to his door, vigorously petting a dog: the Husky was wagging its tail frantically, drooling profusely, and licking his new friend's fingers to encourage him to continue the affection.

"You're a handsome one!" he complimented, burying his face against its muzzle.

The dog barked proudly in return, as if to say, "I know!" and began sniffing the car tires.

"Come pet him, Jo, he's so soft!" he exclaimed.

"No thanks," she retorted warily, "you know I don't like dogs, and even less so displays of love with flea-ridden, germ-filled bags of fur..."

The poor creature, seemingly hurt, threw itself into Raphaël's arms for consolation, but a few seconds later, it stood up abruptly, ears erect, alert to a sound only it seemed to hear.

"TOGO, HEEL!!"

The raspy voice echoed from the edge of the woods: the two companions stood up and watched Togo trot nonchalantly toward the trail to join a figure that gradually emerged from the shadow of the forest.

Ed appeared before them, a man in his fifties, worn by either work, alcohol, or probably both. He wore a green work overall, hunter boots, and a half-frayed woolen hat.

"My dog doesn't bite, but he can be very clingy, even with strangers. Some guard dog," he said by way of greeting.

He dragged himself over to them, his dog joyfully orbiting around him, then fished in his pockets for a half-smoked cigarette, which he proceeded to relight.

"I hope we're not late," Jordane ventured to break the ice, "the road was a bit harder to find than we thought."

"You got the money?" he asked, completely ignoring her comment.

Jordane and Raphaël exchanged a quick glance, and she pulled out a wad of bills from her pocket, the amount they had agreed on over the phone three days earlier. Ed eyed it, and when he took the money in his hand and realized its authenticity, he relaxed slightly:

"Sorry," he mumbled, shifting the cigarette to the other side of his mouth with a flick of his tongue, "I was sure all this was just a bad joke or something... That someone would want to visit this place... it's the first time I'm hearing about it, and I was born in this rat hole!"

He pocketed his dues and turned his back to return to the trail: Jordane and Raphaël exchanged another look, he shrugged, and they telepathically concluded they should follow him, their day of exploration beginning.

"You said you're a journalist?" he asked without turning back.

"Yeah, that's right, I have a camera and even a real notebook," she replied, snapping a picture of their guide disappearing among the pine branches with her Nikon.

"Don't write down my name, huh? And no pictures of me. It's not well seen by the locals to hang around this side of Duli, it's something people here want to forget."

Togo barked solemnly in agreement. And so, they left the daylight and delved into the forest: beneath their feet, fifty bodies lay in their communal grave for decades.

"But was that all that lay in the bowels of this mine?" Jordane wondered.

\*\*\*

They had been walking for five minutes in silence: Ed about ten meters ahead - despite his age and appearances, he kept an excellent pace - and Togo joyfully gamboling now at his feet, now around Raphaël. With the ambient gloom, one might easily think that night was about to fall and not that the morning had barely started: the trail zigzagged between the trees to counter the rather steep slope they were climbing, and one could barely discern its beginning or end, blending into the darkness of the forest.

"Arsenic..." Ed shouted back to them, gesturing towards something on their left.

When they caught up to him, panting, they found a tree, or rather its ghost: the white, leafless specter of the dead pine stood, a relic of the deadly poison's passage through the town's lands.

"You'll see more and more as we get closer to our destination," he continued.

Jordane snapped a photo of the carcass.

"This whole damn forest is dead..." he lamented.

"And the animals?" Jordane asked, "Did they die from the poisoning too?"

"No, not that," he replied. "They died because of the mist."

"What mist?" she asked, puzzled.

"You don't know this story?" he continued, "Well, that's not surprising. At first, no one believed me, but it took a smartypants with a diploma from who knows where to come and give the answer, much later. And by then, people in Duli didn't want to hear about this disaster anymore, so it didn't even make the papers. But I was there. I was there the day of the accident, when the mist killed my sister."

\*\*\*

Ed opened his water bottle and poured some into his hand for Togo to drink. The dog lapped it up eagerly and then gave a joyful bark. He had known this pooch since it was just a puppy and had had him for nearly five years now. He had named him Togo, after the sled dog that participated in the 1925 serum run in Alaska. History remembers Balto because he was part of the team that covered the last fifty kilometers to the village and had a more marketable name for a newspaper article. But Togo had covered almost four hundred kilometers before retiring, ignoring the relay of other dogs every fifty kilometers: he just didn't have the luck to be present to receive the medal. Ed's dog was old enough that he had been well-trained and didn't cause trouble, but not old enough to enjoy a good early evening nap on the porch; so, he made sure to exercise him before returning home to have some peace in the evening.

The kids had asked him what happened on the day of the mine accident. It had haunted him all his life, and even today, he would sometimes wake up at night screaming his sister's name, his heart soaked in sweat and his soul filled with guilt.

Every time, Togo was there at his bedside to comfort him.

He had only him: after his sister, then his parents, and finally his wife, he had lost everything.

"Duli took everything from me," he thought bitterly.

He didn't want to revisit that day, but the kids had offered him a good sum to walk them through the forest. All that to follow the trail, then veer off into the woods to find one of the sealed entrances.

He could grant them that much.

He looked around him: in his youth, this forest was teeming with life, the rustling of leaves as squirrels raced, the songs of birds; and now, only the oppressive silence, or the distant crack of a dead branch collapsing, accompanied them in this cemetery.

"I was a child when it happened," he began...

\*\*\*

Ed was twelve years old when he lost his sister. They had ventured into the forest, as was their habit, Ed to find sticks to add to his collection, and Yvette, his younger sister, to pick up pine cones. Their parents lived at the edge of the forest, their father being a fish warden at the lake on the other side of the hill. A river flowed down the slope and skirted Duli to lose itself in a larger river, miles away from the town - the end of the world for them. Every Sunday, Ed went fishing with his father, but on Saturdays, he was in charge of taking care of his little sister, so he took her with him to the forest, where she could play alone without bothering him.

"Can we go to the cabin?" Yvette asked her big brother.

"No, mom said we're not allowed to go there," he lied.

In truth, he just didn't want to go there: the "cabin" was actually a hunter's shelter, a bit deeper in the forest - adults used it for deer hunting, but it wasn't the season - and apart from that, there wasn't anything interesting to see.

"Pleeease, I want to go," she pleaded.

"No," he repeated as he kicked a pile of dead leaves.

Eventually, Ed found a straight stick that he deemed satisfactory for his collection: in his imagination, it was a gladiator's bronze sword, sharp and powerful enough to kill the lions of the Colosseum.

"Can we go to the cabin now?" Yvette persisted.

Ed sighed:

"Alright..."

"Yay!!" his sister exclaimed in delight.

Now that he had found his weapon, Ed felt capable of venturing further into the forest: if they encountered a deer, Ed could slay it with a single swipe of his saber - his stick had now become a hefty pirate's sword, sturdy enough to open a treasure chest with a flick of the wrist. They thus headed towards the hunting shelter, Ed staying back to keep an eye on his sister. They left the trail and walked a few hundred meters to reach the shelter: it was a simple wooden platform raised two meters high, with a rudimentary ladder for access. A swarm of old beer cans and hunting rifle cartridges littered the ground.

He hit one of the cans with his baseball bat - he was now a popular player in the minor league - which flew off with a metallic sound; meanwhile, his sister clumsily climbed the ladder to reach the top of the shelter.

"Don't fall," he called out to her.

"No," she said confidently, as if wondering why someone would choose to fall.

She sat on the edge of the structure, her legs dangling on either side of the vertical bar of the rudimentary guardrail.

"We can't see anything from here!" she yelled, "Not even our house!"

"Well yeah, banana," he retorted, "did you think you'd be taller than the treetops?"

They spent a long time each doing their own thing: Ed pretended to have epic saber battles with his new toy, and Yvette sang nursery rhymes while swinging her feet in the air, until she broke the silence:

"I'm bored," she suddenly declared. "How about we go to the lake?"

"No," Ed replied, "I don't want to climb all the way down there. And it's going to get dark soon," he lied.

"Okay, okay," his sister resigned, "let's go back."

She began to climb down the ladder backward, making sure of each step, while a few kilometers away, a pocket of methane underground exploded.

First, they felt the ground tremble under their feet, a sharp and brief jolt, as the shock wave traveled through the forest: trees shivered, crows screamed as they took flight, and a rain of pine cones and needles fell upon them. Yvette, still on the last step, fell on her buttocks and let out a cry of surprise:

"Are you okay?" Ed worried.

"Yes," she replied, getting up, "I just fell..."

A second rumble rose beneath them, this one much longer and more diffuse than the first. It wasn't strong enough to rain down more pine cones, but the forest seemed to tremble in its entirety, shaken to its very core.

Then nothing.

The two children had intertwined without realizing it.

"Do you think it's the lake monster waking up?" Yvette asked, pointing to an invisible spot, up the hill hidden by the thick trunks of the pine trees.

"No," he fretted, regretting having made up that excuse a long time ago to avoid climbing the long slope with her that would take them to the lake's edge. "There's no monster there."

"Then what is it?"

"Just a little earthquake," he reassured her, "it's over now."

Ed saw her relax and loosen her grip, but he thought it was probably time to head back: he sensed something was not right, but he had no idea that the second tremor had sealed the fate of the miners, now left to their own devices in the



clogged arteries of the forest, just beneath their feet.

"Let's go back," he declared.

The forest was completely silent: no birds singing or taking flight, no cracking of branches or rustling of leaves. The atmosphere weighed on him, and he felt claustrophobic, crushed by this tension that built up without breaking. He started to turn back when a rustling sound came from behind him: "Oh, a rabbit!" exclaimed his sister. Then Ed saw out of the corner of his eye the animal running at full speed down the slope toward the edge of the forest. He fixed his gaze on the hill: first alerted by small, sharp noises, sounds of branches shaken rapidly approaching, then colored dots detached from the darkness, high in the branches. A swarm of panicked squirrels dashed from branch to branch, fleeing toward the city. They dropped needles and twigs in their wake, eliciting a cry of ecstasy from Yvette.

"What's going on, Ed wondered. Are they fleeing something?"

"Did you see that?" his sister exclaimed. "They're all leaving the forest!"

"We need to get back..."

He was cut off by a gigantic shadow that brushed him at an astonishing speed: it was like being brushed by a train, a sound of hooves clapping in his ears. He fell backward from the shock and barely had time to turn around to see the deer disappear into the darkness, joining the other animals.

"That was close!" he exclaimed, getting up, trembling.

Yvette was starting to get scared, hiding behind a tree, her gaze fixed in the direction of the hill, or the lake.

What if there really was a monster there?

"What's that?" panicked Yvette, pointing at something in the darkness.

Ed started to look as well, then saw something moving slowly among the shadows. He took a step towards the shelter, stepping on a branch, which made him jump.

"What are you doing?" implored his sister from behind her tree.

"Don't move," he reassured, "I'll see better from the top of the cabin."

He climbed the ladder agilely and found himself up high, leaning against the guardrail. From here, he could see a little better what was coming down from the lake: a thick, whitish mist was slowly descending the hill, hugging the ground, coming their way. The dense fog was spewing from the water body, licking the ground and embracing the trees in its path, advancing straight towards them. They were motionless as the waist-high white haze, now just a few dozen meters away, approached. They heard a mournful wail, echoing among the trees, then a shadow emerged from the mist: a doe limping, trying to outrun the thick mass swallowing everything in its path. She left behind a trail of blood, flowing from a massive bite mark on her flank. She continued to run but collapsed near them with a death rattle that could wake the dead: Yvette watched with wide eyes, unable to turn away from the horror. Ed, however, had his eyes fixed on the place where the flesh had been attached: a bite of that size could only have been made by a bear, and there were none in this forest.

"Unless it's the lake monster," his panicked mind continued.

The doe stared at Yvette with its big black eyes, panting heavily, as the pristine mist slowly enveloped them: only the animal's head and the upper body of his sister emerged; the rest swallowed under the milky river. Around him, Ed saw only the expanse of mist advancing slowly between the trees like a lava flow. Only their ragged breathing broke the dreamlike silence. He dared not move, standing on his perch, condemned to watch helplessly as the endless white sea passed his sister and the poor wounded animal. Then, a few moments later, the beast let out a final gasp and collapsed on the spot, disappearing into the fog.

"Ed, I'm scared..." sobbed Yvette.

"Come join me!" he implored in return: he was terrified, his instinct forbidding him from approaching the fog.

"I can't... I don't feel good, it stings..." were her last words.

"It's going to be alright," he sobbed in return, his hands glued to the railing of the shelter.

What they didn't know, and what would be discovered many years later, is that the explosion of the methane pocket that occurred that day in the mine had caused a landslide behind the hill. The small lake, less than three kilometers from them, rested on a layer of volcanic earth: for centuries, carbon dioxide had accumulated at the bottom of the lake, trapped under the pressure of the large body of water. This landslide, of phenomenal force, had turned the layers of water and released all the trapped gas. This gas had to come out of the water in the form of a huge column, then, being heavier than air, descended to the ground and spilled out as a thick white mist. The scourge covered the entire forest below, asphyxiating all the animals too slow to escape.



Yvette leaned against the tree, only her face appearing from the deadly bath, her eyes half-closed: she coughed one last time, then simply stopped breathing.

\*\*\*

Many years later, Ed would stop at this point when telling this story to two young strangers; he would keep the end to himself because he hadn't decided whether what he had seen was real or the product of his imagination. Because then, he had started to cry uncontrollably: Yvette wasn't moving anymore, her eyes open, looking far ahead, while he, up in his hiding place, could only wait for the white sea to disappear. Why hadn't he come down to join her? Why hadn't he made her climb up with him to save her? Why had he remained safe and helpless, while he was supposed to watch over his sister? Was he a coward? What was he going to do now? Just wait for it to pass, and go home?

"Hi Dad, hi Mom! Can you help me bring Yvette back? Then we'll all three go find a coffin her size! And don't worry: I'm doing super well!"

He had pounded on the railing with a furious fist: he wanted to jump. To go join his sister, sleep forever with her and not be called a coward. But he was too scared. Too scared to move even a toe. As he lamented his fate, a shadow passed in the opaque cloud in front of him: a dark silhouette seemed to glide through the mist, moving with the agile step of a predator. Spotting it, his heart contracted in his chest: the thing seemed large in size, but moved with ease hidden in the deadly carpet. The thing headed towards his sister.

"Get out of there! Run away, you nasty beast! Leave my sister alone!" he thought, but his mouth was paralyzed, like the rest of his body. The shadow settled at Yvette's feet, and Ed watched in horror as her head slowly disappeared into the mist as the monster pulled her by the foot. And thus, in an instant, he found himself alone in the forest, crying and begging to be rescued.

\*\*\*

"Incredible..." Jordane exhaled, concluding the story. She could feel adrenaline rising within her, thinking about the new paragraph she would add to her article.

"Your sister... was she never found?" she continued.

Ed stopped, fixing her with a grave look, then gestured with his head towards something behind them: "This is where we leave the trail," he declared, "we'll cross this small hill to find flat ground and follow the railway line." Then he walked past them, seemingly ending the conversation.

"It couldn't have been real..." he thought, while the last image of his sister remained etched in his mind: her final appearance, as the mist had completely evaporated shortly after nightfall, and the last tears had dried on his cheeks, replaced by a miserable hiccup. He had slowly climbed down the ladder, his legs trembling, barely able to put one foot in front of the other. Then, before leaving, he had cast one last glance towards the lake: in the darkness of the night, in the distance between the trees, he saw his sister seeming to wave at him. The enormous monster with eyes shining bright yellow like bulbs held her in its jaws, and by shaking her like a rag doll, her limp arms flailed as if to say goodbye.

\*\*\*

They had left the trail a few minutes ago, Raphaël panting loudly and Jordane fluttering around to take photos here and there - mostly of dead trees it seemed; Ed, for his part, seemed to maintain the same pace from the beginning, as if it were a leisurely walk. They caught up with a railway track, initially completely hidden under the foliage, then gradually emerging from the humus. Decades ago, coal-filled wagons must have made incessant round trips, to the rhythm of pickaxe strikes, or to the rhythm of greedy inhabitants who started heating their homes earlier and earlier since the mine's arrival.

They reached a massive wooden bridge crossing the chasm between two hills, taking the opportunity to take a break. They were out of the suffocating embrace of the giant pines, and the breath of fresh air and the sight of a radiant sun did them a world of good. Below the bridge, Jordane spotted a single road barricaded by a large fence: from this distance, she couldn't make out anything on the yellow signs that blocked the fences, but she knew they spoke of a forbidden road, risk of collapse, and dead miners. Ed took out bread, sausage, and cheese, as if he had rightly predicted that the two city dwellers accompanying him wouldn't have thought to walk for so long, and Jordane and Raphaël gladly accepted. He gave the crusts to Togo, along with a piece of bread, then ate in silence, sitting on a rock.

"Do you know the story of Inès?" Jordane asked, breaking the religious silence.

Ed simply nodded, lost in contemplation of his sandwich.

"I guess you've heard what happened to her in the tunnel... Do you think some miners could have survived that long

down there?" she asked.

"People always make up stories to explain traumatic phenomena," he replied irritably, "this damned town has caused so many deaths that it reassures people to think there's a reason for their misfortune. But it's just old wives' tales, nothing more."

Jordane fell silent, giving up on the urge to ask why he was so touchy and what personal issues lay beneath - What really happened to you that day in the forest, she thought - but she didn't want to push him over the edge and have him abandon them so close to the mine.

"Let's go, we're almost there," he said, getting up. Togo jumped in place and barked joyfully, clearly delighted that the walk could finally resume.

They crossed the bridge, Ed with a confident step, Jordane and Raphaël measuring each of their moves carefully: the ancient beams seemed solid - fortunately, a train used to pass here - but every view of the void dozens of meters below between each plank made them dizzy.

"Get out of the way, you nasty dog!" Jordane hissed when Togo, simply trying to encourage her, hopped around her.

They continued their hike for a few more hundred meters, until:

"Wow..." was the only word that escaped Jordane's mouth when the trail opened onto the entrance of the mine: the cliff housing the opening was blackened and frightening, as if it had been touched by fire itself. Graffiti with various messages adorned the flaked rock slab, such as "honest people always pay the price of the rich's greed," "here lie the cannibals of the underground," and the classic "a good cop is a dead cop." Imposing, rusted, and twisted safety barriers blocked the entrance, preventing any intrusion into the dark depths of the lair. The vegetation had slowly started to invade the surroundings of the entrance, but even the plants seemed not to want to get too close to this place - was it the arsenic, or did they know what atrocities were hidden under those rock bowels? An unsettling silence reigned, broken only by the sound of branches cracking under the weight of the wind. Jordane felt a wave of chills run through her body as she stood there, staring at the entrance of the abandoned mine: she felt as if something was watching her from the darkness within, something malevolent and threatening.

She knew the mine had been condemned for good reasons, but a morbid curiosity was invading her. She wanted to cross the barriers and explore the darkness: but what would she find inside? Would she simply come across an impassable wall of rocks? Or would she see a narrow passage that only she could traverse, and fall into the trap of monsters eager for human flesh? She took out her camera, ignoring Ed's sarcastic snort, and tried to capture the forbidden atmosphere of the place as best as she could.

"Do you know if anyone has ever managed to get in?" she asked her guide.

"No one has ever entered there," he growled, almost indignant.

She approached the moss-covered cast-iron barriers, joined by Raphaël. He grabbed the bars - unable to suppress an initial recoil - then shook them for good measure: no, no one could hope to move them.

"Isn't there another entrance?" she asked.

"No, everything has been sealed," Ed replied categorically. "This is as close to the mine as you'll ever get, believe me."

He nervously scratched his chin before adding: "You've seen what you wanted to see, there won't be anything more. I have other fish to fry in town, I suggest you come back with me, I don't want to have to come back out tonight in the forest to search for you because you got lost."

Raphaël questioned Jordane with a look, who discreetly shrugged her shoulders: Ed was already heading back the opposite way, visibly eager to get as far away as possible from this cursed place - could she blame him? - probably about to abandon them at the foot of the wrought-iron entrance. His dog joined him with a light step, seemingly uninterested in the abandoned lair.

"But why was he so eager to leave?" she thought. "For someone who doesn't believe in all these old wives' tales, to be nervous, you are. Are you hiding something? Someone who spends so much time in the forest, have you seen something? Could you have accidentally found another entrance while walking your dog? The dog could have gone into a rabbit hole before coming out with a human skull in its mouth."

She felt that she needed to shake him up a bit, as he might have information useful in finding Inès, or even to uncover what strange things were happening in this town: because yes, monster sightings after a mine collapse, a mass hysteria in a prison that nearly killed everyone, and also that mysterious incident on the day the fair opened...

Something was definitely going on here, whether it was paranormal, natural, or criminal. This girl had called her for help, and since she had arrived in this town, she had immediately sensed that something was off.

"I understand," she finally said, "we've seen what we had to, but I get the feeling that this place scares you, Ed."

His remark hit him like a slap, causing him to jolt: he curled his lip in a fit of anger, quickly mirrored by his dog Togo. From the corner of her eye, Jordane saw Raphaël step back, and she began to regret her lack of tact – it seemed she had a knack for striking a nerve...

“Down, Togo!” Ed commanded, and he wiped his mouth trying to regain his composure. “What are you talking about?”

“Inès, or Crazy Inès as she’s called around here, sent me a letter, talking about strange phenomena and asking for help. You must admit the history of this town is somewhat disturbing, and I can see on your face that you’ve seen things too.”

Ed burst into a fierce, dry laugh and shook his head as if the idea was laughable:

“Inès never existed, and I have a feeling you’ve been played, my dear lady. This town has seen tragedies, like all towns, and most of its residents have chosen to move on. Accidents happen, and there’s nothing to do but pick ourselves up and rebuild. Some have chosen to invent stories for comfort, or to keep themselves awake at night, good for them. But don’t go insulting the good people who are doing their best to move forward. As for this place, it would affect anyone who has lost a loved one, so have the decency to never bring up this subject in front of me again!”

Ed was now breathless, his face red with anger: even his dog looked small, tail between its legs and head skimming the ground. Raphaël turned to Jordane, looking alarmed, but she kept a perfectly impassive, almost cold face.

When he had met Jordane, Raphaël had felt a bit uncomfortable at first, as he had trouble assessing her feelings: she never showed her fears and weaknesses, always talked about her problems in a trivial way or changed the subject with humor, but he had learned to know her, to love her for her dedication, integrity, and passion, and to accept her clumsiness or lack of tact. She had always been there for him, giving very good advice, but it was impossible to return the favor: she knew how to be inscrutable to not show her feelings. And at that moment, Raphaël was taken back to the years when he felt lost with her, seeing that something was troubling her on her face, but knowing that a question would only lead to a joke, or an annoyed hand gesture as if it was nothing. It’s true that she had invested a lot in this story, from the beginning: Raphaël suspected that in one way or another, the stakes were quite important for her career, even for her position. If he had to dig deeper, move out of his area of expertise and turn into a psychologist and brain teaser, he felt it was possible that something in this story with Inès resonated with her on a personal level; but now was not the time for wild speculations. Tonight, he would sit in front of his computer and could push his thinking further with the help of one or two graphs, some arrows on his digital board app – since he had discovered computer programming, his brain had slowly but surely rewired so that today he could only think in a structured way, with cause and effect links, an introduction, hypothesis, proof, conclusion, endnotes, goodbye – but now, he had to especially avoid upsetting Ed and having to walk back. Or worse, end up on his hunting board.

With a new furtive glance at Jordane, he now saw something he didn’t like: obstinacy.

“Sorry, sir,” he finally said in a conciliatory tone, “if we have offended you. It wasn’t our intention: we haven’t slept much these past few days and fatigue got the better of us. We thank you very much for bringing us here, and we will go back down to town with you, the first round is on me. Right Jordane?”

He gave her a pleading look and thought he saw the gears turning in her head, maybe realizing that she had gone too far, and that the game was over for today. She opened her mouth to answer, but her voice was drowned out by a thunderous bark, startling everyone.

“What’s gotten into you, Togo!” yelled Ed.

The dog started growling, baring its yellow, saliva-coated canines, ears lowered and tail bristling.

“He’s looking Jordane straight in the eyes, thought Raphaël, he’s taken offense too and he’s going to jump on her and tear her apart.”

He barked even louder, three sharp, aggressive growls. A stream of saliva was ejected at his feet.

“Down, Togo!” Ed replied, now worried.

“No,” corrected Raphaël, “not Jordane, but behind her.”

And he wanted to turn around, but his gaze was drawn to a tiny shadow darting between his legs at lightning speed, making a high-pitched noise like an old mattress spring. The apparition disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, and Togo had obviously paid no attention to it, still staring behind them.

“Yeah, right,” thought Raphaël, “he’s looking at that damn cave and you know it.”

He spun around and came face to face with another shadow that ran into his leg: the thing twirled on itself, paddling in the air, whipping the air with its big pink tail. The rat squeaked in panic, and when it finally got back on all fours, it ran off without looking back, disappearing into the forest. That’s when they all turned towards the entrance of the mine and started looking in the same direction as the dog: they heard more powerful squeaks echoing among the long-balanced stones, and three other rats suddenly appeared, in their frantic, panicked run. Two of them ran straight between the three individuals, eliciting a cry of disgust from Jordane, but the third zigzagged erratically, spraying the

grass with a thick black liquid. The beast approached the trio in desperate zigzags, then ended up in the middle of the path, panting at a frantic pace, a blood stain growing under its gaping flank with each breath. Raphaël heard Jordane scream to his left, and the two young people turned a panicked, pleading gaze to Ed, but he didn't see them: he was shaking his head, eyes bulging and mouth open, a thin stream of drool running down his jacket. He was staring at a point high up, behind them, near the entrance of the cave.

"No, no, no, that's not possible..." he murmured.

Togo began to howl louder, his eyes wild, almost frightened. It was then that Jordane and Raphaël turned around, and saw a thick white mist slowly and delicately descending from the cliff face.

\*\*\*

"RUN!!! Ed had screamed, RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!!!"

But they didn't, at least not immediately: he had dashed off in the opposite direction, leaving the duo of investigators as well as his own dog behind. Both were hypnotized by the thick and dense cloud that was now lazily pouring onto the ground, blocking the entrance of the mine like a waterfall of cotton.

"Jordane..." whispered Raphaël, slowly backing away. But she was paralyzed, her arms stretched out and shoulders tense. He tried to call her again, but he noticed that her lips were moving silently: she was repeating the same thing over and over, but no sound would come out of her mouth.

"Jordane!" he yelled.

He was able to snap her out of her stupor. She pointed ahead and finally managed to articulate her thought:

"What is that..."

Raphaël followed the direction of her index finger, and his mouth opened in horror: from the mist had emerged a dark shadow, as tall as the mine's entrance. A canine shape was discernible, with two large paws and a massive body. The glow of a yellow eye pierced through the veil of death, gazing at them obliquely. The shadow did not move, wrapped in its white veil to which it seemed immune. It was the soft, caressing contact of the mist with his legs that brought Raphaël back to his senses: he grabbed Jordane's hand and darted down the trail to escape, ignoring Ed's dog growling at the apparition. Jordane, still in shock, first let herself be dragged, then released Raphaël's hand to start running with all her might, panting in panic.

"Run, damn it!" she exclaimed between two cries of terror.

Instinctively, they followed the slope, tumbling between the trees like two rocks unable to stop their momentum. They dodged roots as best they could, slaloming between branches, some whipping their faces, others cracking sinisterly.

"The path!" Jordane yelled behind him.

"What?" he replied on the fly, without even turning back.

"The path! We've lost it!" she gasped.

Indeed, Raphaël looked around him, while continuing to run, and saw no trace of the trail; just pine trees as far as the eye could see. He found a tree large enough to stop his run and threw himself against it to stop. An explosive pain radiated through his shoulder at the contact with the wooden wall, but he tried not to think about it. He turned around and saw that he had gotten ahead of Jordane, who was trying to catch up as best she could. Then, he looked far behind them, up high, and saw no trace of the mist, nor of the thing within it. He tried to catch his breath, to rebalance himself, and he placed his supporting foot a little lower: he immediately felt it sink into the cushion of dead needles like quicksand. He panicked, trying to grab a branch, and saw Jordane hurtling directly towards him.

"No, Jordane!!" he barely had time to scream, but caught in her momentum, she had no choice but to throw herself at him, and she added her own weight onto the pile of rotten humus: that's when the ground collapsed beneath them, and the world turned black.

\*\*\*

Ed was panting like an animal at death's door, coughing and spitting out his lungs. His blood pounded in his temples to the point of preventing him from hearing his own thoughts, and his legs trembled, feeling like two cotton stalks. His vision was blurred, and he wondered if he was going to vomit his sandwich at his feet: he was definitely too old to run that much.

He straightened up as best he could, out of breath, trying to take stock: what had just happened was utterly impossible. Everything was fine during that morning hike, until that girl lost her mind, and then...

No, he didn't want to think about it. It hadn't happened. He hadn't reverted to being a simple twelve-year-old boy, about to spend the darkest day of his life losing his sister. He hadn't seen that thing ooze from the rocky walls. Not yet.

"It's not my fault, it was automatic, my body decided to run, not me," he heard himself say out loud.

"It's not my fault if they didn't follow me," he thought, too tired to continue speaking. "I didn't leave them there and..."

"TOGO!!" he yelled when he remembered his dog.

He looked around, panicked: he had followed one of the branches of the old railway line, and he had arrived in front of the old, disused hangars that once served as storage and repair stations. Three triangular-roofed buildings rose sadly among the trees, their sheets eaten by rust, windows black with grime or shattered on the ground. A pine tree sprouted from the torn roof of one of the buildings, like an arrow stuck in the chest of a fallen warrior. He called his dog again, but the echo of his voice was his only answer: the place was dead.

"Damn dog..." he thought, and he set out to retrace his steps: of course, he had been hallucinating. None of that had happened, there was no mist. Everyone was safe and sound, and he just had a panic attack. A... what's it called? PTSD?

He gathered his strength and set off to find the trail: he wanted to find his dog above all, but he wasn't going to leave the kids in the forest. But a second later, he froze.

\*\*\*

At first, he thought he was dreaming; but he listened closely and heard the sound again. A voice. He held his breath, closed his eyes, and concentrated as best as he could. The voice again, he was now certain. A feminine voice. He reopened his eyes and located the noise coming from the first building, into which the railway line disappeared into the darkness of the carcass.

"Help..." the female voice said weakly.

Ed froze.

He scrutinized the hangars but saw no movement: everything appeared completely dead, except for that voice echoing faintly against the rusted steel.

"Help me, please," the voice said, louder.

Ed realized: yes, it was indeed the girl's voice. How had she gotten there? Had she managed to pass him without his noticing? Probable, he was so scared that a train could have come straight at him and crushed him without him realizing it...

"Where are you?"

His voice came out much higher than he intended. No response, just silence.

"Who's there? Is anyone there?" the voice sounded miserable.

No doubt, it was her. But where was her friend?

He came out of his stupor and approached the building cautiously. He walked on the line until he arrived at the entrance, facing total darkness. He let his eyes adjust until he could make out some parked wagons at the back of the building. He then saw several heavy machines, some overtaken by vegetation. A bush had grown inside and stretched outside through a broken window. On the other side, a small shrub had grown in an overturned toolbox and had wrapped a wrench in its trunk. It had grown up halfway, with both ends of the tool sticking out on each side.

"Hello!!" he called out to the empty room, and the echo made him jump.

He finally entered the hangar, having gathered all his courage, when he heard panting. The sound was animalistic, but it didn't resemble any noise his dog would make. It was wilder, more primal.

"Help! Please, I beg you!" the girl's voice sounded again.

This time, it was very close: it seemed to come from behind one of the wagons, standing on three wheels. Ed approached even more cautiously, heading towards the back of the hangar. He now heard a rough breathing coming from behind the wagon, then a liquid sound. Like an animal lapping soup.

"Something is very wrong. Something is very, very wrong," he thought.

He stepped forward and stepped on something: he bent down slowly and picked up a white collar with a small medallion. On the gold medallion was engraved "Togo."

The collar was stained with a dark red, viscous liquid.



His hand started to tremble, and he dropped the collar as if it had burned him. He frantically wiped his hands on his jeans, tears starting to well up in his eyes.

"Togo..." his voice broke.

"I'm scared, help me... Please!" whimpered the girl's voice just on the other side.

Then, a sound of chewing.

Ed advanced to the edge of the machine and cautiously peeked around. The first thing he saw was Togo: he lay on the ground, gutted. His organs and tufts of silver fur were scattered around him. His tongue hung from his half-open jaw, and his eyes stared blankly. Above him stood a large black wolf. Well, it looked like a wolf, but the animal was far too big: it must have been over two meters tall and had unusually long, thin legs. It had a powerful jaw, with long, sharp fangs. Its eyes were bright yellow. It stood about half a dozen meters from Ed, in the back of the large room, devouring Togo's entrails with an obscene noise.

"That's it, goddamn it. That's the thing that devoured my sister," he thought.

The wolf-like creature lifted its head and opened its mouth as if it was about to speak:

"Please hurry!" it said with the girl's voice.

Ed's blood turned to ice in his veins, and he had to cover his mouth with his hand to keep from screaming. He tried to back away but tripped over an old empty tool bag and fell backwards. He let out a weak grunt and then froze, listening in horror: he heard the monster start walking towards him. He wanted to get up but his body refused to move: all he could do was watch, trembling and crying, as the wolf's head slowly came out of the corner, then walked towards him with its long, terribly long legs. It stood in front of him, intimidating in its abnormal height, drooling a mix of sticky saliva and fresh blood, its bright yellow eyes fixed on him.

"Dinner time! Dinner time, kids!" said the monster with Ed's mother's voice.

At that moment, Ed's body was overtaken by adrenaline. He bolted, running for his life. He heard the monster chasing him, barking like Togo and laughing like a hyena. Lost and in full panic, he randomly dashed through the first alleys he found. Disoriented and gasping for breath, he heard the wolf gaining ground on him. He raced past closed office doors, turned just before a large pile of coal, and dove into the first open door he found. Once inside, he hid under what appeared to be a desk and remained completely silent. He heard the beast pass right by him, on the other side of the door. It walked around, seemingly searching for him.

*"Promenons-nous dans les bois,  
pendant que le loup n'y est pas..."*

it sang in a child's voice, in a strange language. It seemed to leave but then returned near the pile of coal, continuing its nursery rhyme:

*"Si le loup y était  
Il nous mangerait,  
Mais comme il y est pas,  
Il nous mangera pas."*

It sniffed loudly, as if tracking the scent of its prey. It continued to sniff, rubbing its snout against the ground, approaching the entrance of the room.

*"Loup, y es-tu ?  
Que fais-tu ?  
M'entends-tu ?"*

It sang.

Ed bit his fist to stay quiet. Tears streamed down his face. He trembled like a leaf, hidden under the desk in the near-total darkness. The room was large, but he knew he would soon be discovered. And something was off in this room: all his senses were on high alert, the information scrambling in his head, but one of his senses screamed a piece of information that his brain couldn't process at the moment. The monster sniffed at the door, stuck its head inside, and said in a deep, thunderous voice, resonating throughout the room:

"I'M PUTTING ON MY SHIRT!!"

It slowly passed the entrance, standing up to almost touch the ceiling. At that moment, it slightly pushed the door and let in some light, and Ed looked around: he saw that the room he was in must have been a maintenance room. He saw several imposing tools arranged on the wall, and in front of him, a cart filled with decaying animal corpses.

That was what was off, and now that he had seen it, the smell of rotting flesh began to invade his nostrils. The

monster turned around the room, sniffing everywhere. While it circled, it knocked something over with its tail. Ed, in a superhuman effort, took the opportunity to change his hiding place and nestled in a corner of the room, between two large workbenches - he had realized that the nauseating and almost unbearable stench of rotten flesh masked his own smell. In the near-total darkness, barely lit by the light through the ajar door, Ed saw the wolf search where he had been just seconds ago, banging its head against the table. It growled, clearly irritated, then lifted its head, freezing in place.

"Eddie... Oh Eddie... I'm so scared..."

Ed felt like he was falling ten stories when he heard his sister's voice.

"Eddie, you lied to me! You said everything was going to be okay, that I would make it! You lied, Eddie!" cried the wolf with the tortured voice of his little sister.

Ed clamped his hands over his ears, on the verge of going mad.

"You let me die!" it continued, its bright yellow eyes shining in the dark. "You stayed in your cabin, safe and sound, without coming to get me, and now I'm in hell! I will suffer until the end of time! Because of you!"

The monster began to bark and laugh ferociously, then resumed with Ed's sister's voice:

"Help, Eddie, they're torturing me! They're eating me! Help!!"

Then more barking, more laughing, mixed with crying. Ed was going mad, biting his hand until it bled, his eyes completely rolled back.

"Eddie! Eddie! They're tormenting me!"

"No!!" Ed screamed. "Please, stop!! Stop!!"

Then the two bright yellow lights approached Ed until they were right in front of him. He felt the monster's horrific breath on him, a breath of death and decay.

"I'M TAKING MY GUN! HERE I COME! HERE I AM!" it sang with its booming and shattering voice, like a god.

Ed wet himself.

The monster pounced on him with a ferocious roar, tearing him in two with a single bite. Blood splattered across the room, and it crushed his head between its jaws.

Once finished with its feast, the beast left the hangar, laughing under the high noon sun.

\*\*\*

"Ouch, you're stepping on my arm!" Jordane exclaimed.

"Wait..." Raphaël responded.

Jordane felt him moving around erratically, stepping on her foot at one point and elbowing her in the ribs at another. It was pitch black, and she had a mouthful of dirt. She groped around in the darkness, crouching and feeling Raphaël fidget, but there seemed to be nothing around them. Raising her head, she could make out a faint light, probably daylight. The hole was far but not directly above them, leading her to deduce that they had slid down an underground slope.

"But wait, underground means..."

"Watch your eyes," she heard, followed by a faint, rectangular white glow weakly illuminating Raphaël's ghostly face, then a blinding flash that pierced her brain.

"Oops, sorry Jo," Raphaël said as she cried out in surprise, shielding her face. He stood up, lifting the phone to his height. Jordane coughed out the last bits of dirt from her tongue, and as her eyes adjusted to the harsh light, she discovered they were in a long corridor of blackened, irregular rock. The floor was strewn with pebbles and covered in dust. While they occasionally heard fine dirt sliding from the hole they had opened, no sound came from the corridor ahead, the darkness even swallowing Raphaël's flashlight beam. Two lines of rails emerged from the shadows to their feet before getting lost under the pile of dirt they had just collapsed.

"Jo, do you think this is it? Are we really here?"

"Yes, no doubt," she replied.

"Damn, what are we going to do?" he lamented, looking at the faint light far above them.



Jordane attempted to climb the steep slope that had brought them there: she placed a foot on the pile, which immediately sank into the fine dirt up to her ankle. She felt her shoe fill up and grimaced without saying a word. Then she tried to find a grip higher up with her hands, but the wall crumbled instantly under the pressure of her fingers, showering her face with dirt. She tried again with her other hand, but a dislodged stone hit her in the face, scratching her temple.

"Damn it!" she cursed inwardly.

"Are you okay?" Raphaël worried.

"Yes," she reassured him, hiding her fear, "but we can't get out this way. We need to find another exit."

"You mean venture in there?" he panicked, gesturing to the underground corridor with his phone.

"If you have another idea, I'm all ears."

Raphaël sighed, visibly pondering a solution while frantically looking around. He tested the friable rock of the wall with a hesitant hand, but the earth crumbled like sand between his fingers. He tried calling for help again with his phone, but even the operator signal seemed unwilling to venture into this hell. He kicked the wall in a fit of rage, only to cry out in pain, before giving up.

"No," he finally said reluctantly, "I don't see what else we can do."

"Right," Jordane concluded, regaining her composure as well. "Then we'll have to be brave and go in there. We'll find something to help us."

"Plus," she added, trying to sound light-hearted, "it'll make a great paragraph in my article if we make it out alive."

Raphaël chuckled, then ventured into the tunnel, lighting the way, alternating between their feet to avoid tripping over the rails that showed them the way, winding through the gallery, and the ceiling to avoid hitting his head – he didn't have to duck, but a beam could well hit his skull and knock him out if he wasn't careful.

"Let's go then," he said as Jordane followed, biting her lip in the darkness.

The air, which had been relatively fresh up to now, became heavier with each step: it was warmer, and they started to struggle to breathe. A earthy taste invaded their mouths with each inhalation. The corridor seemed to stretch straight ahead indefinitely, and only the sporadic wooden structures supporting the weight of the forest above them indicated they were actually moving somewhere. Raphaël's phone flashlight only illuminated the first meter in front of them, focused on his feet to avoid tripping, but an occasional beam of light ahead only showed the same scene of the longitudinal corridor for the first twenty meters before the light lost the battle against the absolute darkness surrounding them. Jordane had asked her friend how much battery he had left, to which he replied they had enough for one last selfie together before dying of thirst, and she nodded in silence, even though no one could see her. She chose not to tell him she had forgotten to charge her phone and that the battery was dangerously close to red.

"Look at that," Raphaël said in front of her, shining the light straight ahead.

She looked up and tried to make out something, but she saw nothing but void. He swept the light in an arc, and this time she briefly caught a slight reflection bouncing back from the darkness.

"There's something up ahead," he continued.

Jordane agreed: it was almost imperceptible, but something had shone far in front of them.

"Do you want to go there?" he whispered, praying for a negative answer, in vain:

"Guess?"

He let out a long sigh. He realized his legs had started to tremble, and a sort of claustrophobia was slowly overtaking him. He was seized by an almost uncontrollable impulse to flee. To run to the place where they had fallen, and scratch, hammer, and cling to the wall until they managed to climb up. He felt like saying "screw this" to the whole situation, going home, hiding under a duvet, and staying there until the next day. A cold wave ran down his spine, and for a moment, he thought the ceiling had lowered, the walls had closed in: he almost felt the friable rock scratching his hair and had to lean on the rocky wall with his free hand to keep from falling. What had he gotten himself into?

His breathing becoming labored, he began to unlock his phone again: was there a chance the network had returned? He stared at the barred antenna icon, hoping to see lines appear underneath, even just one would do; but nothing worked, they were trapped under meters of earth, in the middle of a forest, no waves could find them, no one could save them.

"Hey, you're not getting scared now, are you? I've known you to be braver!" Jordane teased from behind him, taking the phone from his hands to lead the way toward the strange reflection. Raphaël could only let her take the lead, trying to regulate his breathing. When was the last time he felt this scared? They had shared numerous adventures

together, boasting experiences in some of the most ill-advised urban explorations. He was accustomed to moving through abandoned places, navigating desolate corridors, waiting in silence for intruders, each rustle of leaves, each sigh of the wind, or creak of a floorboard taking on an astonishing, almost dangerous clarity and proximity. But today, yes, he was scared. This town had enough creepy stories just from reading the articles, but what they had seen at the mine's entrance... Was it possible that the mist they witnessed could seep into the mine's corridors? Would they wander aimlessly, their light dead for hours, until they felt a breath caress their ankles? They wouldn't realize anything until suddenly, their bodies understood they were breathing lethal gas, and pain and panic would eagerly tear through them. Or would they collapse one after the other, noiselessly and without any warning, respecting the forbidden silence that had reigned here for decades?

"Watch where you're stepping."

Jordane's voice pulled him from his daydreams, now several steps ahead, and the panic of being left alone in the darkness overcame his paralysis. So he caught up with her as best he could, trying not to trip over the wooden planks.

"We're getting close to that shiny thing," she whispered.

He finally caught up to her, sticking a bit too close for comfort, when he saw the glint catch his eye again: the object was tiny, on the ground, reflecting a slightly golden flash. They weren't far, but too far for the light to penetrate the black curtain obstructing their view. They continued straight ahead, with no indication that they were approaching a possible exit. Jordane now illuminated their feet, the rocky terrain making their passage difficult.

It was she who jumped first, the gray shape suddenly entering their field of vision: she thought it was about to jump at her, but the inanimate object she had found merely contrasted with the scattered stones. Raphaël followed suit, probably not even seeing the old, dust-covered miner's helmet lying upside down on the ground, and bumped into her.

"What is it?" he asked in a high-pitched voice. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine," she replied, her heart still pounding in her chest.

She crouched and slowly picked up the relic: a stream of dust slid off the surface like sand. It was indeed a miner's metal helmet, scratched and rusted, resembling an old colonial explorer's hat. Inside, intertwined leather straps snaked around, and almost nothing remained of the lamp attached to the front, its glass broken and cable torn off.

"That's cool," she said, restraining the urge to take out her camera and snap a photo.

"Great, a helmet from probably someone dead," Raphaël retorted behind her, "I think you meant 'creepy.'"

"But no, come on, we shouldn't be negative. This article is practically writing itself..."

She heard him mumbling something like "...her damn article," but she didn't respond: she thought only of saving her job by coming to this town, but the situation they were in could indeed cost them more than just unemployment benefits...

"You're right," she said, standing up, "let's get out of here and go home."

She redirected the phone light ahead of her, and what appeared barely two meters in front of them made her scream.

\*\*\*

Decades ago, the mine that had allowed the birth and rapid expansion of Duli became its greatest nightmare when it collapsed. More than its natural resources, it had buried about fifty souls who suffocated in conditions no one could comprehend, denying them even the chance to rest with their loved ones, jealously keeping them with it for eternity. The victims fell into oblivion, deemed condemned and inaccessible to the world above: with the entrances sealed, no human could know their fate.

Until this day, when Jordane and Raphaël became the first to discover the remains of an unfortunate worker.

Of his carcass, not much was left: reduced to a skeleton, lying face down, his clothes had rotted and were nearly reduced to tatters. His arms – now thin bones barely visible under the dust and stones – were above his head, as if the last thing he tried to do was crawl.

Jordane approached, mouth agape, Raphaël feigning a gesture to hold her back, but he too was too stunned to do anything but watch: it was the first time she saw a corpse – at least for real, unlike the many crime scene photos she had seen for her research, among other things – and the effect it had on her was the same as when she looked at images online. What instantly differentiated a movie scene from reality: the banality.

In a movie, when a student is gutted by a serial killer, the next scene shows a corpse with very red blood, highlighted and vibrant against the immaculate ground. A too perfect pose, sometimes symmetrical, wounds too clean and neat. But when the body is real, whether seen in a photo or here in reality, the impression it gives is that it is part of the

decor. Nothing perfect, nothing exceptional, just a skeleton in an uncomfortable pose, blackened and half-buried in dust, the clothes also rotting, flattened, and the same dark, dull, and dead color as the surroundings. Now that she was in front of it, she finally discovered the object that had attracted them with its reflections: the unfortunate man's skull was crushed, a large hole revealing the now-empty cavity that contained his brain. And attached to the bone, the small thing that now shone brightly under the flashlight, patiently waiting for decades, was finally detached from the fractured skull. Jordane struggled to remove it, using both hands, as it was firmly lodged, and she held it up to her eyes, fascinated.

"Is that what I think it is, Jo?" Raphaël worried behind her.

"Yes," she said, "no doubt about it."

"I can't believe it," he replied, alarmed. "A gold tooth! A damn gold tooth, in his skull!"

Indeed, Jordane thought. Apparently, not all of them had died of hunger, thirst, or suffocation down there. Some had indeed been eaten.

\*\*\*

The tension had risen somewhat following their macabre discovery: Raphaël had expressed his unwillingness to venture any further into the gallery. The warning was enough for him, and he wanted to return to where they could see at least a bit of sunlight, to the place where they had fallen. He said he would huff and puff all day if necessary, that he would watch his phone, and eventually, they would catch a bit of network, or attract the attention of Ed, or his dog. They would be rescued, and might even make an appearance in the local newspaper for discovering a secret entrance, two poor tourists stumbling upon a sad prehistoric cave. Jordane listened in silence, nodding, standing straight as an arrow in the total darkness; but her mind was elsewhere, cycling through unanswered questions and increasingly nebulous mysteries.

What had really happened in this cave? The tooth so deeply embedded in the back of the skull could only have been left by a bite. Had they killed each other? Perhaps the tension had risen once the miners were trapped under tons of rubble. They might have gone mad, slaughtering each other blindly in the dark. Or perhaps they had survived longer than expected and had begun to devour each other. Maybe this one wasn't even alive when someone sank their teeth into the back of his head. There had been cases of survivors trapped in mountains or at sea, drawing straws to decide who would serve as food for the others, or the dying giving their last words, allowing their companions to feast on their flesh.

"This is my blood, this is my flesh, don't forget the mayonnaise, bon appétit."

Jordane shuddered: not because of these morbid ideas trotting through her head, but because this biblical reference had appeared unbidden, catching her off guard. She thought she had sealed away certain things, but bad thoughts could apparently remain silent as long as necessary to resurface at the most destabilizing moments. Nevertheless, she put that image aside: even if their situation wasn't ideal – actually quite desperate, though she didn't want to admit it – she remained mostly intrigued by this story. Inès had spoken of a monster-miner trying to devour her, and they had just found evidence of cannibalism here after exploring only a few meters of these infinite galleries. There was surely more to discover here, she felt it: her investigative instinct urged her to continue searching, to learn more about this place. Maybe they had indeed stumbled upon something significant, her mind whispered to her.

"Jo, are you listening?"

She snapped out of her reverie, having momentarily forgotten that she was practically standing with her feet in the ribcage of a poor fellow.

"What?"

"What do you think of my idea?"

"We have to keep going this way," she replied abruptly. "No one is going to find us. We're on our own, and we have to get out by our own means."

"But we'll get lost!" he almost pleaded. "If the miners couldn't get out, how are we going to, when we don't even know the place?"

"We'll follow the rails, and we'll find something. There has to be a solution. If you want, we can split up, you stay near the hole calling for help, and I'll follow the rails, to increase our chances."

She didn't feel like wandering alone in this labyrinthine nightmare at all, and she needed him for support and strength, but it was easier for her to bluff.

"No, I'm not going to leave you alone," he said after weighing the pros and cons. "You'd manage to get lost in a straight

line.”

“Alright,” she concluded, regaining her composure. “Then let’s go, as long as we have light.”

She turned the screen back on, her eyes falling on the 54% displayed in the upper right corner, thinking of her own phone which would also only last so long and her professional camera which would allow her to see intermittently, at the pace of the flash of photos she would take every five seconds. They would find their bodies in a hundred years with the last image on the camera’s memory card being a monster with atrophied eyes and a missing tooth jumping at the lens, claws out.

They stepped over the corpse as best they could, then walked in silence for a good five minutes, making no other grim encounters – just two long curved turns. From time to time, Raphaël reminded her to check for network, and each time, she only saw that damned barred antenna icon. “We’d surely be warned well enough in advance of having found the network by being overwhelmed with notification requests for messages on your dating app,” she had retorted at one point.

Their conversation had turned to their love lives: since the last time, Raphaël had had two encounters that hadn’t led to anything, and Jordane had simply said that it was quiet on her front. Then, she didn’t know why, but she thought of the guy she had bumped into the night before, the tall blond.

“Do you feel that?” said Raphaël.

At first, she sniffed insistently: “Not that, you nitwit,” he had said. “Your hands.”

Then she raised her hands, at first wary: after a few seconds, she felt something at her fingertips, like a tickle. She slowly raised her hand above her head, towards the ceiling, and felt it more distinctly: a soft, refreshing caress, barely perceptible.

“Fresh air!” she marveled. Then, without further ceremony, she set off at a brisk pace to find the source of this miracle, leaving Raphaël in the dark, trying to follow without falling.

The stream of air became more pronounced, and each gulp of air she breathed felt like a refreshing shower in summer: with a cloud of hope, it was a delightful sensation; but more than that, she now had the impression of seeing further than before.

“Wait,” she said, stopping.

She turned off the flashlight and remained silent in the darkness despite Raphaël’s protests; but gradually, the contours of the corridor began to take shape in front of them. She saw her hands, then her feet. She turned around and even began to see her friend, his eyebrows furrowed and his mouth reduced to a simple line under the effect of mistrust.

“Damn, I can see you,” he blurted out.

“Yes, I think there’s light somewhere ahead.”

As if given a second wind, they hurried to follow the rails, now able to discern each stone on their path. They passed an antique cart, empty except for the layer of dust accumulated inside, but still resting on its set of rails. They saw more and more clearly, the corridor now almost taking on a bluish color. Jordane was almost running, then she stopped abruptly when the walls parted, and they emerged onto a precipice. This area, although still dim, was a little brighter. One couldn’t go so far as to read a book or distinguish colors, but the sight in front of them was clearly visible: it was as if an entire mountain had collapsed on the mine.

A chaos of white rocks up to two meters in circumference had spilled across the gallery, crushing the earth and burying it up to three meters below them. The precipice stretched about ten meters in front of them, then the gallery resumed, partially blocked by other landslides. Perhaps a small child could pass through the gaps in the stones, but not much more. To their right, the tear plunged into the darkness, strewn with debris creating a rugged but packed ground. At the top left, large rocks had remained balanced on each other, offering slightly larger spaces to potentially pass through. And then, it seemed that the source of light was emanating from that place.

“It looks like the collapse started from there,” Jordane pointed out, pointing to the weak source of light at the top left, “then it crushed everything to end up down there.”

She finished her explanation by tracing the axis of the tear, heading downwards to the right of them.

“I don’t think we can continue that way,” Raphaël added, pointing to the other end of the gallery in front of them.

“You’re right,” she replied, “but look, the light is coming from up there, and I’m sure I can climb it.”

Without waiting any longer, she began to skirt the void by going left, partially clinging to the balanced granite blocks. She managed to reach a flat and secure ledge without falling; although at one point, her foot dislodged a stone that fell below, releasing a cloud of dust and fine soil. The noise it made hitting the bottom could have woken the dead.

She was then joined by Raphaël, and they found themselves just below the huge balancing rocks and the ghostly light source, on the side of the hole halfway between the two ends of the gallery. The surface of the granite was smooth and difficult to climb, but she thought that if Raphaël helped her by boosting her, she could reach a more manageable part and climb up to - perhaps - the surface.

"My Rafiki," she said, "you're going to give me a hand with your powerful muscles, and I'm going to explore up there."

"Are you sure," he replied, "it looks dangerous..."

"I know, but there's no other solution. The exit is up there, I can feel it."

She handed her bag to Raphaël:

"Keep this for me, I'm taking your phone for light."

"Alright, I guess we're doing this," he replied.

He positioned himself with his back against the rock and propelled Jordane forward with his arms. She managed to grab hold with both hands and hoisted herself up until she found a balanced position, standing on her feet. She cast a glance downward, first at Raphaël who was two meters below her, then towards the pebble pit a bit further away: it was certain that if she fell, it would be the end. She managed to divert her gaze from the abyss and assessed her options for continuing: above her, there were mostly large, well-settled rocks that offered spaces for her to maneuver through, but someone of Raphaël's size couldn't pass through them. If he couldn't reach her, she would have to go for help, and then manage to find either the hole they had entered through or another exit. Meanwhile, her immediate task was to climb, and she dreaded the possibility of dislodging a rock and causing several tons of pebbles to fall on them, crushing them like pancakes. She noticed a hole big enough for her and relatively easy to reach. She clung to whatever she could to gain height. Her shoes slipped several times on the smooth surface of the limestone. At one point, she dislodged a rock the size of her head, which tumbled down to the bottom with the others, narrowly missing taking Raphaël with it. She clenched her teeth during the dull rumbling sound coming from somewhere above her, then continued her ascent while he moved to a safer spot, towards the entrance of the rest of the gallery blocked by a heap of rocks.

\*\*\*

Raphaël watched Jordane crawl and snake her way through the massive obstacles, and then saw her disappear for good, leaving him alone in this cavity that could collapse at any moment. He then continued to see the faint dance of daylight, streaks of dirt and dust tumbling down intermittently, and then nothing.

"Jordane!" he ventured to call out, wondering if the mere sound of his voice could trigger a collapse, like what the mountain had begun to spew out during the mine accident, similar to avalanches. From his position, he couldn't guess what lay above them: another tunnel? The surface? Nothing at all? He thought he heard a response, a very faint sound, but couldn't tell if his imagination was playing tricks on him. He called out to Jordane again, a bit louder, and he truly thought he heard something in return, an almost imperceptible echo. He waited a few seconds, but the mine was now perfectly silent. That was a good sign if Jordane hadn't come back yet: at least there was something to explore on the other side.

"Or maybe she's stuck in a narrow passage, and you're both doomed," another voice in his head suggested, but he forced himself not to listen. Instead, he sat down on the ground, against the pile of rocks blocking the part of the gallery they hadn't explored yet.

"Raphaël!" a voice called out right behind him.

He screamed and spun around, recoiling a step from the wall of stones. There was a hole, barely larger than his hand, leading into the impenetrable darkness of the rest of the mine.

"Raphaël, come look!" the voice called from behind the hole.

"Jordane?" he stammered, still trying to understand what was happening.

"Yes, who else would it be?"

Yes, of course, he thought to himself, it was indeed her voice, but he had just seen her go through to the other side, and he was almost sure he had heard her just a few seconds ago, so how had she already gotten to this side? It wasn't possible.

"How did you get there so quickly?" he asked, crawling cautiously closer.

"What do you mean?" she replied, still invisible. "Everything's connected in this mine."

Raphaël cautiously approached the hole, but he saw absolutely nothing, as if the darkness had swallowed everything.



"What's on the other side?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. Then, when Raphaël thought she wouldn't say anything else, she added, "But I have signal."

His heart leaped in his chest: if they had a signal, they were saved! They just had to call for help and sit waiting to be rescued. Raphaël promised himself that he would light a candle in church the next day, right after taking a shower and eating a triple steak burger.

"I can't unlock it," the voice said emotionlessly.

"Give it to me then!" he urged, pressing his head against the rock to try to see her.

Nothing.

He was about to repeat himself when she continued:

"My arm's too short, help me."

Raphaël complied and plunged his hand into the darkness. He barely fit his arm through, scraping the earth with his sleeves and knocking his knuckles, but he managed. He stretched his arm as far as he could, but felt nothing.

"A little more, you're almost there," she said.

He changed position and pressed himself completely against the wall, stretching his arm to its full length, trying to grab something with his fingers, but only brushing air.

"Yes, that's it, you're almost there."

But still nothing.

"Come on, more, give me your arm."

No, not nothing, a warm, moist breath.

"Your arm, give me your arm."

"This isn't Jordane..." a voice in his head said.

"No, that's ridiculous."

He couldn't feel his ear anymore, and his shoulder was in pain.

"Come closer, don't be afraid!"

Then he felt a drop fall into the palm of his hand.

Goosebumps ran over his entire body. His hairs stood on end up to his neck, and he withdrew his hand in one swift motion, falling backward.

"What are you doing?" the voice from the other side called out, still invisible.

Raphaël's heart was racing: it was Jordane's voice, but he didn't recognize it. Something was wrong.

"Come on, you were almost there! We need to get out of here."

Following his instinct, he picked up the bag Jordane had left him. He pulled out his camera, so disoriented that he took the time to put the strap around his neck in an automatic gesture. He approached the hole, turning it on, and positioned it at face level while keeping just one eye above.

"Are you coming?"

"I'm so hungry..." the pleading voice said.

The click was accompanied by a blinding flash of light that lasted only a moment, but the huge black shape with yellow eyes was imprinted on his retina. He dropped the camera, and at the same moment, a thunderous voice rose from behind the rubble:

"MY EYES!!"

Then he heard a roar so loud that dust fell from the ceiling in several places.

"YOU'VE BLINDED ME, YOU LITTLE SHIT, I'M GOING TO EAT YOU ALIVE!!"

At first, he couldn't do anything, then a deafening scream rose, and the thing with immense mass crashed against the wall with a crash, sending several rocks flying around him. He heard it scratching and pounding like a fury, mixing roars



and demented laughter. He felt a jolt throughout his body, and his brain finally kicked in: run. He looked around in panic and saw only one solution: follow Jordane. He leaped and joined the ledge created by a huge rock. He jumped, arms in the air, but failed to grab hold. He turned back to the noise behind him, horrified: already, he saw rocks detaching and rolling toward the abyss. He focused on a nearby rock and tried to pull it to use as a step. Adrenaline gave him strength, and he exerted all his might to move the object, praying to be quick enough before the creature arrived. He managed to place it where he wanted, but now he heard the monster's less muffled vociferations and more rocks tumbling down.

"STOP STRUGGLING AND ACCEPT YOUR FATE, YOU'RE GOING TO RUIN THE TASTE OF THE MEAT!! the monster yelled behind him."

He climbed onto the makeshift step and used all his strength to jump: he caught a ledge with the tips of his fingers, but the dirt on it made him slip, and he fell straight back down. He looked back, terrified, and that's when he saw the beast halfway out of the rubble: a huge wolf with black fur, crazed eyes, drool dripping between its fangs. The monstrosity was grabbing rocks with its teeth to send them flying and clear a path. Raphaël tried again, certain that if it didn't work, all was lost.

This time, his grip held, and he pulled himself up in one go, adrenaline giving him wings. Once at the top, he allowed himself a look down: the monster was now in the pit, already approaching him. Without taking time to think further, he lunged forward to gain ground. He went through the same place as Jordane, scraping his hands on the sharp holds and his feet slipping on the smooth walls. He squeezed into a tight crevice and crawled desperately to save his skin. Halfway through the chimney, panting and spitting his lungs out, he noticed he no longer heard the monster.

He risked a look back: he was now at least five meters high, in a narrow tunnel, and he could barely see the ground. His foot dangled from the opening by only a few dozen centimeters, and he saw no movement. Silence had returned.

He took the opportunity to take a break, listening in the dark: he tried to catch his breath, but he was so compressed he couldn't fill his lungs and felt suffocated.

"Raphaël, don't go..." his father's voice pleaded below him, and his blood froze in his veins.

\*\*\*

"Thank goodness I stopped eating chocolate when I was a teenager," Jordane thought as she wriggled with difficulty along the winding path between the rocks. Although slim, she felt her body slightly stiff, slowing her movements. Nevertheless, she managed to extricate herself from the rubble and immediately sensed she was in a large room by the way her ragged breathing, which had been trapped in her ears during her climb, now seemed to dissipate around her. Then, her gaze rose to the immense elevator cage that was part of the mine's headframe: the remaining standing part of the cage was completely obstructed by rocks, some as large as a car. The lower part had been completely swept away, the base now a carnage of pebbles and twisted, torn metal rods. Pieces of torn wire mesh lay scattered on either side of the room carved into the ground, the rails that once allowed miners to descend to their livelihood even bent. A cart lay on its side a little further away. From the obstructed vertical throat, a thin beam of light traversed, the same one that had caught their attention from below. Somewhere above her head was the surface; but it was impossible to carve any path through, only a rat could possibly pass. Given the immense mass of rock suspended in this cage, it was no wonder the rescuers found no solution to get the miners out of this hell.

"That's the entrance we saw earlier," she thought. "We were just on the other side with Ed a few moments ago."

She stood before the tortured edifice of crumbling limestone and rusted steel with a feeling of extreme helplessness, being so close to the exit yet the obstacle between them so significant. She was so absorbed that she only noticed the man approaching her silently too late. When she turned around, she saw only a shadow pounce on her. She wanted to scream, but a skeletal hand clamped over her mouth: only a muffled sound escaped. She grabbed the wrists of her assailant reflexively and was surprised to grasp forearms so thin that her fingers could easily wrap around them. Nevertheless, the man held firm and did not falter.

"Shh," he said, "you'll wake him up if you talk so loudly!"

Jordane's eyes widened. She resumed breathing through her nose, and a nauseating smell invaded her head: it was enough for her to refocus, then her gaze returned to the individual.

One might think she was facing a reanimated skeleton, as if the one they had crossed earlier had risen and come to take care of her: the man was just skin and bones, with thin arms and a sunken rib cage. His face was hidden by a long white beard and a layer of black grime, highlighting his prominent cheekbones and wild eyes. He must have been seventy or eighty years old: his body was striated with wrinkles, his posture bent with his head retracted into his shoulders, and his skeletal hands trembled slightly.

Jordane tried again to free herself, but his grip, though trembling, tightened further:

"If I take my hand away, you won't scream?" he whispered.

Jordane shook her head as her only response, having no choice but to comply for the moment.

“Are you sure?” he repeated.

The same head gesture, a small tear shining in the corner of her eye. Then, after what seemed an interminable moment, he nodded and removed his hand. Jordane inhaled a gulp of air, freed from the stench of decay he emanated: he wore simple trousers that had almost completely rotted on his body. She wondered if removing them would bring the skin with them. His hunched back gave him a surly look that contrasted with his thin arms that hung down to his knees. He also wore an old leather satchel across his body. He eyed her warily, like a cat encountering an unknown animal on its territory. She opened her mouth – not even knowing what she was going to say – but he cut her off:

“You... I’ve seen you before...”

She didn’t know what to answer. She was sure she had never seen this man; but at the same time, the state he was in... He could have been her own grandfather and she wouldn’t have recognized him.

“When was it?” he whispered more to himself. “Last year? No, I remember it very well. The light... Rather... Last night?”

Her heart sank in her chest when she realized: “The scratching I heard that night, I thought, wasn’t my imagination.”

“The tunnel,” she whispered back.

He recoiled as if she had blasphemed. Or said something insane. He now looked at her with suspicion. She heard Raphaël calling her from below, his voice echoing like a ghostly bell, but she didn’t move: she felt that if she turned her back on him for even a second, he would pounce on her; but already he was crouching down, holding his ears, a grimace of pain on his face:

“No, no, no,” he pleaded imperceptibly, “you’ll attract it if you make too much noise!”

“Attract what?” Jordane interjected despite herself. But she apparently spoke too loudly because the man was now crouching down, protecting his head from an invisible threat.

“The monster...” he whispered so faintly, in a sigh, that Jordane almost repeated it out loud but held back at the last moment.

She took a step back towards Raphaël, but he already took two steps towards her: she froze, not knowing whether to run or stay.

“Run where, silly girl?” she thought to herself.

\*\*\*

"Raphaël," a voice he never thought he would hear again complained, "just because I left doesn't mean you should do the same now." His eyes widened, and his breathing accelerated even more: first Jordane's voice, and now this.

He realized the rock walls were squeezing him tighter and tighter. Now, he was struggling to even breathe.

"Son," the voice continued, "come back to your father. It's over now, I've stopped everything. I swear, this time it's for real. It's all behind us..."

Raphaël let out a moan that echoed in the cave. This wasn't possible, he was going mad! He tried to move forward, but now he was completely stuck, the stone walls compressing his abdomen.

"Son! Come back here right now!" his father's voice bellowed. "RIGHT NOW!!"

Then, he felt the monster throw itself against the rock, dislodging earth from everywhere that covered his hair, entering his nose and mouth. The pounding continued, and the trembling intensified: he now heard larger stones rolling around him. He began to panic, and the vice he was in completely crushed him. Each breath became a torment, he could no longer take deep gulps of air, and he felt like he was going to die of suffocation. He couldn't move an inch, his body stuck, with pins and needles in his hands and feet; he could only stare at the faint light above him, until everything went dark.

"Come on, son, I'm sorry! I'll fix everything, it'll be like before! Come down from there, and you can see your mother, she's waiting, and so am I. We'll be together, all three of us, forever."

Raphaël bit his tongue to avoid screaming, trying to gather his thoughts: focus on his breaths, and empty his mind. The effort required was superhuman, but he forced himself to think only about his lungs, how they expanded and contracted. He didn't think about the lack of air with each breath, the dust falling around him, the roars and laughter echoing everywhere, the world trembling with each thud. Just his breath, as simple as an inhalation, an exhalation; not his father's voice, begging for help. He slowed down gradually, and the tomb of rock around him seemed to loosen its deadly grip at the same rhythm.

The feeling in his fingertips returned bit by bit, and he was even able to move his shoulders. While remaining focused on the emptiness he had created in his mind, he was able to crawl, and this time his body passed through the constriction. He pushed with his leg to climb, but felt something strangling him: that darn camera. He tried to force it, but the strap tightened its grip around his neck. Below, he heard another blow that seemed to tear through the forest, followed by a mad laugh. He twisted and turned: the camera was stuck somewhere near his back and wouldn't budge. He ran a hand along his body and managed to grab the cord with his fingertips. He pulled on it as best he could and managed to shift it after what seemed like an eternity. The pressure around his neck disappeared instantly, and he could move again: he was getting out. He continued, the earth vibrating around him and the monster howling in frustration, and he finally managed to emerge from the chimney to arrive where Jordane had set foot before him.

\*\*\*

"Since when have you been here?" she asked to buy time, though she already knew the answer to that question.

"I don't know," he replied, "a few days, a year, or a hundred years, I've lost all sense of time since the collapse."

"Were you one of the miners trapped during the accident? How is it that..."

"Shh!" he cut her off, suddenly alarmed. "Do you hear that?"

She listened intently but could only hear the pounding of her heart against her temples.

"What?" she asked.

"The voices!" he squeaked. "They're back! You attracted them! We need to hide!"

"What voices?"

He began to panic, fidgeting in place and casting frantic glances in every direction, and Jordane grew increasingly nervous, unsure what to do in the presence of this man who seemed more savage than human.

"What? Don't you know? You must have heard them too if you're here!"

He began to approach her, using his hands to move like a primate. Before she could attempt any defense, they were interrupted by a dull sound and a slight tremble, and before she could react, a hand grabbed her wrist and pulled her

with incredible force: she had no choice but to run behind the man who led her deeper into the mine. They followed the rails for several tens of meters, him agile despite his bare feet and bowed legs, her doing her best not to fall, her foot painfully hitting the steel occasionally. She heard the satchel beating against his bony hips in rhythm. Without warning, he pushed her to the left and forced her to climb a rock.

“Quick, here!” he hissed.

She squeezed into the sort of recess as best she could, her head and arms banging against the sharp walls.

“Up and to the left,” he whispered beneath her.

In panic and blindly, she climbed about a meter. She felt something push her buttocks, and she rolled headfirst into a small alcove of earth, a natural hideout no bigger than a prison cell and as dark as a moonless night. She managed to sit down, then the man joined her hurriedly, crouching beside her. He positioned himself between her and the exit, and her survival instinct screamed danger louder and louder.

“What was that?” she whispered, unsure whether to be more worried about the tremor or the man keeping her captive in a hidden recess of the mine.

He remained still, seemingly listening intently. Jordane continued to hear, from a distance, the growling voice, and her heart sank thinking of Raphaël: was he okay? Had something happened to him? The thought of Raphaël in danger prompted her to kneel and head towards the exit to help – what was she going to do? What would she even find? – but the old man blocked her path with his bony arm:

“It’s the monster,” he said, “you attracted it here! Didn’t you hear the voices?”

He repositioned himself in front of her, and Jordane realized she would have to be very careful if she wanted to get out of this alive, as the man did not seem to be in his right mind. She tried to calm herself and de-escalate the situation:

“Is that what we hear, the voice?” she whispered.

“No,” he replied as if explaining something obvious, “the voices whisper in your ear, they are those of your loved ones, even the deceased. They call out, mock, but when they’re around, the monster isn’t far. But most importantly, how can you be here? Was it you, the other night behind the grille? I was going to approach, but something blinded me!”

She remembered the flash of her camera, the scratching sounds that seemed to come from the depths of the conduit... She now thought about the legend of Inès, how she was caught by a monster through the grille, a long time ago, under the same tunnel:

“Have you never come out since the mine accident?” she asked, astonished.

“The accident?” he replied bitterly. “Is that what they called it? They left us down here and declared it was a terrible and unforeseeable accident, and then they moved on...”

“Wasn’t it an accident?”

Jordane’s radar activated again, and for a moment, she almost forgot everything else.

“Then let’s get out of here together,” she continued, “and you can tell the whole world what really happened. And you must have family; imagine how happy they would be to see you!”

But his face instantly contorted: his eyes narrowed under his bushy eyebrows, and he bared his few yellowed and broken teeth – two of them were gold, and Jordane noticed immediately.

“Family!” he scoffed. “No one wanted to go down into that mine, but everyone didn’t care! I had to put on my helmet every morning to feed my ‘family.’ While safety standards were just a bad joke, and in the last weeks, others began to talk about voices they heard, just on the other side of a wall or at the bottom of a hole. This mine is haunted, but no one believed us. ‘The door is just here if you disagree,’ the foreman simply said.

“Damn it,” he continued, “this whole damn town is haunted, even on the prison side things began to emerge, talk of apparitions, of someone watching you in your cell. Yes, I’ve seen the monster, with my own eyes. It appears when the voices come. But the voices, I haven’t heard them for ages, but you two arrived and made so much noise that you woke them up! I was safe, I stayed quiet, but now, because of you, we’re all going to die!”

Jordane was dumbfounded: despite speaking as softly as possible, he was panting and sweating after his speech, his entire body rigid. She wondered what he meant about the voices and the monster: had this poor man spent so much time here that he was hearing and seeing things? It was possible, he had been living down here since... No, impossible, for more than thirty years? It couldn’t be true, yet the accident...

“What do you mean by ‘the mine blew up’?” she asked quickly.

He seemed to struggle to calm himself, and once he did, he sat down in front of her – still in front of the exit, unfortunately.

Now she could only see his eyes darting around and the reflection of sweat drops trickling down his skull.

"They said it was an accident, right?"

"Yes."

"And how long before they forgot about us?"

"Two months, a little less."

He whistled, apparently impressed or reassured to be able to put a timeframe on his ordeal, having not seen daylight since well before Jordane was born.

"Anyway, they would have only found corpses," he said. "Except me, I'm the last one."

He took a deep breath and recounted what had happened on that fateful day:

"It was Jeremy who blew up the mine.

For several months, people had been saying the mine was haunted. Someone digging with a pickaxe fell into a cavity, and through a small hole, he heard his deceased aunt telling him he had always been her favorite nephew, and that she had baked him a cake, and he just had to reach out to get it. Another time, while pushing a coal cart. He reached an intersection, and to his right was a dead-end corridor. He saw it because turning his head illuminated it with his helmet, but there was nothing but a large pile of beams. Yet, he listened to his childhood friend he'd lost touch with since primary school asking him to come see his card collection. He ran away when he saw a shadow move behind the pile of beams, but wasn't sure afterward. The next day, he checked at the civil registry, just like that, and learned his friend had changed schools and died of a tumor two years later. He took his last paycheck and left without a word. He was the smartest among us.

More and more people started hearing voices, it even reached the ears of the management so much that the workers were scared, but they must have thought we were making up stories to get the installation up to safety standards, so they dismissed us. And then there was this guy, Jeremy. He heard his daughter. We tried to act as if we didn't hear the voices when they came, but he answered them. We even caught him talking with them. It was his daughter talking to him, her muffled voice coming from behind the wall. She said she was trapped in a coal vein and asked her father to come and fetch her, to free her. Of course, his daughter had died of tuberculosis last year, but that didn't stop Jeremy from talking to the wall for hours. We tried to get him to stop, someone even offered him a job on his cousin's farm because we thought he was encouraging the voices to speak by responding, but he wouldn't listen. Instead, he stopped talking to us and spent his days kneeling against that wall, talking and listening.

Some of us started cashing our checks and disappearing into the night too, but now I'm not sure they really left here. That they managed to leave the forest.

Anyway, one day, Jeremy took matters into his own hands and wanted to free his daughter. With an entire box of dynamite. I was at the other end with my team, but we felt the explosion, oh yes! We thought we were going to die right then – and it would have been so much better, believe me! But once the dust settled, we started looking for exits only to realize there were none left."

He put his hand on Jordane's arm, apparently moved to have shared his story for the first time with someone, and perhaps even to have encountered another human being for decades, but she shuddered with disgust at the contact of his moist, leather-tanned skin and withdrew her arm. The man's stomach rumbled with a sinister, guttural noise, but he didn't react.

"How have you survived?" she asked.

"Rainwater manages to seep down here, and I always find something to eat," he said, avoiding her gaze.

"And you haven't found a way out all this time?"

He shrugged. She heard another rumble from his stomach, which he tried to suppress, then he moved closer to Jordane:

"No, and even if there was one, I can't leave now, I've been here too long. I belong to this mine, until the end."

He reached for Jordane's hand, but she discreetly buried it between her thighs as if she hadn't noticed: at the same time, she tried to shift closer to the exit.

"If there's a monster here, then my friend is in danger, we have to go get him, and find a way out of here. You know this place, there must be an exit."

He dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand, looking annoyed:

"Didn't you hear it? It's here, and your friend is already dead, believe me. This monster ate all my friends, it will eat him too."



Then, he put his hand on her shoulder, but when she tried to free herself, the man's fingers turned into claws: Jordane felt a surge of anger rise within her and yanked her shoulder away sharply.

"A monster, my foot!" she yelled in the confined space, "I saw one of your 'friends' earlier, and it wasn't a fang in his skull, but your gold tooth!"

He staggered backward in shock, too stunned to even command her not to scream. Shame was written all over his face, and Jordane took advantage of the opening she had created to try and destabilize him and escape:

"I bet you didn't even wait for them to die on their own, and you took matters into your own hands!" she added.

"NO!" He protested, then, "...not at first."

Now his head was bowed, and he trembled with rage, or guilt. Jordane cautiously shifted her position.

"You have no idea what it's like," he lamented. "When you're starving, your body eats itself... You feel your skin crack, your teeth loosen, your muscles being nibbled away, and your organs shrinking... The pain is excruciating! The monster devoured most of the survivors, but I was with a group, and we managed to find hiding spots, to stay invisible. Unfortunately, we rarely had anything to eat, and my group members began to collapse. At first, no one dared, but once we tried..."

His stomach growled again, as if to illustrate his point. This time, he grabbed Jordane's pant leg at the knee with one hand, and her sleeve with the other, towering over her.

"I did them a favor," he continued, foam at his mouth and a vacant look in his eyes, "and I'm going to do you a favor too."

Jordane screamed and clawed at his face, lacerating his cheek. He groaned in pain, saliva mixed with blood dripping down his chin, but he slapped her across the face, ringing her ear and making her see stars. He then grabbed her hair and smashed her head against the wall with such force that the shock made her forget the slap: the wave of pain went through her entire skull, and for a few seconds, she couldn't feel the rest of her body. As he advanced on her, Jordane just managed to regain enough control of her legs to kick him in the ribs and topple him over. He groaned in pain, insulted her, but she gathered all her strength to try and stand up: her legs collapsed once under her, then on the second attempt, her aching head spun so much that she fell forward, tumbling down the crack to land on the tracks. The man was already coming down after her, now furious. She tried to defend herself with another kick, but this time it was much too weak and he simply parried it with his hand. He lunged at her, but she managed to grab a random rock beside her and smash it on her assailant's head. A mix of blood and saliva whipped her face, and she heard a tooth fall onto one of the rails with a bell-like sound. She took the opportunity to stand up and flee along the tracks, heading back towards the broken elevator. Pain throbbed in her head, and she no longer paid attention to the beams and rocks that tripped her and nearly sent her sprawling several times. She arrived in the large room and wondered whether she should go back down to join Raphaël or find another way out.

"Jordane!" she heard whispered to her right. She turned and saw Raphaël's silhouette beckoning her, almost invisible behind a huge rock. She dashed to join him and he grabbed her to hide in his makeshift shelter.

"Jordane, we have to get out of here, there's a fucking monster in this mine!" he whispered as low as possible.

"It's not a monster, it's a miner," she replied. "He's been trapped here all this time."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, visibly confused. "It's a huge wolf, it had your voice Jo, it took your voice!"

She didn't understand what he was talking about: had she hit her head that hard? She had trouble thinking, and the more she tried, the more the pain intensified. She even began to feel faint, when they heard dragging footsteps heading towards them.

"Sorry about earlier..." the miner said in a trembling voice to the apparently empty room.

They risked a furtive glance and saw him rummaging through the debris, leaving drops of blood in his wake: Jordane hadn't missed.

"Come back and let's talk... I promise to behave."

His voice was falsely friendly, but his face was distorted with rage, hunger, and a swelling bump on the left side of his head.

"Let's be friends, all three of us..."

Saliva flowed from his mouth, and his stomach roared with hunger, echoing throughout the cave. They took cover again as the man now headed in their direction after searching the rest of the place. He picked up a sharp rock silently, approaching their hideout as discreetly as possible. Now only a few steps away from them, he raised his weapon in the air, waiting for just one of them to dare peek out. They heard his ragged breathing just on the other side, huddled



together waiting for the inevitable; but the miner didn't hear the soft footsteps of the huge thing sneaking up behind him, and the shining yellow eyes just behind his shoulders.

They all three jumped when a terrible and powerful voice shook the entire mine:

"I ALWAYS THOUGHT YOU WERE JUST A COMMON RAT, WITH YOUR STENCH OF ROTTEN RODENT. I THOUGHT I HAD EATEN EVERYTHING, BUT THERE WAS STILL A SNACK LEFT."

The man turned and faced for the first time what he had been hiding from for so many years: a huge beast, fur as black as unreflected night, and eyes piercing his soul, ready to feed. It towered over him by a head, and from its slightly open mouth, it too let a stream of saliva escape. The miner dropped his weapon and didn't even realize it had crushed his foot before rolling away. His mouth trembled, his dangling arms lowered.

"LOOK AT THIS..." said the monster in a falsely disappointed voice, "BARELY MORE THAN SKIN AND BONES... BUT YOU KNOW WHAT THAT'S LIKE, DON'T YOU?"

The man pulled himself together: perhaps it was being judged a second time for committing an act that only psychopaths or walking dead trapped without food for several weeks could dare imagine, or maybe it was just his survival instinct giving him a last chemical boost. Either way, he momentarily regained the use of his hands and tongue:

"You..." he said, "you and the voices... You are the cause of all my misery!"

The wolf chuckled.

"All this time hiding," he continued, his eyes wide with rage and a mad smile, "eating your leftovers, you who devoured most of my companions! And yet I'm so happy to finally face you!"

He dug his hand into his satchel and pulled out a long, cylindrical object in faded red and an old lighter:

"I've been waiting over thirty years to give this to you!"

He raised the stick of dynamite above his head with one hand and approached the lighter to the wick with the other. He was shaking like a leaf.

"I'm going to do it!" he bellowed. "All I have to do is light this wick and the fireworks will send us to the moon!"

The wolf revealed his teeth as he grinned widely, but the miner didn't back down:

"I'm going to light it! I can do it!" he repeated in a cracked voice. "Your only chance is to leave here and never come back! Otherwise, I'll blow your brains out, I'm not joking!"

"COME ON, COME ON!" the ferocious beast taunted, "YOU KNOW THIS IS MY HOME. SO GO AHEAD, DO IT! STRIKE YOUR LIGHTER!"

The miner stood motionless at first, then the wolf took a step towards him. Jordane and Raphaël heard a series of clicks echo in the room as the man tried to light the wick. But tears rose with the panic as the spark failed to produce a flame.

"I KNEW IT!" exclaimed the wolf, "YOU'RE BLUFFING, AREN'T YOU? WHY HAVEN'T YOU USED THAT LITTLE FANCY STICK TO GET OUT? BECAUSE YOUR LIGHTER HAS NO FUEL, RIGHT? YOU WASTED IT ALL TO LIGHT YOUR WAY AT FIRST, I BET! FIGHTING AGAINST THE DARKNESS INSTEAD OF EMBRACING IT... SUCH SADNESS..."

"Go to hell!" cried the miner.

Quicker than lightning, the wolf snapped its jaw with phenomenal force: the man's forearm vanished, and his hand holding the dynamite stick flew towards Jordane and Raphaël. It crashed to the ground within Jordane's line of sight, who was simply petrified with terror. The miner, now left with only one arm, began to scream in pain and tried to flee as the beast chewed on the bone it had just seized. Swallowing his snack, then leaping with agility, it had already caught up with the unfortunate man at the other end of the room: with a swipe of its claw, it sliced open his back, severing his spinal column. He collapsed with a cry and fell onto his back, the wolf now on top of him. A bloodstain began to form slowly under him, soaking the dry earth, while another formed under his crotch, a mix of other fluids.

Unable to stand up, as his lower body no longer responded, he tried to drag himself backward but forgot he had just lost a limb. The bone of his arm scraped against the rock, sending him a burst of unbearable pain. His scream seemed only to whet the wolf's appetite: it grabbed his leg in its mouth and chewed on his shinbone, tearing off the flesh and gnawing the bone. The man grabbed his head with his remaining hand, crying and moaning at the horrific spectacle of being devoured alive, unable to do anything more. The beast now tore off his other leg, crunching the bones like dry biscuits, accompanied by a terrible sound like branches being snapped by knees.

Jordane was horrified, unwillingly listening to the symphony of chewing sounds and pleading cries. She watched Raphaël cautiously extend his leg to the right: he was trying to grab the object lying on the ground, still firmly held by the ownerless hand.

"A stick of dynamite..." she thought, incredulous.

Her companion managed to snag the object with the tip of his foot. He pulled it toward him, but the hand held its grip, leaving a bloody trail. On the other side, the miner had both legs devoured. Now he lay silent, paralyzed by fear, simply staring at the ceiling and trembling as the wolf attacked his groin.

Raphaël picked up the explosive and tried to detach the dead limb: unwilling to touch it, he shook the stick, then tried rubbing it against the wall, but to no avail.

"I don't know what you plan to do, but hurry up, my friend..." Jordane pleaded with her eyes.

Raphaël seemed to get the message, as he first touched the hand with his fingertips and then pulled on it with a grimace of disgust. Suddenly, the screams intensified behind them, resonating in their veins: the liquid noise and various obscene gurgles indicated that the monster was relishing the victim's intestines. Raphaël was now trying to pry the grip open with his full hand, but despite the energy he put into it, trying not to think about the rough contact with dead skin and the blood droplets on his own fingers, it didn't work. He grabbed the stick by one end, crouched down, and swung a heel kick at the hand, sending it flying against the opposite wall. It then collapsed to the ground with a squishy sound, the fingers up like a dead spider.

"And now?" Jordane thought.

Raphaël seemed to have the same thought, as he began to look around for something to light the fuse: but nothing. The screams slowly died, along with the person making them, as the wolf attacked the ribcage, shaking the remaining carcass with its powerful jaws to dislodge the bones: the corpse danced from one hand, the head swinging in rhythm with the shakes.

Raphaël silently moved to peek around the other side of their hiding place. He saw nothing of interest – it was rather difficult in such darkness – but his gaze lingered unwillingly on the ferocious beast cracking the poor man's skull between its jaws. He turned to his partner: "I don't see how to light it..."

She bit her lip: she also cast a thorough, circular glance behind her, but nothing appeared either. She tried to think of a solution – was that Raphaël's plan? To use this weapon against the thing? Tapping two stones together? No, they needed flint for that, not ordinary rock. Even the mineral coal like this wouldn't do.

Rubbing a stick to ignite it? No, they were hiding behind a rock, waiting to be devoured by a giant wolf, not at a scout picnic...

"I have an idea," suddenly said Raphaël. Jordane's face momentarily lit up with hope: "but it's going to make noise," he added.

\*\*\*

"Don't move from here," Raphaël told Jordane.

She nodded, not quite sure what he had in mind, and then he stood up quietly, the dynamite stick in one hand and the camera still around his neck. The monster, with its back to them, was noisily and avidly gnawing on the last remains of bone from its carcass. He glanced at the enormous elevator cage: although blocked by rocks, it seemed possible to climb its exterior face quite easily and reach a large beam high up. There, the wolf wouldn't be able to reach him, and he would have some time to light this damned fuse. And then? He imagined the beast barking under his tree, and then he would drop the bomb right into its throat: easy, right?

"You really have to be completely crazy to try this," he said to himself as he carefully placed the explosive in the back pocket of his jeans.

One last look at the wolf still gorging itself, another at Jordane who watched him with a bewildered expression, and he quietly approached the cage. Even though he showed nothing, at Raphaël's first step, the wolf's ear twitched, but it continued eating: "Of course you heard me..." he thought.

He reached the cage: the fence, though very old and rusty, seemed quite sturdy and climbable. He grabbed his first holds, and prepared to place his foot to climb, when behind him, as he expected:

"Son... Daddy lost his wallet, give me your piggy bank, the one shaped like a pig, I promise I'll pay you back... I swear, this time I'll pay you back, promised..."

This flashback still managed to catch him off guard, hitting him like a brick wall. But he resisted the urge to run and started climbing. At the same moment, the monster charged like a locomotive, letting out bestial roars. Though it was fast, Raphaël had already climbed out of reach. It crashed its full weight against the structure, causing it to tremble. Raphaël let out a cry of anguish, shaken like a ripe nut in harvest season, using all his strength to avoid falling. Jordane watched in horror as the wolf threw itself again and again against the cage, threatening to make Raphaël fall or even

collapse everything.

“SO YOU WANT TO PLAY TREE TAG? BUT I PREFER PLAYING THE WOLF, COME LET ME TAG YOU!”

Its voice was deafening, and Jordane wondered if what she was seeing right now was real. And had it not taken another voice, or had she dreamed it? She thought back to Inès’ famous phrase, “monsters don’t exist,” and yet, it seemed she had one right under her nose. But no time to ponder: the beast gave no respite, jumping, cackling, and shouting obscenities, and Raphaël would soon fall if she did nothing. She suddenly remembered the hideout, the small crack in the wall that the other madman had made her go through to get to the small shelter. If she started running, maybe she could divert its attention to her, and maybe she could reach it before he did. It was a lot of maybes, but in a few seconds, her friend was going to fall. Then be eaten. Then she would be dessert.

She stuck her head out from behind the rock and froze: the monster had stopped moving, and its two eyes were fixed on something in the air. It looked almost satisfied. She tried to follow its gaze and spotted her friend clinging desperately to the beam. Then she looked up further, and finally saw it:

“Raphaël!!” she screamed, pointing at the top of the elevator cage.

He didn’t have time to look up: already the white mist that had infiltrated the cave flowed around him like a foamy milk waterfall. The cloud of death slowly spread across the floor, but the wolf had found something more interesting:

“Well, well! Look who we have here,” it exclaimed in a radiant and enthusiastic voice, “a grumpy little girl sent to us! Here we are all friends, and only happy children are allowed! So dry those ugly tears and show me your brightest smile!”

Jordane’s heart stopped in her chest.

She couldn’t understand what was happening, but she was instantly thrown back more than ten years. Then he would say: “Listen, none of this is your fault, it’s the devil controlling you...” she thought simply.

“... and your parents sent you here to be freed, to be fixed. And your parents only want your happiness, don’t they?” the monster finished.

She turned towards it, all her strength suddenly leaving her: it was right in front of her, its fangs dripping with blood and the hot breath of death filling her nostrils. Then she fell to the ground. The mist licked her shoes, then caressed her legs. The world spun around her. She saw her school, all the students looking at her, then she saw the other school, the trauma she had tried so hard to leave behind. But all of that no longer mattered, she was going to die here and now. Either by sharp teeth like razors or by claws as long as knives. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw rats trying to escape the toxic fog, but it was in vain, they were already inside the trap.

“ANOTHER SKINNY ONE, WHAT A SHAME...”

The breath of the beast was awful, but the aura it emitted was unbearable. One could feel the spirit of all its victims floating around it, all the raw violence and carnage tingling the skin like icy needles, giving goosebumps. It sniffed Jordane eagerly, as if feeding on the scent of her terror:

“WHAT A DIVINE SMELL! MASTER CHOSE YOU WELL! YOUR SOUL IS SO TORTURED, YOU WILL BE A REAL FEAST FOR ALL OF US!

AH, MY ANCESTORS! THEY WANT US TO WAIT, YES, A MEAT LIKE YOU DESERVES TO BE WAITED FOR! ALL THESE DEMONS HAUNTING YOU, I SEE THEM... THEY ARE EAGER TO COME OUT... DO YOU SEE THEM OUT OF THE CORNER OF YOUR EYE? DO YOU SOMETIMES SEE THEM WAITING FOR THE CHANCE, JUST BEFORE YOU TURN YOUR HEAD? OH, MY BEAUTY, A MEAT LIKE THIS, WE NEED TO OPEN THIS DOOR, LET YOUR DEMONS TORTURE YOU A BIT, COOK YOU SLOWLY, DRIVING YOU MAD, AND YOUR SOUL WILL BE SO DELICIOUS... A MEAL OF A CENTURY.”

Jordane trembled like a leaf, unable to move or think.

“BUT I CAN’T WAIT,” the beast suddenly continued, licking its lips, “I’M SO HUNGRY! TO HELL WITH THE OTHERS, I WANT YOU ALL TO MYSELF! OH, MY BEAUTY, I’M GOING TO DEVOUR YOU RAW...”

As it opened its mouth, approaching her, Jordane screamed with all her might. Saliva dripped onto her jeans. They were interrupted by a dull thud followed by a growl: Raphaël had come down. He was coughing and staggering as if dizzy. The mist was rising to his ankles.

“Jordane,” he spat out, fumbling with something in his hands, “close your eyes!”

“OH NO, YOU’RE NOT GOING TO RUIN MY MEAL! I’LL USE YOU TO PICK MY TEETH BEFORE THE REFINED DISHES!!”

It lunged at him, and Jordane just had time to recognize the object he held in his hands before closing her eyes: the camera’s flash blinded her even through her eyelids, but the beast’s scream gave her enough adrenaline to leap up and join Raphaël heading towards the crack in the ground. He plunged in first, forgetting all forms of chivalry for the

moment. Jordane followed closely, keeping an eye on the monster thrashing in the void, screaming and hitting against the rocks. She pulled her head back just in time to avoid a jaw-crushing blow against the ground.

“STOP RUNNING!!” it raged, “I LIKE MY MEAT TENDER! DON’T GO TOO FAR, I’LL BE RIGHT THERE!”

Its last words echoed in the rock conduit as they descended into the first cavity they had found. When Jordane finally set foot on the ground, she first saw Raphaël fiddling with the camera in the faint light of the room. Then, her gaze was drawn to the gaping hole that had once been a pile of rubble.

“Yes,” said Raphaël, “that’s where he came from earlier, so he’ll be back soon...”

She moaned, imagining two yellow eyes emerging from the darkness at the end of the passage, but she was interrupted by a dull snap. She turned and saw Raphaël hitting a small gray object with a sharp rock.

“What are you doing?” she implored, seeing his camera gutted on the side.

“I have no idea...” he murmured... “But it should work. It has to work.”

He struck the rectangular object again, which didn’t budge: she recognized the camera’s battery. She now looked at the red stick protruding from his back pocket, and the calculation in her head clicked.

“You’re completely insane!” she exclaimed.

“Do you have another idea?” he snapped, hitting the battery again.

The plastic cracked a bit.

“Then hurry up!” she urged, “he’s going to arrive any minute!”

He said nothing, pounding away with his rock, but something else answered him. Somewhere in the dark, at the end of the tunnel. A child’s laugh. Jordane froze, as if hypnotized. In the darkness, voices gradually rose. The monstrosity was approaching slowly, and she began to hear them more and more clearly. Several adolescent voices exclaimed laughing:

“Look! What’s with the goth girl? They say goths are easy, I bet you’d sleep with the devil if he came to you!”

Her stomach clenched. Then, a reassuring voice of an old lady:

“I know it must be hard for you to understand what’s happening, my dear, but I want you to know that we will do everything to find you a new loving and caring family. You won’t be alone...”

She noticed that Raphaël paused in his action for a moment, but he resumed his blacksmith’s blows. Two small lights emerged from the darkness and slowly danced in the tunnel. Now, she could see its white teeth appearing calmly. She heard its steps. The saliva dripping to the ground. It was coming.

“Raphaël...” Jordane whispered, but she was shaking too much to be intelligible.

The wolf entered the room, singing.

“Watch out for Crazy Ollie,  
If you cross her, it won’t be jolly.  
If you speak her name three times in a mirror’s sight,  
She’ll break out of the asylum and haunt you at night.  
Beware of Crazy Ollie,  
Run if you’re not feeling dolly.  
She’ll drag you into the woods, don’t you see,  
Put your head in the oven and set you free.  
Watch out for Crazy Ollie,  
In the darkness, she lurks, all eerie and folly.”

“Raphaël,” she repeated, a bit louder.

She turned towards him, just as he struck the battery for the last time: first, she saw it split in two, then a liquid squirted out and poured from the crack in drops. A moment later, it ignited, shooting out an impressive flame and blue sparks that lit up the entire room. He placed the dynamite’s fuse on it, which immediately ignited. Now the battery had become a real flamethrower, hissing intensely: he flung it backhanded toward the beast. Before it could hit the

ground, it exploded like a firecracker, clapping in the ears of everyone in that cave, causing tinnitus. This must have destabilized it, for it froze for a moment. Raphaël dropped the smoking and hissing object he held in his hand: it fell and disappeared under a pile of rocks, while they ran in the opposite direction, and then, nothing.

For barely two seconds.

The subsequent explosion was tremendous: for a fraction of a second, a monstrous thunder rose, then all was but a piercing whistling. The shockwave passed through them with phenomenal force, throwing them to the ground like an invisible hand. They felt a wave of heat rise, then a rain of debris hit them. A cloud of dust then filled the space, as the shockwaves came back, bouncing off the walls. A rumbling thundered around them, as if the mountain itself was moving above their heads, then the noise gradually calmed down. Raphaël was spitting dust, his ears ached terribly, he was in pain everywhere but still alive. Jordane was beside him, curled up in a fetal position, coughing, her hands pressed against her ears. They remained like this for several seconds, until the smoke settled, and they could hear again; but among the tinnitus, Jordane was haunted by a voice. A voice she hadn't heard in so long, yet she recognized it immediately, stunning her on the spot: it was Father Donovan.

Beneath his smiling and welcoming mask, Jordane had discovered his true face when she was a teenager. It was at Donovan's school. Naming a school dedicated to the almighty after himself should have raised suspicions among those so-called "responsible adults." But if she had learned at least one thing there, it was to be wary above all of those who proclaimed themselves as exemplary figures.

\*\*\*

They had finally regained the open air after what seemed like an eternity below: the explosion had collapsed the room separating them from the monster, trapping it, hopefully, forever. Then, they had pushed the cart along the straight rails up to the hole through which they had entered. Not only had the blast enlarged it, but they used the antique scrap to climb onto it and get out by grabbing a tree root. There was no trace of the mist anymore, and the forest had returned to a serene calm. They continued down the slope, this time treading carefully, until they found a trail far below. They followed it back to Raphaël's car, just as they had left it. They noticed that Ed's pickup was still in the same spot, so they decided to wait a bit longer. They discussed what to do next, especially whether to call the police or not, carefully avoiding any mention of whatever they had encountered in the mine half an hour earlier.

In the end, they simply had no choice, as it seemed that the entire forest was out of coverage. They concluded that the best thing to do was to go directly to the police station since their guide had still not returned from their "accidental" separation. They imagined he might still be searching for them, scouring the surroundings - the mist had dissipated so quickly, it made them wonder if it had appeared at all. They carefully avoided voicing the thought that he might have been devoured by the monster too, as with each passing minute, their previous experience seemed more and more unreal, as if their subconscious was working hard to erase this anomaly from their memory; nevertheless, it's what they thought in silence, they could feel it.

They hesitated to wait any longer, thinking it would be better for the authorities to come as soon as possible and thoroughly scour the area. They didn't say it, but once again, each asked themselves: "What should we tell?" Then Jordane decided to break the silence first, a little because she wanted to make sure she hadn't gone mad, but mostly because she didn't want Raphaël to ask her the question first:

"The voice it took at one point, was it really your father's?"

Raphaël stared at her from the other end of the roof of the old blue Mercedes where they had slumped, head in arms.

"Yes," he simply said.

Jordane nodded slowly, seemingly reassured.

"And was it really him?" she continued, "I mean, something he had said or could have said?"

"I don't know," he replied after a pause, "I don't have many memories of him."

Jordane nodded again and, not wanting to give him time to ask his question, a little "and you?" for example, she quickly added:

"We need to get going, we can't just sit here any longer."

Raphaël reluctantly agreed, and they got into the car and drove off in silence, leaving Ed's car behind, which would remain in that spot for many years to come.

With a distracted glance in the rearview mirror, Jordane thought she saw two yellow lights watching her from afar in the shadow of the pines. She turned to look better through the rear window of the car, but Raphaël turned at the same moment and she didn't have time to make sure she wasn't dreaming. But deep down, she knew the answer.



They arrived in town and followed the signs to the police station: the streets were deserted that afternoon, and they only passed one or two pedestrians who seemed to wander aimlessly along the asphalt paths. Jordane's phone, once back in civilization, began to ring like a rooster at sunrise. She checked it automatically and swiped away various irrelevant notifications with a thumb gesture; however, she lingered on the last one, an email from the agency captured by Raphaël's spy software. Making sure he was focused on the road – she knew deep down she was on a slippery slope and should uninstall the app sooner rather than later – she skimmed the message: an exchange between the boss and Melody with lots of uninteresting information, except for the part that jumped out at her, "prepare your article for tomorrow instead, you're replacing Jordane's."

Her heart started racing, but when Raphaël indicated they had arrived, she managed to respond with a smile.

The police station was a small structure nestled among old buildings and shops, half of which were for rent. Its facade was covered with prevention posters about safety, crime, and accidents, and a far too large section dedicated to photos of missing people - Jordane regretted once again losing her camera. They were able to park directly across the street from the building, but Jordane hesitated as she touched the door handle: something like fear, or apprehension.

"Will they believe us?" a timid voice in her head said.

She immediately dismissed the thought: something horrible had happened in that mine, whether conceivable or not. They had to bring the truth to light. They had to.

To enter the police station, one had to ring for the officer to unlock the door: Jordane pressed the button and heard a shrill beep from the other side of the tinted glass door. A few seconds later, they heard a click at the lock, and they entered the building's vestibule. Once the first door closed, another click sounded in front of them, and they could open the second door, with Jordane's heart starting to beat faster. There were only two people in the waiting room: an old man in a thick jacket and beret who seemed to be napping, and a girl of barely fifteen who fidgeted in her seat, tapping her leg frantically. She glanced at Jordane, and it was she who had to lower her eyes first.

"It's not often that you must see strangers," she thought, especially in our state..." They headed to the reception on their right to meet the officer who was engrossed in reading a manual.

"Hello," Jordane said almost curtly.

The uniformed woman looked up, her smile fading upon seeing them:

"What happened to you?" she asked.

It was Jordane who spoke. She explained how they had arranged to meet Ed, their hike to the bridge and one of the sealed mine entrances. How they had seen the white mist arrive, got dispersed, and both fell into a hole before managing to get back to the surface. She watched the officer's face shift from skepticism to disarray as she recounted the tale of the miner, the monster, and even the dynamite. The woman let her speak without interruption, but her response was blunt and unequivocal:

"It's impossible, there's no access to that mine."

Jordane was initially dumbfounded, then recomposed herself, adopting a conciliatory tone:

"Is that what worries you? We fell into a hole, there must have been an unstable patch of ground..."

"Are you sure?" the officer replied sharply. "You didn't fall into a ravine or a small cave? The mine is sealed, approved by the mayor."

"I... maybe..." Jordane hesitated.

"Furthermore, there haven't been any wolf sightings in Duli for over thirty years. They started leaving the area when the mine construction began. Is this some kind of prank? Such jokes can get you into serious trouble, young lady!"

Incredulity began to give way to frustration, but Jordane made a great effort to remain composed.

"We can take you to the entrance! You'll see for yourself! And our guide, he's missing. You must at least consider that!"

"His name?"

"Ed..."

"Last name?"

Jordane turned to Raphaël, but he just shook his head, appearing helpless.

"I don't remember his last name, but I have his number," she said.



"I need the last name," the officer retorted.

"He... is a hunter, lives outside of town, at the edge of the forest... He's lived here all his life."

"Okay, and how did you get separated?" she continued.

"The mist appeared," Raphaël interjected, coming to Jordane's aid, visibly struggling. "Like during the accident."

"Mist? It was bad weather and you lost sight of each other?"

"No, it's not that..."

"Listen," she cut him off, "if this Ed is still missing in three days, come back and report a missing person. I can't do anything before that. In the meantime, go to the infirmary to get checked out. As for your grim stories of fierce beasts and ghosts, I'm doing you a favor by pretending I heard nothing, but I strongly suggest you get your minds straight before wasting anyone else's time."

Jordane, now fully enraged, wondered how the people supposed to protect the residents of this town could be so disengaged. Something was going on here, that was clear to her, but the authorities seemed to look the other way. Who could they count on for protection?

Raphaël noticed Jordane boiling inside and felt that if he let her respond, the confrontation would quickly escalate. He grabbed her by the shoulder and turned her away, breaking the electric arc crackling between their gazes.

"It's true," he said, "we should check your injuries, you might have something serious."

The woman opened the gate and gestured them to head to the back. Raphaël gritted his teeth under Jordane's glare, but they followed her to the infirmary without further ceremony, while the intense gaze of the teenager in the waiting room followed them.

\*\*\*

The nurse was a young man with a strong build, taking an infinite amount of care and time with each task. They were given paracetamol, disinfectant, and a couple of bandages. They also got to wash their faces with a cloth, looking less like vagabonds. They answered the nurse's questions, tried to chat with him, but only managed to elicit occasional "hmm-hmms" and "ohs."

They left about half an hour later, deemed healthy and safe for the rest of the day. Walking through the corridors, they crossed paths with the young, fiery teenager. She wore loose, unisex brand clothes, giving her a street-style look, holding her white cap in her hand. She tried hard to appear proud and haughty, but perhaps there was fear in her eyes.

"We're done for now," said a police officer behind her, "but I'm watching you, believe me. And don't think of running away, or else!"

The girl ignored him and continued to the exit. Jordane and Raphaël followed, passing the receptionist who was on the phone. Once through the vestibule again, they were relieved to leave the oppressive atmosphere for the fresh air.

"A town of crazies..." Raphaël commented.

"That's right," Jordane simply said.

Behind them, the girl leaned against the wall, apparently waiting for someone. Jordane lowered her voice:

"It's really strange," she said. "People don't care at all, but residents are dying! Look!"

She pointed to the wall plastered with photos of missing persons. Of all ages, seemingly from different backgrounds, they couldn't all be runaway children, husbands leaving their families, or wanderers.

"Is it that thing causing all this? Are there others?"

Raphaël didn't know how to answer. He almost said what he wanted was to get out of there while they were still alive and try to forget this whole story, but he didn't: he knew Jordane well enough.

"We have to go to the carnival," she blurted out.

Raphaël winced, but again he said nothing. She just never gave up. It was the girl behind them who replied:

"If you go there, you won't come back."

They turned as one. Having caught their attention, she approached them nonchalantly:

"I heard you earlier, you really went into the mine, right? But these idiot cops, all they want is to give parking tickets

and go home at five to watch TV. They don't want to know what's really happening in this town."

"And what exactly is happening in this town?" Jordane asked cautiously.

The girl let out a sardonic laugh:

"Mysterious accidents killing all sorts of people, always stories of 'we heard stuff,' or 'we saw things'... And then people disappearing from time to time... You might think, sure, they woke up one morning and finally realized they lived in a dying, crappy town and ran away. But it's not true, I know this damned town is haunted..."

Jordane observed the girl for a few seconds: this rebellious-appearing teenager seemed to have interesting information about the town. She also appeared eager to talk, and Jordane decided she could extract information without showing her cards – a reflex of an investigator.

"Why do they act as if nothing is happening around them?"

"I don't know," the girl replied, "maybe they're in on it, or maybe they're just STUPID and LAZY!"

She shouted the last two words, standing up against the tinted glass of the police station. On the other side, one could vaguely make out the silhouette of the policewoman who didn't even seem to lift her head.

"Is that wreck yours?" she continued, nodding nonchalantly towards the Mercedes.

"Yes, it's my car..." Raphaël replied, unable to hide his outrage in his voice.

"Yeah, Mercedes... More like 'Mercy-less' – typical tough German engineering," she scoffed, making Jordane chuckle.

"Listen," she continued, "I bet you're here for all this weird stuff. Otherwise, why would outsiders come to this rat hole? What are you? Detectives? Bloggers?"

"I work for a magazine, Tales from the Crypt. Ever heard of it?" Jordane offered. "I'm writing an article."

"Never heard of it. But I've got something that might interest you, check this out: me and two friends, we're planning to do some urban exploration in one of the town's haunted places. You know what urban exploration is, right?"

"Yes, we've done it before," Jordane replied, suddenly feeling very old.

"Great, so here's the deal: last night, we got our hands on a document, perfect for its story, full of descriptions and comments, like a guided tour in a museum! So, we're planning to check it out this afternoon, take a tour, try to meet some ghosts. But here's the catch, we don't have a car, and it's not in town. So if you drive us there, you can tag along."

Jordane's heart raced with excitement: a haunted place? Ghosts? A document? Was this providence sending this girl their way?

"And what is this haunted place?" Jordane asked.

"The prison."

\*\*\*

Jordane took Raphaël aside to discuss, clearly more excited than him about this new lead:

"Raf, for once we're in luck! It's the prison! The riot caused almost as many deaths as the mine accident!"

"I know," he replied, "but we don't even know them, can we trust them just like that?"

"Don't worry, they're just kids, you'll be fine!"

"What do you mean 'you'?" he alarmed.

"Well, yes, look at the time. If we both go wandering near the prison, it'll be too late to check out the Palace of the Strange. So you go with them, and I'll head to the palace on my own, then you join me when you're done. Is that okay?"

No, it wasn't okay at all: they had nearly lost their lives in that mine. If it were up to him, he'd have gone home and forgotten the whole story with a few drinks. Yes, that girl in the letter was right: there were monsters in this town, as crazy as it might seem, and everyone either didn't care or was too scared to look into it. People were disappearing, he had just seen one die before his eyes, but that was their problem, they should just move away. And now Jordane wanted them to split up, to maybe face more danger, all for a simple article?

"No, that's not it," he thought. "There's more to it."

He knew Jordane well enough to understand that she felt involved, in a way. The truth was they were probably the only ones interested in this story – the girl and her friends probably just wanted some thrills, maybe sneak some beers away

from adults, but he doubted they really believed the town was haunted – and it was simply the right thing to do: to act. He couldn't dissuade her or stop her: when she had an idea in her head, when she felt responsible, nothing could stop her. So what was he going to do? Leave? Go home alone? It worked for his father, so why not him?

He sighed: he would have to accept her plan. He'd make it as quick as possible, meet her there, and with some luck, she'd be waiting in front of a closed and impassable gate.

"Yes, it's fine," he finally said. "And how are you going to get there?"

"Well," she replied, "you're going to give me some bills for a taxi."

\*\*\*

Having parted with all his cash, he let the girl – "By the way, I'm Emilie," she had said – into the front seat of his car, leaving Jordane in the parking lot of the police station, amid the deserted street. Emilie directed him to pick up her two friends: they had left the deteriorating city center, with its "FOR SALE" shop signs and soulless parks, now venturing into more populous neighborhoods to the east.

The road grew increasingly potholed, and the boarded-up shopfronts gave way to old houses with plywood windows. She asked him to park by the roadside, in front of a graffiti-covered building. Two teenagers in tracksuits sat on the steps, energy drink cans at their feet.

"What have I got myself into..." he thought.

He parked, and Emilie exited, asking him to wait in the car. She joined the other two youths: one was short and stout, his padded puffer jacket giving him the look of a Michelin man. He wore his fur-lined hood up and his sneakers untied. The other, tall and thin – taller than Raphaël – had curly hair and ear piercings. He smoked an overly long hand-rolled cigarette, likely not just containing tobacco, its ashes slowly falling onto his hideous, multicolored, expensive sneakers.

She spoke to the tall one, pointing at Raphaël through the car window. He scrutinized Raphaël just as Emilie had initially, then seemed reassured and nodded, letting her continue. At one point, he showed and patted his backpack, then the two boys stood up – "My god, he's taller than me," Raphaël thought – and headed towards his car, leaving their trash behind. Michelin and Emilie opened the rear doors and sat in the back without a word. The tall one circled the car, casting a discreet glance at the license plate as if to make sure it wasn't an unmarked vehicle, and then folded himself into the front seat:

"Hey man," he said, sitting down, "I'm Thomas. That," he gestured to Michelin in the back, "is Nono. He's a bit slow, doesn't talk much."

"Shut up," Nono replied gruffly.

"And you already know Mimile," Thomas continued. "Can we smoke in your car?"

"I'm Raphaël, and I'd prefer not."

"What if I open the window?"

"I'm trying to sell it," he lied.

"Good luck with that," Thomas replied, cracking the door just enough to toss his joint outside. "So, she hooked you up? Heading to the prison?"

"That's right," Raphaël said, starting the car as they unknowingly left the town for the last time.

\*\*\*

They ventured onto a departmental road that disappeared into the fields, encountering only three or four cars. Leaving the forest behind, to Raphaël's great relief, he took the time to appreciate the rural landscape. Michelin, who hadn't removed his hood despite the twenty degrees inside the car, hadn't uttered a word. But each time Raphaël dared to glance at him in the rearview mirror, their eyes would instantly meet, forcing Raphaël to pretend twice to readjust the mirror. Thomas was conversing with Emilie, occasionally giving directions to Raphaël: "Turn left at the nasty building" or "follow that bitch" as a car took a right turn – either he knew a woman was driving, or the car was the bitch, Raphaël thought. After about fifteen kilometers, he didn't need to see the "PENITENTIARY CENTER" sign to know when to turn: they had left the last traces of civilization – an abandoned warehouse, a large farm with a tractor lazily tilling its plot – and the building loomed ominously on the rest of the barren hill where it perched.

The penitentiary itself looked like a monster: a red-brick building with square shapes, pointed towers piercing the grayish sky, and a hellish labyrinth of rusty wire fences and barbed wire. Emilie was ecstatic in the back of the car as Raphaël drove slowly down the driveway: "Damn!! This is so cool!!"

They passed through an empty guard post with broken windows, the barrier lying on the side of the road, and arrived at the prison parking lot. Completely empty except for a row of rusting dumpsters, two of them overturned. The place was fenced with immense wire meshes topped with barbed wire loops a meter high, which hadn't budged an inch. The structure stood before them, separated into different buildings isolated by walls or fences.

He parked as close to the entrance as possible: despite all the windows being barred with steel, the main door was open. In fact, there wasn't even a door anymore. Emilie didn't wait for him to turn off the engine before getting out, eager to explore. Her friends followed suit while Raphaël silently observed the impassive facade of the main building: with all those barred windows regularly dotting the red-brick wall, he wondered if he might catch a subtle movement out of the corner of his eye, a ghost passing from one corridor to another.

"Don't start freaking out," he told himself.

He also got out of the car. Thomas was rummaging through his backpack under the watchful eyes of his companions.

"I've got it," he finally said.

He pulled out what appeared to be an old book, or a journal. Its cover was leather, and yellowed pages, half-detached or folded, protruded from it.

"What is that?" Raphaël asked.

"This," Thomas replied, "is our guide, my friend. We're not just visiting this damn prison, but we're reliving that freaking riot!"

"You see," Emilie continued, seeing Raphaël's furrowed brows, "not everyone died during that riot: a guy survived, a prisoner. Eustass was his name. This guy was the biggest coward of them all, he found a hiding spot, and the cops found him to throw him in a new prison! What an idiot... But Eustass, and this was more a legend than anything else, well, he supposedly wrote a journal about what happened, then sent it to his mother. Right after, they said he hung himself in his new cell."

"You talk too much," Thomas cut her off.

Emilie fell silent and looked down. Thomas approached Raphaël, book in hand:

"That's about the story. No one knew what had happened that day, there were always rumors, but it was impossible to know. At least, until we found the real journal of good old Eustass!"

He opened it to the first page, pointing to the doorless entrance in front of them:

"I suggest we read his text aloud and explore his trail at the same time! It's going to be awesome! But who's going to read? Not you, Nono, because you can't read..."

"Go fuck yourself."

"... not you, Mimile, because you talk too much, and you have a grating voice - she scowled, crossing her arms - and I'm too stoned, I see the letters dancing on this damn paper. Which leaves you, chief. You're our guide, OK?"

He then handed the book to Raphaël. Raphaël remained still, unsure of what was expected of him. Thomas shook the journal under his nose, showing signs of impatience. Raphaël took it, and several leaves fell to his feet. He quickly bent down to pick them up as Emilie laughed loudly.

"Man, maybe you're the one who needs a pick-me-up," Thomas commented.

He feigned laughter with them and opened the cracked leather cover of the journal: the dense, spider-like, half-faded writing was hard to decipher on the yellowed pages, but the carefully written title in capital letters read: "MY STORY."

"You want me to read the book out loud, is that it?" Raphaël asked.

"Yeah," Emilie said, "come on, let's go!"

He looked around at his audience, all waiting eagerly. Apparently, this was what was going to happen, so first with a trembling, hoarse voice, then soon with fascination, he began to recount Eustass's story, starting with the first sentence: "I don't believe in God, but after surviving that night, I now believe in the devil."

## Interlude: There's a Monster Under the Bed.

Richard breathed calmly in the closet where he was hidden. He had been sitting there for over an hour, motionless and silent in the darkness of his lair. The house was empty and silent, which had allowed him to wander in his thoughts without interruption: and tonight, ideas were crowding in his head like enraged crows.

He was blinded by a flash of yellow light through the slats of the closet door, then the harsh light gave way to the sound of a car engine passing by the building. Richard listened attentively as the old diesel parked in the driveway, purring for a few extra seconds before the engine was turned off. A door opening. Heels clicking. Richard's heart quickened in his chest when he heard the key inserted into the door: he was now completely pulled from his world of dreams and daydreams, and excitement began to take hold of him.

That sweet dose of adrenaline temporarily calming his bad thoughts.

The door opened somewhere to his right, and the woman turned on the light. From where he was, he could only see the white tiled hallway, striped by the slats; but his ear was sharp. A long sigh was heard – “oh, don't sigh again, my dear,” thought Richard, “the night is just beginning” - then she took off her heels. From what Richard had seen in her dressing room an hour earlier, it must be her high-end black pumps, the only pair he was missing.

“So, we had an important meeting today?” he thought, alone in the darkness of the supposedly empty house.

The young lawyer first deactivated the alarm that Richard had already neutralized a few hours earlier – after all, he was the one who had installed it... - then she crossed her living room with heavy steps to go to the kitchen: he knew that after a long day like this, she would pour herself a glass of wine before reheating a dish in the microwave. He thought a woman who didn't cook severely lacked education, but he knew he would soon educate her in his own way.

The faint sound of a cork being pulled, then the shrill noise of a microwave being set.

Then, for three minutes and thirty seconds, only the buzzing of a prepared dish cooking. During this time, Richard amused himself by imagining what his sweetheart was doing while waiting for her meal: was she reading the paper? Staring at the ceiling while sipping her glass of wine, wondering why all her days were so boring and meaningless, repeating themselves each week? As he daydreamed, his skillful fingers performed the same figure in a loop, an exercise he did without even looking.

Once the electronic bell rang, he heard her get up like a good Pavlovian dog to fetch her food. She let out a loud “damn”, probably burned by the dish, then Richard heard nothing else but the regular metallic sound of cutlery on a plate. The lawyer ate her meal silently, convinced she was alone in her house: why wouldn't she be? She lived alone every other week since she had divorced her husband, an alcoholic poker player and a petty lying braggart. Her daughter was only there on even weeks, and half of the holidays.

Richard observed the vacuum cleaner among the bric-a-brac of household appliances in front of him: sometimes he could barely distinguish its silhouette in the darkness, sometimes it was striped with light through the regular slats of the door. Occasionally, a shadow passed in the hallway. Always, his fingers tied and untied complex knots with his thin rope.

He felt his knife weighing in the pocket of his pants.

He remained still for another twenty minutes, absorbed in the play of light and the various sounds of the house, when he heard the water of a shower running: the last step before his darling went to bed.

Slowly, without making any noise, he opened the closet door with his gloved hands. His boots made no sound as he crossed the house, his fingers on his knife. He approached the bathroom: he could feel the humidity and heat of the room through the door. It seemed to him that he could even smell the scent of her soap, the taste of the water trickling down her still young and firm body.

She was singing.

He continued his path and entered the bedroom of the mistress of the house: the room was in complete disarray. A pile of clothes casually placed on a chair threatened to collapse at any moment, the small desk in the alcove was littered with papers and binders, and her wardrobe was slightly open, revealing jackets lying on the ground. Aside from the catastrophic mess, the room featured apple green wallpaper, one entire wall covered with photos: pictures of Kya with her friends, Kya with her ex-husband, Kya with her daughter, Kya with her dog. Kya on vacation in Rome. Kya on vacation in Korea.

“Kya, Kya, Kya...” he thought. “You think the world belongs to you, that you are the center of your life. But your life hangs by a thread. I decide whether you will see the sun rise on your pathetic existence each morning.”

On her bedside table, three books on criminal law were placed, unfinished and gathering dust for several months. Her

bed, meanwhile, was quite imposing, with its wooden frame and carved headboard. Her duvet was thick and featured red and white Japanese patterns, matching the two memory foam pillows. Richard stepped on the thick, soft white carpet, moved silently, lay down on the floor, and crawled under Kya's bed. He was going to spend the night listening to the sweet sound of her breathing, enjoying every little snore, hearing the springs of the mattress creak with every movement: the prospect of being so close to her, of being part of her life without her suspecting it, excited him intensely. Intense enough to silence the voices in his head, but not for long: Richard knew that when he went this far, the time to act would soon follow.

"Oh sweet Kya," he thought, "will you fight, will you beg me? What do your tears taste like?"

He thought of her smooth, white, firm skin. He imagined it covered in bruises. Then stained with blood.

"What sound will your voice make when it breaks? Your beautiful eyes, what will they look like when they are empty, staring at the ceiling?"

The room lit up when the door opened. He saw the bare feet of his doll approaching - she had deliciously deep red nail polish - then the bed sagged slightly as she lay down in it. She picked up one of her books, sighed, then put it back. She turned off the light, and silence regained the room, except for the light, monotonous sound of her breathing.

For Richard, the night was just beginning.



## Chapter V: The Prison

“Every night, I have nightmares. I dream of murders, violence, torture. I dream of closed doors, bars, and worse: I dream that I can’t lock my door. Each time, death enters, and unfortunately, every time, I wake up. I wake up screaming, in my new cell, waking up half the block. I get a ‘shut up’ or ‘someone kill him,’ but nothing more. In the old prison, the one in Duli, I would have been stabbed for that, and much worse. But here, everyone is afraid of me. News travels fast, but they don’t know a hundredth of what happened that night; and they’re already terrified.

I have no one to talk to (or rather, no one wants to listen), but I’m tired of keeping all this to myself. I need to tell my story, so I’m going to take my pen and write everything down. I don’t know who will read these lines (maybe no one will ever read them) but I hope you are far, very far from Duli, and that you will never (re)visit.”

Raphaël stopped, eyeing the teenagers after this grim warning. He only got a shrug from Thomas:

“He’s right, this dumbass, that town is a pain in the ass...”

Seeing that this introduction didn’t interest them much, he continued:

“It took just one mistake to screw up my whole life. My record will tell you that I committed a ‘homicide,’ it will give you all the details of that day, and much better than I can. Because that morning, I was mixing up a blend of opiates and horse tranquilizers with my ‘friends,’ and I woke up in a hospital room the next day. A few hours later, without understanding what was happening to me, I landed in hell. I was told that I stabbed the guy forty-eight times. That I had fled, that there was a witness, or something like that. I was high as a kite in court, I remember almost nothing.

Maybe I really killed that man (I think he was a homeless person). Maybe I was defending myself, maybe I was innocent, just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I’ve had time to think about it during all these years in prison, but it makes no difference: the worst mistake of my life, I’m sure I’m responsible for that. I should have never touched drugs.

It started after my accident. I was very young, only fifteen and without a license, but that didn’t stop me from messing around on a motorcycle. Apparently, a car hit me, and it was the first time but not the last that I woke up in the hospital. I had broken vertebrae, and the doctors had given me a new opiate for the pain, ten times more powerful than morphine. Except what they didn’t know (or maybe it was on purpose...) is that it was ten times more addictive. When I got out of there, I had a fever and my whole body was itching. At first, the pain was unbearable, but what I didn’t know was that it was withdrawal, not the accident. So they gave me more opiates. When my prescription ended, I went through the worst moment of my life (at least at the time...). The pain I thought was unbearable had multiplied by ten. So I went out on the street, and I started to hang around.

At first, we couldn’t find anything stronger than heroin, so I started to shoot up: I didn’t feel anything, but the pain was a bit less worse. And then, very quickly, the dealers adapted, and you could find the new pharmaceutical opiates on the street, a hundred times cheaper and a hundred times more dangerous than heroin. I was already hopelessly trapped, living on the street, doing odd jobs or stealing to pay for my fix: it was simply unthinkable to be in withdrawal, as if I had been partying for years without ever stopping drinking to push back the hangover, knowing that the longer I waited, the worse it would be.

And yet, I hadn’t hit rock bottom. After a few years of back and forth to the hospital, waking up on a mattress in a derelict building with shoes that weren’t mine or without the sweater I had the day before, the street chemists had gone even further: they started mixing tranquilizers and opiates. And then, people started dropping like flies.

Two bucks, that’s all it took for me to take my dose. And my god, it was powerful: three times I woke up next to corpses. And the worst part was that it was a vicious circle with no way out: when withdrawal hit, even taking heroin or opiates did nothing to avoid the crisis and convulsions. It was kiddie drugs compared to that. Sometimes, even the withdrawal crises were deadly. So you had to take more not to die. But it was SO powerful, you never knew if you were also going to drop dead from an overdose by taking a cocktail.

During that period, my memory was like Swiss cheese. I lost two years of my life, erased or fogged in my sick brain. At least until one day I killed a man. And then, I left one hell for another. They took me out of the hospital in handcuffs, and after a long ride in a police car, I remember my arrival as if it were yesterday, with impeccable clarity: the high fences with barbed wire, the huge red brick building with its sinister windows, the heavy and imposing black door. When I entered, and it closed behind me, a feeling hit me like a hammer blow: I would never leave this place alive. Even if I didn’t get life, I would die before serving my sentence.

And my god, how I wish that had been true...”

"Eh bah damn, the old guy wasn't joking!" Thomas exclaimed. "What an explosive cocktail! And to think I was scared of trying cocaine... But I've heard of all these drugs, it's no joke."

Raphaël added nothing, though he knew it all too well. His hands trembled, and his mouth had gone dry listening to this speech and these experiences he was all too familiar with.

"Come on," the young man continued, "it's time to take a tour inside."

The three of them headed toward the now doorless entrance, followed by Raphaël. Arriving at the foot of the building, he looked up and was struck by its height: "One more step forward, and it will swallow me whole," he thought to himself. Beyond the doorway, the afternoon light filtered through the bars, striping the room with light. The dirty walls were covered in graffiti; on the row of chairs against the tainted concrete, only two remained intact.

"So, storyteller!" he heard someone shout from inside, "Where to? What's this guide you've given us?"

He sighed and stepped over the heavy black door lying on the ground. Entering, he felt struck by the same thought that had overwhelmed Eustass, almost knocking him over: "NO ONE WILL GET OUT OF HERE ALIVE." But it was just his imagination. It was just that, right? He saw the three teenagers to his left, leaning against the reinforced glass counter. No one was there to greet them, though; only a few pens lay hidden under a layer of dust. Someone had tried to break the glass - during or after the riots? - but had only managed to crack it. The door on the other side of the counter was closed, its small window covered in black grime. The corridor led to several doors with different signs - "TOILETS," "BLOCK 1," "DO NOT LEAVE OPEN" - as well as a reinforced steel grille wide open leading to another seemingly endless corridor.

"So, are you coming? Or are you chicken?"

Thomas's comment made his two companions laugh.

Raphaël, though reluctant, complied, wondering why he hadn't left yet - because Jordane would kill me, he thought - and approached them. Suddenly, he heard a sharp crack under his feet and jumped: looking down, he saw that he had stepped on the debris of a beer bottle. The group burst into laughter, the sound echoing through the building, and he hid his frustration as best he could.

"Don't worry, we're just joking," Michelin said, uttering something other than a mere insult for the first time that day.

"But of course," Thomas added, "we're here for a little scare, aren't we?"

Then, he ceremoniously gestured for Raphaël to continue the reading. He complied, but not entirely reluctantly: he was beginning to find interest in the story.

"From where I write these lines, on my tiny desk, I can see the sky (through bars, but it's better than nothing) and the guards pass by from time to time, calmly or whistling. Somehow, today I am in the nicest room I have known since I left my parents' house. It's much better than the street, but especially so much better than Duli.

When I arrived, I quickly understood that this place was going to be hell. Back then, I was mostly suffering from withdrawal. I was busy vomiting, trembling, fainting (and when they questioned me after the riot, they blamed everything I said on my addiction, saying I had hallucinated, but at that time, I had been clean for months...). But I still remember how they made me join a line of other guys, all with mean looks, tattoos, or scars. They stripped us and showered us with icy water jets. I think at that moment, I didn't feel anything because the withdrawal was so intense. They took us to block 3 (I later learned it was called *The Hole*): of course, to get to block 3 at the back of the complex, we had to walk past blocks A and B.

Naked.

We had to go outside and walk down a corridor formed by two high fences while the prisoners in the yard of block A on the left and B on the right mocked and intimidated us. Some were already choosing their future prey, announced out loud. I, on the other hand, was staring at the sky, probably with drool dripping from my mouth, fingers clutching my folded prisoner's uniform as if my life depended on it, and my toes curled in pain, nails scraping the cold ground. Once I arrived at The Hole, I..."

"Wait wait wait!" Emilie exclaimed, "we're late here! We need to find this famous corridor and get to block 3!"

"You're right Mimile," Thomas agreed, "you can even strip if you want to be historically accurate."

She blushed and tried to hit him on the shoulder, but he dodged and her fist hit his backpack, making a metallic sound.

"Stop!" he shouted, somewhat panicked. "That's worth more than you, everything in my bag!"

"Pff," she hissed, "what's so precious in there anyway? Your family jewels? I thought they were in your mom's purse..."

He playfully slapped the back of her head, but his smile fell for a moment when he briefly caught Michelin's eye.

“Stop your nonsense,” he said, “and let’s go. Let’s visit the hole.”

He led the way towards the open grille, followed by the three others. Raphaël checked his phone: no news from Jordane. He thought about asking where she was but decided against it, not wanting to be left behind.

They entered the long corridor littered with doors on both sides: none had been left intact. Some lay on the ground in the opening, revealing a locker room with overturned benches and torn lockers, others stood but were dented as if a rhinoceros had charged into them. Another was even cut in half, standing halfway like a door in an old western saloon. This part seemed reserved for the staff: on their left, they had seen a black mark spreading on the ceiling from the door frame, as if an ectoplasm was escaping the room and crawling on the ceiling. They had come across a room completely charred inside, except for the metallic structures of the locker rows sticking out of the ashes like steel bamboos. On the grey door warped by the old fire, “INMATE FILES” was still written, and Raphaël seemed to understand who had set the fire, and why. Maybe they thought that if they destroyed their files, no one could prove they had to serve a sentence? Times were different before computers, he thought.

He saw Thomas pull out his phone in front of him, unlocking it to take a picture – 6969 was his PIN, yes, it was wrong to look, but it was just nerdview...

He took a selfie, with the incinerated room behind him, soon joined by Arnaud and Emilie, giggling and bursting into laughter, like the young people they were.

“Hey hey, what’s up, losers!” he sang spiritedly, jostling with the others for a spot on the phone screen. “While you guys are loafing around like loafers, we’re having fun at the Duli Penitentiary, just like that! Ghosts, here we come!”

Raphaël took the lead and headed to the end of the hallway, where a heavy grille with three sawed bars allowed light from the main courtyard to filter through. Once outside, the gentle wind caressed his hands, and the sun warmed his cheeks. The sky was clear blue; only a few pristine white clouds seemed to lazily drift along the air currents. In front of him lay the vastness of blocks A and B’s yards, deserted and desolate. One of the large fences lay collapsed in various places, its steel rods bent like reeds, providing direct access to block A. The building was a simple rectangle of reinforced concrete with regularly spaced barred windows. The yards were just barren lands with a few timid tufts of grass here and there. To his right, behind the barbed wire, stood its twin, block B, equally forbidding. And then, in front of him, the famous hole. It was an older, larger block, also made of red brick. It had no windows, and in its corner, a huge guard tower with a pointed wooden hat.

“You could pack a lot of cattle in there,” Thomas said from behind him.

Raphaël nodded:

“Do you know how many prisoners there were at the time?”

“I have no freaking idea,” he replied, shrugging. “Anyway, people say they were seriously overcrowded, piled on top of each other.”

He then took the lead, and all four of them walked down the path that brought newcomers to the Hole, imagining the horror and violence that awaited them on either side of the fences. The double doors of the block were open, as were the heavy grilles that once isolated the different parts of the building. Upon entering, they saw a control post on their left with all its security windows shattered. There was a panel filled with buttons, the structure too old to have known screens and cameras. The post’s seat, or rather a plain plastic chair, lay in three pieces on the ground.

“So this is where the bugger landed,” Thomas remarked. “Which was his cell?”

He nodded at Raphaël, signaling him to continue his story. Clearing his throat, he read aloud:

“Once I arrived at the Hole, I had nothing else to do but fight my addiction. This place was supposed to be a buffer zone where you awaited your trial, a matter of a few days. But for me, it lasted a month. Maybe they were overwhelmed there with the drug wave starting to hit the region, or maybe they were waiting for me to be clean to judge me. In any case, the beginning was a real nightmare. They gave me the cell at the very back of the building, the one with the luxury of a window, but especially the one that wasn’t insulated from the cold. And the first week, every night I woke up sweating but shivering from an icy cold, frozen to the bone. I slept on a mattress as thin as a book’s page, as dirty as a sheet of toilet paper. Speaking of which, the toilet was just a hole in the ground, in a corner of the cell (two meters by three meters, I almost stepped in it by mistake during the night). There was nothing to wipe with, and the flush was part of a unique water distribution system: once a day, the valves opened for a minute. The toilet flushed on one side, and on the other, the tap started running. You had to be alert and take the opportunity to drink, wash, and brush your teeth (it took me two weeks to get a bucket that I could fill with water). Moreover, the water arrivals were irregular: sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon. At that time, I was always parched, and once the water came while I was sleeping: I spent an extra day without drinking, my tongue felt like sandpaper.

I lost quite a bit of weight too, as we only received a vegetable broth and a slice of stale bread per day, and rice every three days. I was between four walls, with a steel door with a visor that opened once a day to reveal a meal tray. I was isolated, sick, fighting symptoms, cold, hunger, dehydration.

A month had passed like a year. It felt like living in a waking dream, or being a zombie. Sometimes I talked to myself in the dark, closing my eyes for a second only to reopen them in broad daylight, my body sweating with cramps everywhere, then closing them again to reopen them and find myself in the middle of the night, trembling with cold. Eventually, they came to get me. During the trial, I was in a daze. My court-appointed lawyer spoke to me, and I just nodded. I was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison, and I didn't flinch. I returned to Duli in a police van, with other inmates, and this time, I didn't enter through the main entrance, like last time. This time, I entered through the back door, straight into the jungle."

Emilie rushed down the corridor to be the first to arrive at the back cell. They passed several doors, all heavily closed. This block seemed to accommodate a good forty people, judging by the different wings branching off perpendicular to it. The floor was of raw concrete, the walls oppressively red, and a system of old neon lights - most broken, making the ground crunchy under their feet - ran along the ceiling. They reached the end of the hallway, Eustass's infamous first cell: Emilie threw herself at the closed door to open it, but it didn't budge.

"Damn it," she cursed, "it's locked!"

She used her entire body to try to pull on the steel mass, but the cell remained as sealed as in the past decades.

"Damn it," she swore, "this is crap!"

"Relax," Thomas ordered tiredly, "it's not the end of the world..."

He approached, playfully bumping her with his shoulder, eliciting a playful cry of frustration from her. He too tried his luck, shaking the door, working the handle, but everything was frozen. He tried to slide the small peephole to at least peek into the cell, but it was also stuck. He sighed and slumped against the door, producing a heavy, hollow sound that filled the corridor. Amused, he knocked on the door three times, the sound echoing endlessly in the brick sanctuary. A second later, three loud knocks came from inside in response. He screamed, jumping back. Everyone jumped, and Emilie screamed, shattering Raphaël's ears.

"Damn it, you're really an asshole!" she yelled, hitting Thomas, frozen in place. "Stop messing around, you scared the life out of me!"

He didn't react, his eyes fixed on the door.

"There's only him to be so stupid!" she raged. "You're really not funny!"

She left the scene like a hurricane, and Raphaël saw Michelin chuckle, looking at Thomas, patting him on the shoulder and whispering, "Nice one, buddy!"

Then, he scrutinized his face: there was only confusion and fear. He let out a nervous laugh and left without a word.

Outside, Emilie had calmed down. They joined her, relieved to be in broad daylight and far from the decrepit building. Thomas rummaged in his bag for a cigarette, and Raphaël saw him light it with a trembling hand, taking barely two puffs before tossing it to the ground agitatedly.

"So, what's next?" he asked, as if to chase away thoughts.

"From what I know," Emilie said, "there are four blocks in this dump, plus the hole. Block A and B for the clowns, C for the snitches, the gays, and the child molesters, and D for the tough ones, the telepaths..."

"The psychopaths, idiot," Michelin interjected, evidently in good spirits.

As the two argued, Raphaël saw Thomas discreetly slip a pill into his mouth.

"What's that?" he asked involuntarily.

"Why?" Thomas retorted, "are you a cop?"

"No..."

"Then mind your own business, boss. So? Which block did that mooncalf end up in?"

"I was thrown into block A, in 'general population'. 'Gen pop' means that everyone is mixed, and there's no one to protect you. They put me in a cell with Clarence, a skinny guy, and the guard gave me my toothbrush and my cup. Then he said, 'It's three hundred bucks for a mattress', and when I didn't understand, he came back with just a simple straw mat for a bed: that set the tone right away.

The first day, nothing happened. I found a quiet corner to sit in the yard without bothering anyone, and no one bothered me; but there were the looks. Sideways glances, all day. I even thought I'd been pointed out by a group, at one point. But evening came, and I returned to my cell in one piece. I thought, like an idiot, that everything would be fine. Except Clarence came to me, and said calmly, looking me straight in the eyes, 'Mathia has chosen you to be his bitch. You know what that means, right, or are you stupid? It means you're going to suffer every day, be at the very bottom of the food



chain. Him and his buddies will take care of you, vent their anger on you. Good luck, man.'

I cried all night.

In prison, everything runs on reputation. At the top of the food chain are the guards. Because they, they're part of the system. They can beat you with batons, send you to solitary (that damn room...) or deny your visitations. You didn't want to cross them. Then, there were the 'damned'. They were serving life: it meant they had nothing to lose. Most were in block D, the block of the furiously insane, the most violent criminals, but there were some in block A. And most of them, including Mathia, had already killed in prison. Then, the victims started: there were the 'fish', like me, serving a fixed sentence and who would get out one day. Generally, the shorter their sentence, the worse it was. Since they had the chance to leave prison one day, they owed respect to the 'damned'. That's how it was. Some fish turned into the damned, it had been seen. For example, a guy named Niño was caught for drug possession, five years max. He was immediately hassled, didn't take it, and fought back. He killed two damned with a sharpened toothbrush (the thing is to aim for the stomach, even if it doesn't pierce far, it's the infections that kill the victim. They agonize for days in the hospital and die.) and he got life. He ended up in block D.

'Life's a bitch,' as my father used to say.

Anyway, then there was the bottom of the barrel, those who always had to look over their shoulder: the 'dolls'. They were the child molesters, people who lost all their rights as soon as they set foot in prison. Designated victims. They were supposed to live in block C, reserved for their safety, but sometimes the transfer wasn't immediate, there could be 'file errors', and other schemes and twists of fate. And finally, there were the snitches. That was the worst.

Prison operated on reputation and respect: the order was well established, but in a way, it was always the inmates against the guards. The players against the system. Those damned bastard guards always came to hassle us, and we always had to grit our teeth. So, when a guy 'sold his soul' and played the snitch for favors from the staff, it was the worst possible betrayal. A snitch was sent to block C, where they didn't fear the weak, but an inmate could easily slip a bill for there to be a 'file error' or a 'temporary transfer', sending you back into the jungle of A, B, or even sometimes D!!! with a 'come beat me up!' sign so glaring that you had to be an idiot to play that game. A snitch in gen pop wouldn't last a day. Or, they decided to really punish you and made you pass through the inmates for weeks, the guards turning their backs and their pockets full.

Still, the next morning, having not closed my eyes for a second all night, I stayed seated in bed. All the doors unlocked, Clarence scurried away like a mouse, sensing the storm coming. Me, I stayed still. I had scraped my toothbrush against the floor to make it somewhat dangerous: I was going to jump on Mathia and stab him until his intestines were mush. Supposedly, I had stabbed the bum forty times, well now I was ready to hit a hundred times. Until I was sure he wouldn't get up. I was going to get life, but I didn't care anymore.

Then, a shadow appeared at the doorway, and Mathia walked in with his three buddies. He was a good six feet tall, maybe 240 pounds of muscle. He was bald, closely shaved, with a sly smile and a lecherous eye. He was the least muscular of the four. I was done for, it was over.

"You know how this works?" he said in a deep but strangely smooth voice. "You belong to me now. When I say come, you come. When I say suck, you suck. When I need to vent, or I don't want to see your ugly face for a few days, you say 'Yes Mr. Mathia', and when you come back from the infirmary, you say 'Thank you Mr. Mathia'."

His buddies weren't laughing; this was clearly not a joke or a figure of speech. I stayed silent.

"It's going to be twenty-five long, very long years... But don't worry, once it's done, you don't feel anything anymore. And once too old, you'll only be good for a punching bag."

I started trembling, and I wanted to die right there. A heart attack, a stroke, anything, as long as my life ended now. Barely arrived in this place, I had already found my place: a victim. I wasn't strong, nor brave. I had nothing to survive. 'All this because of that damn bike', I thought to myself.

"Or..." Mathia continued, "you turn out to be useful. A lifer has no hope of tasting freedom again. But a lifer has a family, friends outside. And he also needs a little money inside, to afford some pleasures." He pretended to smoke a cigarette.

"In the building across from the old cinema downtown Reigner, you can climb the west-facing wall. You'll come to a row of garages. The fourth one from the right isn't locked. If you open it and remove the sixth brick from the third row at the back, you'll find a bag with five hundred drug bills."

I spoke in one breath, without thinking: I even heard myself talking from afar, spilling out as if they were my last words. Mathia stood still for a moment, eyeing me as if he had the ability to detect lies, still smiling.

"Be careful baby girl, if you waste my and my friends' time, it's going to go very badly for you. But if you're telling the truth, you just bought yourself a week."

Then, he simply left as he had come. I felt a ton of weight drop on me, like the counter-effect of having survived a horrible event, and I burst into tears.

In a way, I had been clever in my monumental stupidity: back then, when the new drugs had just come out, dealers didn't quite know how to dose them. So, it happened that people died of an overdose from a certain batch of 'production'. The news spread quickly, and the junkies, instead of avoiding this batch, rushed to it because it meant it was stronger than the others. People are stupid. But I took advantage of it: I did my best to buy it back before everyone else did, and sold it more expensive. Or, I put it aside, like the one in the garage opposite the cinema. I was stupid too.

Anyway, I had done a mental inventory of what I had on the side, good plans I could share, and I calculated that I could survive about three months. Three months out of twenty-five years. I had to find a solution during this respite, but even under Mathia's protection, I had to be on my guard: for the first two months, I learned the workings and mechanisms of the Duli penitentiary. As long as I stayed in my place, no one came to attack me; but tensions were slowly rising, because every day fresh meat was brought to the slaughterhouse, and we were starting to suffocate with so many people. Most of the newcomers returned more battered than they had arrived, but I looked away. Conditions were getting worse: the food was disgusting, we were served rotten meat, and some fell seriously ill. The hygiene in the cells was deplorable, with sewage water occasionally backing up into the toilets and feces flooding the cell for several days. I had bought a decent mattress from the bastard guard, but some couldn't afford it, and one day a guy even died eaten by bed bugs!!! Seriously!!!

Speaking of the guards, the city had less money since the local mine had closed. Their pay had decreased, so most of the somewhat nice or qualified guards had gone elsewhere, and they had been replaced by real bastards, who had no training and were probably too shady to do anything else. So now, in addition to being extorted by the lifers, we were being extorted by the guards. Those sons of bitches had a long reach: one of them took away my mattress for a week because I didn't call him 'Sir', others had been beaten up for just sighing while the officer was doing a cell inspection and had trashed everything. They also used solitary confinement. And that, that wasn't funny: they left you in a completely dark room just big enough to sit, but not lie down, for days. No exit, nothing. A hatch opened once a day for some broth, and we returned the bucket in exchange (sometimes, it came back as dirty as it had gone). Strangely, that was what we feared the most: I never went there, but when they sent a guy there, he came back changed. And there were all sorts of stories about that place: those who went there talked about hearing and seeing things. They talked about big eyes staring at you from the corner of the cell, in the dark, until you went mad. At the time, I put it down to psychological stress or something, but now...

Anyway, everyone found this punishment inhumane, and it made everyone angry.

The situation was becoming alarming: the more difficult the conditions, the more black glares towards the guards or fights between prisoners broke out, the more our lives were made hellish. It had quickly turned into a real pressure cooker ready to explode: I didn't even care about my twenty-five years, or the month I had left before facing Mathia with nothing to offer but my behind, but whether I would make it through the day, or end up in that damn isolation cell for the slightest misstep (a guy had stayed there for more than a week!! He had jumped on a guard because he had grabbed his girlfriend's butt when she came to visit. They also beat him up pretty good, and since then he's sat all day without moving, staring at the ceiling).

The only thing we had to hold on to was alcohol. A guy, Mitch, knew how to concoct super brews from rotten fruits. He would ferment it in a plastic bag hung on the outside edge of his window. His stuff circulated all over prison, even in block D. We would get smashed on his stuff; he was very popular. Those damn bastard guards were crazy, they inspected all the cells trying to find the booze, tearing up mattresses with knives, ripping pages out of books, and smashing cups. We'd had enough of them, but no one snitched: they had now become even more hated than the people in block C.

Days passed, the atmosphere became palpable: prisoners were sent either to the infirmary or to isolation in droves. One guy came back from the infirmary paralyzed for life, and more and more stories were heard about the isolation cell. Some came back and started praying to the Virgin Mary every night. Others had sleep paralysis after being there, seeing figures slip between the bars of their cage, monsters emerging from the bed, and more. It was said that this cell was haunted, that the devil lived inside it. It had become the ultimate punishment. And since the prisoners couldn't take revenge on the staff, they tore each other apart. There were several murders, 'fish' being brutally tortured, sexual abuses on the rise... I felt that scratching a single match in block A would have blown up the whole prison.

I was so preoccupied with that, that it was only when one evening, on my way to my cell, Mathia and his gang took me aside and told me I hadn't provided anything for two weeks, that I realized I had given everything I had outside.

"So?" Mathia repeated, flanked by two giants crossing their arms. The last one was keeping watch.

I didn't answer: I had nothing to say.

"You know what's going to happen to you, right? A young, not yet damaged guy like you, you can't find them here anymore..."

Twenty-four years and nine months.

There was no one around, strangely. Everyone had taken the side corridor to return.



He nodded towards his companion who began to take off his pants. My heart started beating wildly, I even felt like it was going to burst out of my chest. And damn, I wish it had, even in hindsight. They approached me, cornering me against a wall: there were no more sly smiles, no lecherous eyes; just tight lips and empty eyes, as if there was nothing left upstairs but the instinct of the predator, filling their skulls. Then, a whistle, at the corner of the entrance: the three brutes immediately backed off, before I realized that it was the signal from the fourth one who was on the lookout. A few seconds later, the same bastard guard who had extorted money from me for the mattress appeared. Reiner, that was him. But man, at that moment I would have kissed his feet.

“What the hell are you doing here, girls!” he bellowed, baton in hand.

No one answered; everyone looked at the ground. These three scumbags ran off with their tails between their legs without a second thought, but that didn’t mean I was completely reassured.

“That’s it, get lost before you end up in isolation, you idiots!” he continued. “I’d take you all straight to the infirmary myself! So behave!”

They left without protest, not even a sigh: it must be said that at that moment, even the toughest could turn pale if isolation was even mentioned. Everyone had agreed that it was haunted by Satan himself, and that you left your soul there. But me, I didn’t move: he had simply replaced them to put me against the wall.

“So son, rumor has it that Mathia got his hands on you...”

I nodded, still looking at the ground.

“Bad luck, bad luck...” (a fucking falsely sorry tone) “I’ve known that thug for a while, and he’s broken guys. And tougher than you... We’ve done a lot of stitches in the infirmary, and guys can’t sit for weeks, if you get my drift! And when he’s done with you, when he’s passed you around to all his little buddies, and they don’t want you anymore, then it’s back and forth to the doc, and not just in the ass, the stitches, I tell you! It’s not a pretty sight.”

I already knew all that. Reputations spread fast here. But I said nothing and waited for what came next:

“Twenty-five years, right? That’s no life!” (This son of a bitch was a real torturer, I wondered how he hadn’t ended up in block D, on the other side of the bars. At least, before the riot...)

Once again, I nodded.

“All this is because of alcohol. It’s a real poison that runs in this damn prison, and fries people’s brains like him. Then he goes and takes it out on honest guys like you!”

It was bullshit, but he knew it. I understood what he was going to ask me next, and for a moment, I regretted that he had come to save me a few moments ago.

“If we got rid of it, everything would be back to normal. Everyone would calm down, and be more at peace. No more psychosis because of tainted alcohol. All I would need is a little help. Someone who could point the finger at the responsible party.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but I didn’t even have time to make a sound before he cut me off:

“I know, dumbass!! Snitching isn’t well seen! But I promise you’ll be rewarded! Block C for twenty-five years, just that! You’ll be at peace for the rest of your life! You’ll be the king among all those fairies! No one to bother you! No ‘file errors’, or ‘temporary transfers’, you have my word. You’ll be treated better than in a damn hotel, and safe for the rest of your stay! No one will have to know it was you.”

I knew it was false: everything is known in prison. If I gave a name, I was a dead man. But well, was it so bad? A few hours of suffering, compared to a quarter century of being violated? And maybe he was right, maybe I would end up with the other snitches and child molesters, like in a criminals’ paradise. I think at the moment, I really believed what he was saying. I think I could have believed anything not to end up as a human skewer, but it’s mostly what he said next that decided me:

“You know, maybe a little week in isolation will help you think it over...”

And then, it came out. Eyes glued to my sneakers, my voice no louder than a kid caught stealing candy from the jar: “... Mitch... Under the window...”

\*\*\*

Raphaël paused, his throat dry from speaking so much. The three teenagers had been captivated by the story, even though Thomas seemed restless, fidgeting with his fingers and clenching his jaw: “I bet it’s not paracetamol you swallowed...” he thought to himself.

“What a fucking snitch!” Emilie exclaimed. “But honestly, in his place, I wouldn’t have been so brave either...”

“Yeah,” Michelin retorted, “at least you make money by getting screwed like that!”

“Shut up, dickhead!” she yelled. “You don’t even know what sex is!”

Their argument seemed to be the funniest thing Thomas had ever heard, and he burst out laughing, tears streaming down his face. The other two laughed a bit nervously with him, everyone noticing his now dilated pupils.

“So, are we going into this prison or what? What are we doing standing around in the middle of nowhere?” he blurted out.

“Exactly,” Emilie agreed, “block A is just to the right, the fence is bent right here...”

“Then let’s go, damn yeah!” Thomas exclaimed excitedly.

Raphaël followed their lead: he stepped on the flattened fence and carefully avoided the barbed wire by lifting his legs. He walked along the courtyard, a bit behind the others. The entrance to the long building was also open, and he slipped inside too.

The place was quite different from the hole: the structure was on two levels with a large hall, resembling a big shopping center. The red brick had given way to a vast expanse of gray concrete. The floor was flooded with large puddles of stagnant water full of blackish and viscous solid heaps, perhaps a mix of soil and something else. Each cell had a front of steel bars, and overturned bed frames and broken porcelain toilets could be seen inside. Not a single cell was intact, as if each had housed a raging boar or bear that had torn everything apart. They moved forward, each of their steps echoing in the immensity of reinforced concrete. Some walls were streaked with black stains, sometimes spreading onto the floor. They encountered a control post in the center of the block, illuminated by a hole in the ceiling. The opening let a curtain of golden light pour in like a natural spotlight. A tree with intensely green leaves had grown in the post, taking advantage of the broken windows to spread its large branches. The glass shards still on the ground shone in the sun like precious stones.

Emilie marveled at the sight, while Thomas popped another pill into his mouth.

“Lame,” he said. “Where are the ghosts?”

Then he picked up an iron bar lying around and wandered off on his own, loudly striking the steel bars.

“What an idiot he can be sometimes...” Emilie commented.

Raphaël took a tour as well: aside from the completely destroyed state of the cells, the place seemed simply abandoned. The black marks on the walls could be rainwater, the windows perhaps broken by local kids. What was he supposed to find? A trace of a monster? A corpse? He had no idea what to look for. He could finish Eustass’s story and get out of here, hoping this whole adventure would end with that.

He climbed the stairs and arrived at a level between two floors that seemed to be the canteen. Hundreds of trays were overturned on the floor, cutlery scattered everywhere. Some tables had been completely torn from their bases, and that couldn’t have been the elements. Nor kids. More like enraged adults.

“Or a monster,” he thought.

An object on the ground caught his eye: he bent down to pick it up and examined it in his hands. It was a roughly shaped blade with a handle wrapped in tape. The sharpened part was covered in a brown stain: dried blood, no doubt.

“Find anything interesting?” he heard behind him.

He jumped, and the weapon fell to the ground with a metallic clang. Thomas had caught up with him. His eyes were red.

“Nothing at all,” he lied. “Just a big mess.”

Somewhere above them, in the distance, they heard a door creak loudly before slamming shut with a crash. Raphaël jumped on the spot, but Thomas simply looked in the direction of the noise, a distracted smile on his lips, letting the echo fade away in the large hall without a word.

His gaze returned to Raphaël, and he added as if nothing had happened:

“It’s clear that it’s a mess... When you treat people like animals, they become animals.”

Raphaël remained perplexed, as Emilie joined them running, panicked.

“Did you hear that? What was that noise? Are we not alone?”

“Probably a ghost,” Thomas replied with a sardonic smile.

"Well, what are we waiting for? We have to film it!" she said.

"No," Thomas countered. "I want to see the isolation cell first. Lead the way, boss."

"Well, I don't know where it is," Raphaël replied.

Thomas shrugged and pointed to the book: if the information was anywhere, it was there. Raphaël grumbled, annoyed at playing the narrator, but continued nonetheless.

"I went back to my cell without saying anything. Clarence gave me a worried look, but quickly lost interest and returned to his business. Me, I sat on my bed: what was going to happen to me? Whether I stayed here, or they found out I snitched on Mitch, I had a target on my back anyway. The thing to do would have been to turn my toothbrush on myself, slit my wrists with it, but I didn't have the courage, I'm a coward.

At one point, we heard noise coming from the end of the corridor: people were talking loudly, someone was knocking over objects. Batons sounded throughout the corridor, soon overtaken by screams of pain. It lasted a good five minutes, until the screams died down. The beating continued a little longer while the victim no longer made any sound, as if they were hitting a sack of potatoes. Then, I saw two guards dragging an unconscious man on the ground, leaving a trail of blood on the floor in front of my cell: they were heading to isolation, at the far end of the transverse corridor.

Clarence was asking me what was going on, but I didn't know any more than he did. Well, actually, I did know, but I didn't want to admit it to myself. A murmur rose from cell to cell, like the rising tide, and the news soon reached our cage: Mitch had been snitched on. They had found the alcohol. He was in for a trip to isolation. My blood froze upon hearing that. Not for Mitch, but only because I was terrified that they would find out it was my fault. Yes, I know, it was selfish, but everyone has their own shit to deal with.

The news had spread, and now the whispers turned into discussions, suppositions, and conjectures. There were talks of luck, betrayal, and revenge. I tried not to listen, to block my ears and force myself to sleep. But the voices continued long after lights out, cursing the guards and the snitches. Planning the tortures they would inflict on the rat. But it didn't concern me. Tomorrow morning, at the crack of dawn, I would be in block C, far from all this and its consequences. At least, that's what I naively believed as I finally fell asleep.

I was deep in my dreams when a scream slowly rose. At first, it was very distant, and my brain struggled to keep me immersed in my slumber. But the cries of terror grew louder, drowning out the voices in my dream, and I woke up abruptly. Shouts of horror and pleas filled the entire wing, mixing with the echoes bouncing off the walls. Everyone seemed awake, and prisoners from other cells were shouting: "God, help him!" "Someone do something!" Clarence had his head stuck between two bars, swinging and shouting, "Sons of bitches! Go help him! You're going to just stand there, you bastards?"

It was Mitch screaming to death from the isolation cell in the distance: "HELP!! COME AND HELP ME!! HE'S RIGHT THERE, BEHIND ME!!" He was crying out in anguish, weeping and begging. I emerged, still wondering what was happening.

"THE EYES ARE HERE!!! MAKE HIM STOP LOOKING AT ME!! STOP HIM FROM LOOKING AT ME!!! I'M GOING MAD!!!! HELP!! GET ME OUT OF HERE, I BEG YOU!!"

"Those damn dogs!" Clarence yelled back, shaking the bars with a strength I didn't know he had. Then he looked me straight in the eyes: "Eustass! If we find the little shit who snitched on Mitch, we're going to unleash hell on him! Being the bitch of the whole D block will be a walk in the park compared to this, right, buddy?"

"Yes," I heard myself say from afar, very, very far away.

"You hear me!!" he continued, screaming and shaking the bars even more, "you damn snitch, you see what you've done? I know you hear me, we're all coming for you!!!"

I thought I would faint if I heard another word from him, and fortunately, Mitch took over, and his hoarse voice covered all other sounds.

"HE'S GOING TO KILL ME!!! HE HAS GLOWING EYES, HE'S RIGHT THERE!! OPEN UP, PLEASE, I'M BEGGING YOU, HELP ME, I DON'T WANT THIS, NO, I DON'T WANT THIS, MOM, I WON'T DO IT AGAIN, I PROMISE, MOM, HELP ME, MOM, COME SAVE MEEEE..."

His voice died down, and there was complete silence for the minutes that followed. Even for the rest of the night, until the early morning.

It wasn't a whisper that rose the next morning, but a rumble. The news had broken, and it was swirling through the penitentiary like a storm: Mitch was found dead in the isolation cell. His mouth agape, his eyes wide with terror. It was assumed that the guards had badly beaten him before putting him in there. There were even rumors that they had given him a second beating during the night and killed him. Enough was enough, anger was rising along with the sun, and by noon, the center was seething with rage.

I later learned that on that day, three guards had called in sick and gone home. The two chefs who served in the

canteen had done their duty and then deserted the place without a word: they had sensed the imminent explosion. As for me, I was secretly escorted to block C; even though I was walking through empty corridors, with my handcuffs, chains, and two bodyguards, I could feel the electric atmosphere. The storm was coming, there was no doubt. From a distance, I saw a few inmates: whispering, looking over their shoulders.

It was certain, the powder keg was about to ignite.

I crossed the center through service corridors. At every straight line, we stopped so that the central could open the gates for us to move forward. At every turn, I was sure that a band of enraged inmates would tear me to pieces; but no, I arrived at block C without any trouble, as promised. Just in time to settle in before the start of the riot.

\*\*\*

"Damn!!" exclaimed Emilie, "this is so cool!"

Raphaël nodded despite himself: his hands were trembling, as if something was wrong.

"Follow me," Thomas added, "I know where to find the isolation cell!"

They followed him as he headed to the second floor. He moved his arms and head uncontrollably at times, as if in spasms, attributing it to the drug he had taken, whatever it was. They passed a row of cells just as dilapidated as the first: one even had its bed wedged across the door. The security grilles were all open, leaving the way clear. Raphaël caught sight of a piece of rope firmly attached to a concrete pillar and hanging in the air: he hoped there hadn't been a noose at the other end, but he thought he was wrong. They entered a long corridor with no more cells, which reminded Raphaël with an eerie chill of the mine he had visited that morning. Thomas stopped without hesitation in front of the room with the heavy half-open door at the end of the hallway.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he said, swallowing another pill.

"Take it easy with that stuff," gasped Michelin, exhausted from climbing so many stairs.

"Don't worry about it," Thomas replied.

Raphaël, like the others, cautiously approached the cell. The inside was shrouded in darkness, making it hard to see clearly; yet, he seemed to discern something on the walls.

"You noticed, right?" Thomas said cheerfully. "Come closer and see what it is, you'll love it."

Michelin and Emilie slowly backed away from him, visibly more and more uncomfortable. Thomas held the half-open door, inviting him in with a predatory smile on his face. His pupils were fully dilated.

"Come on, don't worry, there's nothing in there!"

He flung the door wide open to illustrate his point. Raphaël moved closer, intrigued. He now stood just in front of the opening, the youth's breath on his neck. He leaned in closer, examining the wall, and finally understood what he was looking at.

"Yeah, my man, it's exactly what you think."

All the walls of the cell were covered in nail scratches, across their entire surface. Like the coffin of a victim buried alive, dozens of men had scratched the concrete, even the steel door, trying to escape. Or was it just Mitch's work?

"Yep," Thomas said behind him, "Mitch did all that."

Then he pushed him into the cell and closed the door behind him.

\*\*\*

"Hey! Help! Get me out of here!" Raphaël shouted, pounding the door with all his might. He felt Thomas's weight right behind, pushing against the door and cackling like a madman. Farther away, he heard the other two panicking, shouting at him to stop and asking what had gotten into him. Gradually, the screams became more distant, more muffled. The door, which had been slightly ajar, barely opening one or two millimeters when he hit it, now seemed to fuse to the frame, and all he could hear was the cold echo of his palms against the steel.

"Where are you? Let me out!" he cried, but complete silence was his only answer.

"Damn, damn, damn," he thought frantically, "what the hell is this?"

He found himself in total darkness, as if isolated from the rest of the world. His five-sided concrete coffin, marked with scratches, left him little room to move. He continued to push the door, but it seemed to weigh a ton. To knock on it,

but no one answered. To shout, but even his echo now seemed swallowed by the darkness. He tried to catch his breath and calm down: at the moment, he didn't care about making a spectacle of himself, being seen as a coward, but he felt that if he gave in to panic, it would seize him like a monster and he would start screaming to death.

"Calm down... Don't panic..." he thought, but already, crazy ideas were crowding his mind: "He's here, in this room with me, watching me!" He couldn't help but think about Mitch, what he had screamed just before dying, and a parasitic thought told him the same thing was going to happen to him.

"He just has to reach out to me, breathe his death breath on my neck, and I'll go mad in here, I swear," he told himself. He forced himself to control his breathing, close his eyes, and think of nothing, but the poison of panic was spreading in his skull, urging him to scream, throw himself against the walls, scratch, scratch with his nails until they bled, until he lost them in this coffin.

"If I turn around, I'll see him, he really exists and he's right behind me, we are two in this small room I'm sure of it I know it," whispered his inner voice; but he forced himself to focus, close his eyelids until it hurt. While he silently prayed in the dark, he didn't see the two round eyes watching him from the corner of the room. Pupils of a washed-out blue. A gaze that enveloped him like two clawed hands. The thing didn't move, just lurking in the shadows, watching.

"Don't panic don't panic don't panic don't look behind you don't look behind you," Raphaël recited aloud like an ancient mantra. The two eyes began to slowly approach him, and that's when the door opened.

He fell forward and sprawled on the ground in front of three pairs of sneakers. The light almost blinded him, and the teenagers' screams buzzed in his ears. He got up as best he could, still trembling. Michelin was still clinging to Thomas's arm while Emilie was yelling at him:

"Damn, you can be such an idiot sometimes! You have to stop that shit, it really makes you stupid!"

He, however, was still laughing.

"You're the only one who finds it funny," she continued, "you really deserve a kick in the balls!"

"I'll be happy to deliver it," Michelin replied.

"Are you okay?" she asked, turning to Raphaël, looking embarrassed.

"Yeah, more or less..."

"Oh yes, it was just a little joke, nothing serious!" Thomas cut in.

"Shut up, I'm sick of you!" Emilie complained.

He now had red, bulging eyes and was fidgeting all over. He freed himself from Michelin's grip, much heavier than him, and said cheerfully:

"It was just for fun, there's nothing in that room! Can't we joke anymore!"

He took his backpack off his shoulders, opened it, and rummaged inside:

"And even if there was a monster in this damn prison, let it try to mess with me! I'll welcome it with this!"

He pulled his hand out and triumphantly brandished a pistol. Emilie shrieked in horror at the sight of the weapon, but Michelin said nothing: he must have known. The pistol looked heavy, real, and deadly. Thomas pointed it erratically as if it were a simple water gun. The magazine protruded from the steel handle by a good ten centimeters, and a small mechanical plate extended from beneath the hammer.

"Look at this jewel, boss!" he exclaimed, now pointing it at Raphaël. "This little beauty has been modified, it's got an automatic conversion thingy!"

He pointed with a trembling finger at the small metal plate. "With my extended magazine of forty rounds, I just have to keep my finger on the trigger and this firecracker will act like a damn machine gun! I bet it empties completely in less than two seconds!"

Raphaël stood agape, horrified: where had these kids gotten an illegal weapon, and applied an even more illegal modification? Thomas was now peering into the barrel, trying to see God-knows-what.

"Be careful with that, man," Michelin said warily. "You should put it away..."

"BUT WHERE DID YOU GET THAT?" Emilie exploded. "ARE YOU COMPLETELY CRAZY?! WASN'T IT BULLSHIT WHAT THE DAMN COPS WERE TELLING ME??"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, calm down Mimile," he retorted, now pointing the gun at her nonchalantly as if he were simply pointing a finger, but it immediately silenced her. "You're blowing my ears out, you're not funny! I'm just saying you



can't be safer than with me! Even if there are ghosts, monsters, or a damn wild bear, I've got everything we need! So relax!"

He put his weapon in his bag, to Raphaël's great relief.

"Look, I'll go too if you want, we're here to have fun!"

Before anyone could react, he threw himself into the isolation cell and pulled the door shut behind him: it slammed with a supernatural force that made the whole group jump.

"See, everything's fine!" his muffled voice said from the other side of the steel door. "But damn, you shouldn't be too tall here! I almost touch the ceiling! Hey, Nono..."

They heard him chuckling, unable to continue his joke:

"Nono... Seriously... If we had wanted to lock you in solitary..."

His sentence was cut off by laughter.

"... I think the door wouldn't have closed! Damn my man, you'd just fit in there!"

Arnaud said nothing, just frowned and clenched his fists. They heard Thomas try to push the door from the inside, but it didn't budge. Then dull thuds followed.

"Ha-ha-ha... Really funny guys, I can't believe such a good joke..."

He threw himself against the steel plate, but even though Raphaël, Emilie, and Arnaud were only a meter away, all three stunned, it didn't open.

"Okay, okay, the joke was lame and not funny, I'm sorry. Now don't be kids and open this damn door!"

He delivered a half-dozen powerful, muffled blows to the middle of the door, as if using his head. Emilie was the first to snap out of it:

"You, stop being a kid!"

And she threw herself at the door trying to open it; still firmly anchored.

"Come on, guys..." he sighed. Then: "DAMN, WHAT IS THIS THING??"

Silence.

"Thomas??" Emilie called, pulling harder on the door. "What the hell, open this damn door!"

Arnaud joined her and pulled with her, but the two teens couldn't even budge it an inch. Inside, Thomas had fallen silent. No sound came out of the isolation cell.

Raphaël stepped back from this scene: he only wanted to leave them behind and get out of here. First a drugged-up thug, and now a weapon... No matter what, he was never setting foot in this town, or even the whole region again. But he should take Jordane and leave right now...

Without warning, the door gave way and the two young people were thrown to the ground. Thomas was sitting in the cell, looking dazed.

"Uh?" he said simply before slowly getting up. He ran his hand through his curly hair to dust it off, but still looked calm and dazed, his eyes bloodshot. The other two got up, but instead of scolding him, Raphaël noticed they were wary of him, as if waiting to gauge his state. He took this lull to try to excuse himself politely:

"Okay, I've seen what I needed to, but I have an appointment and need to go. If you want to stay longer, I can leave you here..."

"What are you talking about, man," Thomas said calmly.

"He's right," Emilie whispered cautiously, now clearly frightened. "We should all go, I told my mom I wouldn't be late."

"But," he protested, "we haven't finished the story! We haven't even started the story of the riot!"

"We can always read it in town, at the café," she almost pleaded.

"No, that's too lame! Since we're already here, let's make the most of it! Boss, go on, tell the rest!"

"Listen," Raphaël replied, as if walking on eggshells, "I need to go. We'll finish another time."

He was suddenly completely uninterested in the notebook, and this whole damn prison. The discomfort had already



set in, but he saw Emilie growing more and more horrified looking at Thomas, as if she understood something very serious. It was high time to get away from this madman. But just then, he reached into his bag again, and a second later he had Raphaël in his sights.

“Give. Me. The. Notebook. I want to hear the rest, even if I have to read it myself.”

Then, with a nod towards Emilie:

“And when I’m done with this story, it’s your turn Mimile. You’re going to tell me everything you spilled to the cops, especially about that weapon. They don’t like snitches in this damn notebook either...”

\*\*\*

Raphaël, Emilie, and Arnaud followed Thomas through the corridors of block A, their hearts filled with fear and minds overheating. Raphaël tried to analyze the situation with the little information he had: they had met Emilie at the police station, where she had evidently been interrogated. Given her reaction to seeing the weapon, and what Thomas had said about snitches, that must have been the focus of the interrogation. Had Thomas already used it? He couldn't answer that question, but he knew this young man was dangerous: drugs, and a firearm. He had seen too much of the effects and misdeeds that come with substance abuse, but this was the first time he saw someone wave a pistol under his nose, and it made him extremely nervous. Of course, he could try to run away; but he didn't know if Thomas would shoot and he didn't want to test that to find out.

The others didn't seem eager to take initiative, and they clearly knew him well: so it seemed wiser to imitate them and cater to his whims. He seemed pretty stoned, maybe he would settle down at some point, or let them leave, and they could make it back to the car to escape to the city. There, the police would have no choice but to take them seriously.

"That looks like the exit," Thomas said ahead of them, pointing to a series of wide-open gates.

Raphaël had given the notebook of Eustass to Thomas without any trouble, and he had said that since the riot started in block D, they would all go there first before continuing the reading. Emilie was pale, Arnaud's lips were so tightly pressed they had almost turned white, but they continued to follow him without protest. Raphaël wondered what Emilie had told the police, and how far Thomas would go upon learning it. He concluded that all three of them could very well die here.

Block D, housing the most dangerous inmates, was also a large complex of gray concrete; but the grilles on the front of the cells had been replaced with heavy steel doors like the isolation cell. The guard stations were more numerous, several having been torched. The isolation grids of zones were closer and bigger, though also all open. The few brown stains on the ground left no doubt about their origin: there were handprints and dragging marks. In their center, the ground was still gouged by the impacts of sharp objects.

"Even if the carnage took place in all the blocks of the prison," Thomas announced in a powerful voice as if addressing the entire building, "it was here that it had its genesis. I feel like a pilgrim finally arriving at the holy land, at the cradle of his beliefs. Do you feel that? Do you feel this energy that haunts the place?"

He rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a handful of pills which he stuffed into his mouth like Skittles. No one said anything, perhaps everyone hoped he would drop dead from a heart attack and that would be the end of this awful day.

"Even the silence has a particular flavor here. As if the walls whispered their story to those willing to listen. We are in a place that was baptized by blood that night, and it has retained all its splendor. It should be a place of worship, no doubt."

"That's it, he's completely lost it," Raphaël thought.

"Alright, let's continue our story. Some might say that I'm reading the Bible of this blessed place to you..."

He produced a light laugh as he said these words. Then, in an almost ceremonial voice:

"When I arrived in my new cell in block C, the news had already spread. Not bad, for a block that was supposed to be protected and isolated from the others. Even here, the fury was beginning to rise. The inmates, all nobodies who had committed the worst categories of crimes, were beginning to ask questions: snitches were everywhere, everyone was under surveillance and could get caught at any moment. And the guards could now murder an inmate without any embarrassment or consequence: how far would it escalate? Here too, people were tired of looking over their shoulder, of being mistreated by the staff, and living in unsanitary conditions.

I was trembling: I knew it was only a matter of time before they discovered I had snitched. I bitterly regretted my decision and hated myself for being so weak. I should have taken courage and endured the suffering, as long as I respected the only thing we had left here: the code of honor. Now, I didn't even have that, and it seemed that whatever path I took to try to escape my misery, I would inevitably end up in the same place.

The day passed, and everyone was talking about Mitch's incident. Here, the atmosphere was still much less tense; but in the meantime, the pressure was rising even more in block D. The inmates were outraged at having lost their only source of liquid escape, their ray of sunshine in a flask. They blamed the guards for confiscating the alcohol, they also wanted revenge on the guy who had snitched. But above all, there was Mitch's death. Prison life was already complicated enough, but when the new wave of uneducated brutes showed up to replace the good guards and keep an eye out for less money, things got worse. There, too, the uniform was king. You had to pay under the table for everything (it becomes complicated to find money for someone who rots here for several decades), keep your eyes

down and your tail between your legs to not get beaten or end up in solitary, and always show your teeth to not become the new victim of the block. Fighting other prisoners was one thing: it had become more and more frequent for fights to break out due to a lack of resources, boredom, or paranoia. Plus, with the recent overcrowding, everyone was stepping on each other's toes. But now, the guards were sending a message: anyone who defied their authority would be liquidated on the spot. It was the last affront to their human rights that overflowed the vase.

Like a Faraday cage, the echoes of discontent, violence, revenge, resonated throughout the block, feeding again and again. That day, the altercations between prisoners multiplied by the hour, several ending up in the infirmary. The guards were starting to get scared, the electric air sending shocks at every sideways glance cast on them, so they easily used their batons to separate the troublemakers, further fueling the beast that would be born at nightfall. Then, in the evening after dinner, a small group of inmates from block D decided it was time to act: the dark clouds were saturated, now the lightning would strike. The administration had pushed them to the edge, them the forgotten of society, so they were going to remind the whole world that they existed. And when everyone was listening attentively, they would lay down their terms.

The plan was simple: take control of a zone, capture the staff there, use them to move to the next zone freeing as many people as possible, and continue until they had the entire block. Then move to block A. Then B. Then, they would all go together to block C to settle their scores with all those damn snitches: besides, the night Mitch got caught, people saw an inmate hanging out with a guard. The next day, that inmate was transferred to C. Coincidence? No, they knew who had snitched. That night, they were finally going to unleash all the rage they had accumulated since their arrival here. The pressure cooker was finally going to explode, and it was going to dirty the walls, for sure.

The implementation was even simpler: the city couldn't defund the concrete walls and the steel security grids, but it had done enough damage in terms of personnel. There was a weak point in the system: the infirmary. In addition to the medical staff, it was guarded by a finite number of guards. Sure, they had weapons, but their numbers were limited. What was incredible, and what the inmates exploited to perfection, was that communication between isolated blocks was faster than between the undertrained guards and their radios. So, the group from block D spread the word: send as many people as possible to the infirmary.

They brought out their finest Sunday shivs and sharpened toothbrushes, and started slashing. Fights erupted everywhere: they would choose a victim to stab viciously, then a trusted man to whom they inflicted superficial wounds, or even just smeared with blood. They were all sent urgently to the infirmary, one dying and the other pretending. The guards from each block brought in the wounded in droves, overwhelming the staff instantly. It was like a massive pile-up in front of a hospital's emergency room, with the injured arriving from every door. These fools took a while to understand: it was when there were four viable inmates for each armed guard, two inmates bleeding out per nurse, and seeing their colleagues from each block arriving through its entrance, that they realized what was happening. On the other side, the guards responsible for the main areas' security were busy beating up the attacking inmates and shackling them, unaware that they would be freed immediately after and seek revenge fivefold.

In the infirmary, it started with a look: Joël, incarcerated for setting fire to a building and turning five families to ashes, now smeared with the blood of the poor guy next to him, spotted a guy from block A who was alert.

With my luck, it had to be Mathia.

Around them, it was complete panic: the guards had brought in too many people, and the armed guards were yelling at those still trying to get into the corridor. Nurses ran around in all directions, their gowns covered in blood. About fifteen inmates were moaning and screaming, their guts mashed.

That's when Mathia and Joël nodded at each other, and the hostilities began.

It was Joël who started it: he spotted a guard busy giving orders left and right, a shotgun slung over his shoulder. He lunged at him, but the guard saw the movement out of the corner of his eye. Without thinking, he brought his weapon to his hip and fired: the blast, as powerful as an explosion, stopped everyone in their tracks, even Joël. He was blown backward, leaving his slippers in place. He fell to the ground with a hole in his chest, and his blood started to flow for real. For barely more than a second, which seemed to last a minute, everyone froze and watched the man on the ground, their mouths agape and ears ringing. The inmates were the first to react: Mathia charged at the guard who hadn't had time to reload and pinned him to the ground. He was imitated by all the other fake injured: more shots rang out, a man had half of his face torn off and collapsed onto a hospital bed. Another guard, a newcomer, swept the room with the barrel of his weapon, panicked, when he caught the gaze of an inmate really dying on his bed, a hand pressed to his stomach. The unfortunate inmate lifted his free arm in front of his face to protect himself and was instantly swept away, along with the top of his skull, by a volley of lead. He fell forward, and the contents of his half-burning brain spilled onto the floor. The infirmary buzzed in complete chaos, the medical staff trying to escape or hide, the inmates throwing themselves at the guards and seizing their weapons; but after a moment, barely twenty seconds, the prisoners had taken control, with only three human casualties.

The seven other assailants, four from block D, two from block B, and Mathia from block A, had now tied up the guards and the staff with tape and lined them up on their knees against a wall. Five of them had recovered a weapon: without further ado, they seized sets of keys and plunged into the corridors to catch up with the escapees and continue their

advance. The two remaining in place seized whatever sharp objects they could find and finished off the injured one by one, slitting their throats with the speed and efficiency of butchers. When the scalpels or bistouries broke in the throats of their victims, they switched to bandage scissors or forceps. Once the job was done, only the penitentiary staff remained, waiting for their fate. The nurses were spared, at least for the moment, but the guards were not so lucky.

On his part, Mathia moved quickly along the corridor, shotgun in one hand, the collar of a guard he had seized in the other. He arrived at the guard station separating him from the first cells, in front of the closed security gate. Seeing him, the man inside displayed an almost comically surprised expression and began to fumble on his desk, probably looking for his radio. Mathia fired at the reinforced glass, which instantly whitened from the impact of the projectiles, holding up but so frightening the guard that he fell backwards and couldn't get up right away. Seizing the opportunity, Mathia grabbed the keyring from his hostage and opened the door to the station. Inside, the young uniformed man begged him not to shoot, to spare his life: he had a family, a newborn child. Mathia simply ignored him and pressed the button to open the gate: what the young man should have begged for was to be killed right away. During the night, each guard would endure unimaginable tortures, and the outcome would be the same: they would all be dead by morning.

A very unpleasant alarm sound went off, and the gate opened. Mathia heard the cheers of the prisoners from adjacent cells, whistling and applauding.

"If I open the doors, it's for you to join us!" he shouted.

Then, as the prisoners cheered him on fervently, he hit the general cell opening button and continued on his way, leaving the young man where he was: already, enraged inmates were rushing toward the guard station to take care of him, patting their liberator on the shoulder as they passed.

On the other side, in block B, everything unfolded just as rapidly: armed prisoners were breezing through security barriers like butter, rallying more and more inmates and catching undertrained guards along the way. The crowd of criminals gradually flooded the corridors like a contagion. Some of them decided to stay in their now-open cells, not wanting to participate in the raid but promising not to hinder it: some were nearly at the end of their sentences and did not want it extended. At first, they were left alone, but when the escapees gained access to the cafeteria, they retraced their steps, and stabbings with knives and forks began to rain down.

In block D, it was different: once the doors opened, no one chose to stay. On the contrary, everyone participated in capturing the guards, piling them in a room, and stripping them: already, the inmates were lining up to take their turn with them.

And so, in less than twenty minutes, blocks A, B, and D of the Duli penitentiary center were completely controlled by the inmates. Armed with knives, batons, or even steel bedposts, the prisoners had organized themselves to keep all the guards hostage and torture them to pass the time, or murder those who refused to partake in the carnage. Some settled scores: in block B, a man who had been tormented by a gang of bikers for years took the opportunity to jump on one of them and plunge a spoon into his orbit, his eye splattering on him as if he had squeezed a raw egg. The others seized him, and while two held his arms, the injured man took his time carving him up with a butcher's knife brought from the kitchens, his one remaining eye wild in its socket.

But the mission was not over yet: now, they had to take block C, and then the fun could really start. The very first conspirators, three murderers from block D, recruited two other guys who looked tough enough for dirty work to storm block C, round up all the snitches on their list, and keep them awake all night. In addition, they had found out who had sold out Mitch: a certain Eustass.

"I know what that guy looks like, I'm coming with you," Mathia said, fury in his eyes.

The band of five psychopaths, hands full of weapons and keyrings and pockets stuffed with oxycodone pills pilfered from the pharmacy, headed towards block C, thirsty for blood and vengeance. Before setting off, for fun, they agreed to call themselves "the death squad."

Ironically, after everything he had put me through, I think it was Reiner the guard who saved my life that night. And it was hearing his voice crackling through the general loudspeakers that I knew what was happening, along with all the prisoners in block C: "Attention all! General alert! Escaped prisoners! I repeat, escaped prisoners! Close all exits, lock down all gates! Emergency protocol!"

My heart nearly stopped at that moment. I immediately understood what was happening: that was it, they had had enough. The powder keg had finally exploded, and the carnage wouldn't stop until all those who couldn't defend themselves were dead. And of course, I was one of them; but now that I was in block C, there would be many more steps before I met my end. I think it was that thought that gave me the boost: the image of my genitals stuffed into my throat, maybe no eyes, no teeth, my backside on fire and bleeding. That's what allowed me to leap up, well before everyone else, well before the guards who were casting bewildered looks everywhere, as if discovering for the first time that we had loudspeakers, and wanting to see them to make sure they were really there.

I ran to the main guard post of block C: inside, a man in uniform was pulling his hair out, lamenting his fate, seemingly looking for a particular button on his dashboard filled with beeps and alarms of all kinds. Above him, I grabbed the lever

of the power breaker for the main gate and pulled with all my might, before he had time to say "Hey!" The lights went out in the corridor in front of me, and the gate locked down completely. The guard tried to grab his baton to wield it at me, not sure if I was on his side or not, when footsteps were heard in the dark.

We stopped dead and tried to peer into the darkness in the corridor in front of us, on the other side of the out-of-service gate. There were several sets of footsteps, with a very slow and confident stride. And also a moan, with little cries and hiccups.

The footsteps approached, and the full death squad emerged from the shadows: five men armed to the teeth, one of whom, appearing to be the leader, was seated on his mount that advanced at a walk. His steed, a guard on all fours and completely naked, his face bloodied and feces running down his legs, had a gag and tape around his mouth, but his sobs could still be heard.

"Damn," the guy on the far left said, pointing at me, "he's the one who ratted out Mitch! This son of a bitch!" I recognized Mathia, covered in blood, but clearly not his own. Their eyes were all red.

He approached us, us still unable to move like two idiots in a guard post, and he slid the key into the lock, but nothing moved.

"Bitch..." then, looking up at me: "you're the one who locked it, asshole?"

I didn't even have time to open my mouth, didn't even have time to think about doing it, when I saw a reflection glint in one of the men's hands. Both of us, the guard and I, ducked, and a deafening blast shattered the glass of the post, just below our heads. Shards flew everywhere.

"Don't kill them, idiot! We need them alive, at least the rat!" someone yelled.

The guard got scared, and that fool tried to run: he took two steps out of the shelter, and another gunshot swept his legs from behind, like a tackle. He collapsed to the ground, one leg broken and the other dangling at the knee by a thread. He screamed, blood flowing profusely.

"Shit, this bitch jammed!" I heard.

It could have been a feint, a ruse, but I didn't question it. I took the chance to run off, deep into block C, anywhere but safe.

"Pfeu!! You think you can run away like that, man? We're gonna find you, you can believe that! We came for you, and we're gonna take good care of you!" I heard behind me as I ran until my lungs burst; but I never saw them again.

I ran through the block, everyone around me bustling like panicked ants. Some barricaded themselves in rooms, but I knew they would eventually give in to the assaults of the other inmates. Others returned to their cells and hid under their beds, like children. There were those who talked about reasoning with them, but they would be the first to die.

I arrived at the cafeteria and stopped dead, trying to catch my breath: I realized that I was like everyone else, I had been running in circles all this time. I didn't know where to go, nor where to hide. And then, for the very last time, the block's loudspeaker came on, this time with a voice I didn't know, terrified and in tears: "The death squad has found a way through! They're roaming the hallways, hide well! May God help us all..."

So, I found a closet, a tiny thing in the kitchen of the cafeteria, and I hid. I wedged myself in there, couldn't even move an inch, but I stayed there until morning. And all night, I heard distant screams, gunshots, laughter, and cries.

But when I hadn't heard anything for several hours, when I understood that it was all over, I came out. The sun had risen, the silence was implacable. I had cramps everywhere, a backache, and I was on edge, but I left the cafeteria.

The main atrium was a true carnage: I walked through a pool of blood that covered almost the entire ground floor. There were corpses everywhere, never in one piece. From the second floor hung about fifty people in a regular row, like decorations, their feet dangling in the air. I walked through the entire block in unbearable silence, only the corpses following me everywhere. I crossed the yard of block B, several people had been lined up against a wall and then murdered. A body hung by the feet from a basketball hoop, headless. I came back to the main entrance as if I were the last man on earth. It was only when I arrived at the very last door that I saw all the cop cars, waiting for a signal, or maybe even the army to enter. Without asking questions, I lay down on the ground, arms over my head, and waited for them to come in.

In the end, of the two hundred sixteen prisoners and twenty-one staff members who remained that night, I was the last survivor. It took them eight months to identify all the bodies, but strangely, five were missing. Three from block D, and two from A.

But that's where the story ends. At least officially.

What this story doesn't tell is that the five missing people had briefly formed a group, 'the death squad', to settle their scores with everyone who had wronged them, prisoners and guards alike, and in particular the one who had



committed the irreparable, me. What the story doesn't say is that they started piling up victims in a room, torturing them at length before killing them. They weren't lacking in imagination or commitment, but they couldn't find the one they wanted most of all. They swallowed oxycodone pills like candy and ran around block C, their eyes redder and drooling, overturning everything in their path. They became increasingly enraged, slowly turning into monsters. The drugs were getting to them, or maybe they were possessed, but they started killing everyone indiscriminately. They let their guns spit, played with blades and ropes, and in one night, they had killed every living being, except for me. In the end, they were no longer human, their eyes had popped out of their sockets and they had bitten off their tongues from clenching their teeth like sharks. In the end, no one knows what happened to them, but it's said that they became one with the prison, and that they still haunt it, even today."

"And that concludes the book by Eustass," finally said Thomas. "Did you like it?"

The audience was tense, each waiting to see what would happen; but it was Emilie who broke the silence with a voice trying to be confident:

"You made up the ending."

"Not at all," he simply said.

"But yes," she protested, "I'm not stupid, if no one survived except Eustass who was in his closet all night, how do we know about the squad? And then, you told things he couldn't know, about the infirmary and all."

"It's true, but I know all that."

"And how?"

She was almost shouting, on the verge of a nervous breakdown. And it was with a calm and seriousness that sent shivers down the spine that he replied:

"I was there."

No one knew what to answer, no one even dared to move. But Raphaël had a question burning on his tongue: he absolutely had to ask it, even though he already knew the answer, but it was impossible. Yet, he knew he was right. Thomas turned around and looked him in the eyes, two red orbs with dilated pupils that were soon to pop out of their sockets. He smiled broadly and sent him an almost telepathic message: "Go ahead, ask your question."

So Raphaël spoke up:

"Is it you, the thing that lives in the isolation cell?"

Thomas burst into laughter and bit his tongue sharply: blood began to pearl at the corner of his mouth.

"Yes. I hesitated to take you, until I saw what he had in his bag."

He pulled out the weapon and examined it with ecstasy, his eyes now truly bulging out of their sockets:

"It's magnificent. He wouldn't have dared to use it against you, but me, I love carnage, I need carnage! When he stole Eustass's book from his mother last night, she was still up. He used this against her, as young and scared as he was, and that's what woke me up. And now, it's in my hands! I'm giving you a ten-second head start, after that, the carnage begins!"

A shrill sound screamed throughout the building, and the metal grilles of all the surrounding cells closed in unison, producing a metallic clamor that echoed throughout the atrium. Emilie looked around her in horror and disbelief.

"Nine..."

Raphaël's blood ran cold, sending an icy wave through his body: he felt the same thing as in the mine when he had faced that wolf monster.

"Eight..."

He leapt to escape. He headed for the exit and threw himself at the bars, which were now closed. He shook them, tried to pull, but they were securely locked.

"Seven..."

He turned around in panic: he caught Emilie's gaze, on the verge of tears and completely lost.

"What's happening? What are you doing?" she asked him in total confusion.

"We have to get out of here," was all he could reply.

His gaze returned to the atrium: was there another way out? He had no idea at all, and if he risked it, he could end up



trapped...

"Six..."

A thought struck him: the circuit breaker. If he had heard the alarm and the doors had closed, it meant the power was back. If what he had said earlier was true, the opposite had worked for Eustass.

He went to the empty guard post, a few steps away, and spotted the famous handle, in the closed position.

"What's happening?" he heard behind him, then: "Five..."

He pushed the lever up: an alarm went off and a green light came on, but the grate didn't move.

"Damn it, damn it, why isn't it working... No, don't panic, don't panic, think..." he thought.

"Tom," Michelin said in a frail voice, "what's happening man, what are you doing to us?"

He had remained standing in front of him, nervous and hesitant, not understanding what was happening.

"Four..."

The buttons. He had just restored the power, now he had to open this damn door. He bent over the control panel and his heart sank: there were buttons everywhere...

Emilie was now right behind him, hovering around him like a mosquito with a lamp, looking dazed.

"Is he alright? What's happening to him? What's all this about?"

Desperate, Raphaël started to hammer the buttons randomly.

"Three..."

One button opened the cells on the first floor behind him, another turned on the old neon lights which exploded, spewing shards of glass on the floor.

"Two..."

It was when he pressed the last one that an unpleasant siren pierced their eardrums and the door in front of them began to open. He wanted to leave the guard post, but Emilie stood in the doorway, motionless, just waiting for someone to explain what was happening.

"Move!" he shouted.

But she remained motionless, her eyes glassy.

"One..."

He abruptly grabbed her by the shoulders and directed her out of the way, then he took her arm and dragged her towards the slowly opening grate, much too slowly. Not enough for him to pass through.

"Man, you're seriously freaking me out!" Michelin said, still standing in front of a Thomas who was clacking his teeth so hard that Raphaël, looking at the scene over his shoulder, saw a small piece of tongue fly and crash to the ground.

"Zero."

The gate finally opened wide enough for them both to pass through. Thomas slowly raised his weapon and pointed it directly at Michelin. Michelin let out a small, nervous laugh and said in a high-pitched voice:

"Listen, everything is going to be fine, we're going to..."

It was as if a million lions were roaring right in their ears: the weapon spat out a burst of flame, sending bullets as rapidly as a war gun. The sound filled the atrium completely, so loud it seemed it could push the walls. Michelin's stomach exploded, and he was cut in half on the spot, sending a cloud of blood into the air and hundreds of red, sticky pieces crashing against the walls. A rain of empty, burning cartridges fell to the ground, but Emilie and Raphaël's ears rang so loudly they didn't even hear the clink of metal on the concrete floor; however, their noses were invaded by the smell of gunpowder, soon accompanied by the scent of blood.

Michelin collapsed in two distinct halves with a dull, guttural noise: his face still moving, expressing a mix of astonishment and incomprehension. Emilie screamed at the top of her lungs, a shrill sound that could tear one's ears off, then she was covered by the noise of the second volley that poured down on the unfortunate man, finishing him off. Thomas turned to them, his eyes bulging red:

"I hope you last longer than that one..."

He let out a distorted laugh, his jaw clicking and rows of teeth grinding, or rather sanding against each other. Raphaël grabbed Emilie and they fled down the long corridor. They reached the end, the last guard post before the exit, and Raphaël threw himself at the locked gates. The post was right in front of him, its circuit breaker clearly visible; but it was on the other side of the bars. He shook the steel structure more out of panic than to really try anything. It was their only way out, and it was blocked: in a few seconds, they would hear footsteps arriving accompanied by an infamous laugh, and the fire would spit to disintegrate them both.

“Over here!” he heard.

He turned to his left, at a fork, and saw the slightly narrower corridor disappearing into darkness. He couldn’t make out anything in the shadows. Well, yes, a very slight humming. Like a purring, almost imperceptible.

“But move, damn it! He’s coming!”

He came out of his stupor and headed in the direction of Emilie’s voice. As he went deeper, the sound became more audible: it seemed like a straining engine. He turned at a right angle and arrived in front of a gate that separated him from a room filled with heavy machinery, hooks hanging from the ceiling, and laundry baskets overflowing with blackened moldy fabrics.

“Hurry up!” Emilie called from the other side of the gate: a pile of metal laundry bins had been overturned, and one of them was blocking the closure. He jumped over the half-sunken obstacle and passed through the gate pressing on it to join her. She kicked the bin, which freed the mechanism to allow the door to close behind them.

The room was in chaotic condition: the large industrial dryers had their portholes broken or even torn off, machines overflowing with rotten laundry or toppled to the ground. The linoleum was black in places, probably due to puddles caused by water leaks left to fester in the dark.

He didn’t have time to study the place in more detail: already, the sound of teeth clicking could be heard nearby.

“Over there!” Raphaël said when he spotted a loading zone: a gate and a small guard post isolated it from the room, and even though the cage was well closed, the post had its security glass lying on the ground, intact but dirtied by impacts. He went first, closely followed by Emilie, and not so far away by the monotonous voice of the demon inhabiting Thomas: “How did you get in there?”

They reached the access ramp and jumped to reach the open air. They arrived in a dirt courtyard with various markings on the ground that once welcomed trucks filled with dirty laundry on arrival, and clean on return. One of them lay in a corner, its four tires flat and its bodywork eaten away by rust. A large electric gate topped with two guard towers blocked the passage; but to their left, at the end of the courtyard, a section of fence that separated them from another block had fallen to the ground. They exchanged a look, but before they could even open their mouths, they were interrupted by the shrill alarm of the doors opening: Thomas was arriving.

No other choice but to take their chance: they ran towards the other block, crossing the flat, exposed courtyard, making them easy prey. Just under a hundred meters separated them from the new obstacle. Raphaël jumped over the roll of barbed wire on the ground then walked on the fence to get to the other side. Emilie tried in turn, but being smaller, she caught her foot in the wire and fell to the ground, letting out a cry of pain.

“Damn it! My foot! Help!” she screamed.

Her leg was caught in the sharp trap, the barbs tightly clinging to her jeans.

“Help me!” she implored, reaching out her hand. “I don’t want to die, help me, please!”

He tried to pull her by the arm, but she began to scream as her pants tore: a red stain appeared on the fabric, and blood started to flow onto the ground.

“It hurts too much!!” she yelled, tears in her eyes.

He tried to think of a solution, but already, the silhouette of Thomas appeared in the distance, descending from the loading ramp as well. They were in the middle of the courtyard, nothing to hide behind or protect themselves with. There was the back building they hadn’t visited yet behind them, its entrance seeming open, but it was still a good twenty meters away.

He looked at Emilie, pleading to be taken out of there, then, a hundred meters away, he distinguished Thomas slowly raising his armed hand: that was it, this was where he was going to be shot down. He thought of taking Emilie on his back, pulling her out of there and getting her to safety. He even thought of running away, leaving her to her fate and taking care of his own survival. But he just stood there, motionless. He could do nothing but watch Thomas in the distance, Emilie’s hand still gripping his sleeve. Like a deer caught in the headlights of a semi-truck on a night road, he stood there motionless, staring death in the eye. Everything happened in slow motion: he first saw a small light emerge from Thomas’s hand. It danced like a candle in a breeze. Then he saw the dust rising in bursts around them, whistling in his ears like whip cracks as the bullets whizzed by. And finally, the distant and muffled rumbling of the weapon, a sharp

and cutting original sound dulled by the distance and the echo between the red brick buildings. No bullet hit them, some having crashed into the facade behind, others leaving tiny craters up to ten meters from them. Emilie screamed, her face buried in her arms, plumes of dust rising all around her, but Raphaël remained standing, simply paralyzed. Thomas – or rather the thing inhabiting him – lowered the weapon in the distance and seemed to utter a curse: he must have run out of bullets.

Raphaël, with considerable effort, managed to break free from his paralysis. He grabbed Emilie, apologized in advance, and pulled with all his might. The barbed wire initially clung on but as he pulled her far enough, it was caught by the structure of the fence on the ground and let go, tearing off the bottom of her jeans, her shoe, and shreds of skin with it. She screamed even more, but once freed, she clung to him to stand up. She leaned on him, limping to the door behind them, one foot bloody and a shoe missing. They managed to reach the building, leaving a red trail on the earthy floor. Looking back, they saw Thomas advancing towards them with a measured step.

\*\*\*

The sign “BLOCK C” with an arrow pointing down loomed above the metal door in front of them. They found themselves in a staff locker room, in as pitiful a state as the rest of the prison: perhaps it was the prisoners who had vandalized all the lockers, ripping off some doors, or maybe it was teenagers who had come to play in this abandoned place and took the opportunity to damage the site without getting caught – perhaps some really did get caught, but not by the city police. Dusty clothes and safety equipment were scattered on the floor. In a corner, behind a partition, pieces of ceramic urinals lay on the ground turned brown by years of slow water leaks.

“Where are we going?” groaned Emilie.

She was still clinging to Raphaël’s shoulder, but an alarmingly large pool of blood was beginning to form under her entirely red sock.

“We need to cross the building and find the entrance,” he replied. “Once there, every block entrance should be connected to this prison’s entrance, right?”

“What are you, some kind of civil engineer in a penitentiary center? Stop pretending you know something and admit you’re lost.”

He didn’t know what to say, caught off guard.

“Sorry,” she apologized, “it just hurts like hell, that’s all.”

The truth, he thought, was that she was right: he had no idea where to go in this labyrinth of walls and gates, and they were going to need a lot of luck to get out of here. Especially with a mad killer on their heels.

“Anyway,” she continued, “I don’t have any other choice with my leg in fucking shreds. Shit, my mom’s going to kill me if I come back with only one shoe...”

“Your mom will be glad to see you alive,” he tried to reassure her, “we’re going to get out of here, don’t worry.”

“Yeah, right,” she said, “it would be quite convenient for her if I disappeared like all the others. It would save her all the trouble I cause her.”

He couldn’t find any comforting words that didn’t sound hollow; he knew what it was like to have a parent who struggled to manage themselves before thinking about their child. But there was no time for introspection; it was time for action. He began to remove his belt, and Emilie suddenly looked outraged, her cheeks momentarily regaining a pinkish hue on her pallid face: “What the hell are you doing, you pervert?!”

“It’s not what you think!” he apologized, realizing the misunderstanding. “You need a tourniquet, you’re going to bleed out!”

At first, she didn’t seem to understand, then she looked at her leg, wincing at the extent of the puddle.

“Is it going to hurt?” she asked.

“A bit, but it’s going to keep you alive.”

“Then do it, and don’t make a fuss.”

He wrapped his belt around her thigh, just above the knee. She leaned on him: she was breathing heavily and her complexion was pale. He then tightened the tourniquet, eliciting a cry of pain that she had tried to suppress. The wounds were deep, and he hoped it would be enough to stop the bleeding.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“It’s fine,” she said between her teeth, “let’s go.”

But before they could set off, a bell chimed in the room. They both jumped, and Emilie groaned in pain as she dug her hand into her pocket. She pulled out a mobile phone blinking insistently.

"Damn it, not now!" she groaned, looking at her screen.

Raphaël leaned over her shoulder and saw that she had a notification. A message from Thomas.

*"Where are you, little darlings? Why don't you want to play with me?"*

Then, they almost screamed when a new message appeared on the screen, accompanied by the notification sound:

*"Come on, give me a hint! Scream my name once so I can find you!"*

They looked at each other, unsure of what to do, when another bell chimed in the room: this time, Thomas had sent a video. Emilie started the playback, too terrified to do anything but obey. At first, they saw nothing but a mass of black and gray pixels, accompanied by a saturated cacophony, as if he had filmed in the middle of a storm. Then they made out branches, and the electric sound transformed into the rustling of leaves. The cameraman was sneaking through a bush.

He emerged from the foliage to the back of a house. It was night, and not much was visible except for a window emitting a yellowish light. The person filming moved silently until pressing against the wall directly under the window, and the lens turned to reveal a face half-hidden under a hood. His pupils were fully dilated.

"What's up, girls?" Thomas whispered in the video. "You won't believe it, I found Eustass's old house! No kidding! According to my sources, I can find his famous book in his old room! If you're nice, for a joint or a little something, I'll let you read it!"

Then he raised the phone and placed the camera on the window ledge, inspecting the interior of the house like a periscope: there was an old living room with two sofas worn to the threads, and several paintings half-hidden behind a ton of cheap knick-knacks. In the back, the hallway light was on, but apart from that detail, there didn't seem to be a soul in sight. The camera spun around in all directions, almost nauseating, as Thomas climbed through the half-open window.

"I'm in..." he giggled.

He crossed the living room, the phone still in front of him, and headed towards a bedroom. He took a tour of the room, scanning it with his phone with a wrist movement: there was a simple single bed, and the little furniture that adorned the room was empty; but when the phone pointed at the nightstand, Raphaël jumped at recognizing Eustass's book.

"Damn, it can't be!" exclaimed the cameraman.

He approached slowly, lowering the phone which now filmed his legs. Between his thighs, the barrel of a gun was visible.

He then tossed the device onto the bed, perhaps to pick up the book, when a voice exploded from the other end of the room.

"WHAT IS THIS? screamed a woman. A THIEF! GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!!"

The phone was filming the ceiling, but Thomas was heard begging the woman to be quiet. But the poor lady screamed, demanding someone call the police, that she would give him a beating. A crash of falling objects followed, sounds like two people fighting, then a burst of gunfire saturated the sound of the video.

Then, silence.

No, someone crying. And vomiting.

Suddenly, a panicked and bloodied face filled the entire screen, and the video stopped.

"My God," whispered Emilie, trembling.

A few moments later, a new message appeared under the video:

*"Thanks, I heard my name! I know where you are now ;)"*

Then, directly after, a photo appeared: it was the door of the block through which they had entered moments earlier.

Emilie moaned.

And finally, one last photo: a close-up of Thomas's face. His eyes were red, and his skin, streaked with blue veins, was beginning to necrotize. His lips hung, full of blood, and his nose had disappeared, exposing the black flesh of his nostrils. There was a text with the photo: *"I'm coming."*

Emilie dropped her phone.

They started running.

\*\*\*

Block C was the most dilapidated of all: the corridors were all stained with dark marks, some accompanied by gouges in the wall. Given their number and size, Raphaël understood why it had taken so long to recover all the bodies. The massacre that had taken place here might have even been more significant than that of the mine. He thought of the voices that the miners heard in the dark corners of the galleries and the piercing eyes that the prisoners saw in solitary confinement: was there a connection? Was this town really haunted, and did the monsters feed on carnage and desolation?

He looked at Emilie's leg, clinging to his shoulder: even though the tourniquet seemed to be working, her injured leg had doubled in size. It was now purplish, and he wondered how much time she had before the leg began to rot. No sooner had he finished this thought than he felt her weaken and almost fall off.

"Hey there!" he said, "stay with me!"

"Yes, sorry..." she replied in a weak and sleepy tone.

His stomach knotted: she was really in bad shape, she needed care as soon as possible. She was rapidly losing strength, now putting all her weight on Raphaël.

"Maybe I can take her to the infirmary?" he thought. "No, I don't even know where it is, and besides, they must have emptied everything before abandoning the prison." There was really only one solution, to find the exit as quickly as possible. But with all her weight on his shoulder, they were moving slowly.

"Damn, it's a real maze in here!" he cursed, disheartened.

They had entered through the back of the building, which seemed to be on the staff side. He needed to find something to orient himself, like an atrium, or a main hall, which would be connected to the exit, that is, the block's entrance. Then, he had to see what this entrance led to: was it connected to the administrative building, the one they had entered through with the four of them? Or would he end up in another courtyard? Would they have to cross another block, A and B, to finally find the parking lot?

"Damn it," he thought, "how am I going to make it moving this slowly?"

He passed by a room and glanced inside: it was a bathroom. An idea came to him. An idea he didn't like at all, but he told himself – or rather, he was telling himself – that it was the thing to do.

"Emilie!" he called.

"Mmmh?" she replied as if she were being pulled from sleep.

"I'm going to put you somewhere safe, just while I find the exit. I'll find a way out of here, and then I'll come back for you. I'll carry you if I have to, but we're going to make it."

She groaned, her eyes almost closed: she was so weak that he had to carry her so she wouldn't collapse. He took her response as a yes, and dragged her into the room until they reached the stalls. He managed to seat her on the toilet: she was now as white as a sheet, blood continuing to slowly ooze from the wounds on her leg.

"Especially, don't fall asleep," he told her.

"... You're going to leave me."

"What? No, I'm just going to look for an exit, and I promise I'll come back."

Her eyes were half-open, but she was looking at the floor. Her breathing was slow, and she was too weak to move. The only part of her body that wasn't milky white was her leg, which was turning almost black.

"Yes," she continued as if in a trance, "you're going to find the exit, and you're going to run away without me. You're going to leave me here."

"No, that's not true! I swear, I won't leave without you!"

But she didn't respond. He thought she had tried to shrug her shoulders, but he wasn't sure. He stood there for a few seconds, not knowing if he had made the right decision.

"But yes," he thought, "you couldn't walk around carrying her throughout the entire penitentiary. Now, you can move quickly and effectively, but you have to hurry!"



So he left the stall hesitantly, walked out of the bathroom, and started running down the corridor.

He ran randomly through the various turns, sorely lacking direction signs, turning back when he encountered a staircase: he didn't know if it was the staff who had deliberately made the building impractical to prevent prisoners from roaming, if it was them who had torn off the signs like they had destroyed everything else during the riot, or if it was the administration who had removed everything after the penitentiary's closure. Then, an answer suddenly came to his mind, and he was convinced it was the right one: it was the monsters. They had removed them to more easily trap their victims. To corner them here like laboratory rats.

He finally arrived at a guard post: this one seemed to separate the staff area from the prisoners, with its system of double gates, open and inert. He ran through, out of breath, and stopped at the kitchen of the cafeteria.

The place was completely empty. The refrigerators were missing, their shapes having left a specter of dirt on the wall. The carts that had contained the meal trays to be cleaned were still there, but some were overturned on the floor. The bins that must have once contained food were empty, all the cupboards were open, there were no dishes or cutlery.

"This is where he hid, thought Raphaël, during the night of the riot." He wondered which cupboard it was, and even if he could imitate and hide in it too. He concluded that it would not serve much purpose, except to condemn Emilie. He left the kitchens to enter the dining hall with overturned tables and folded chairs, when he heard a sound coming from behind him.

He turned around: it was a growl. It came from the kitchens, where he had been a little earlier. He thought he saw a shadow move in the darkness, but maybe it was his imagination; the animal noise, however, was very real, no doubt.

Another movement, as if the thing lurking in the shadow was slowly advancing.

He stepped back: something was there, deep in the kitchens, waiting to pounce. He heard a yelp: yes, it wasn't his imagination.

He began to walk backward, convinced that if he turned his back on that kitchen for even an instant, a monster would leap from the darkness and grab him. That was when the loudspeakers of the block spat out a piercing crackle, like an electric tongue snapping, resonating throughout the room. He shouted, caught off guard, then he heard a voice, crackling and panicked, coming out of the speakers:

*"To everyone in block C... The death squad is coming... God have mercy on your soul... They're entering through the kitchens..."*

The speakers went silent, leaving Raphaël paralyzed with fear with the thing that emerged from the dark to reveal itself: the man on all fours was naked, his bulging eyes pointing in opposite directions. Drool dripped from his lips as he barked. He moved slowly towards him, carrying on his corpulent back another man seated. This one wore a prisoner's outfit, a butcher's knife in one hand and a human head in the other. His carnivorous smile undulated as his rows of teeth ground against each other. Suddenly, right behind him:

"What are you, mate, a snitch or a queer?"

A third man arrived, a metal bar in his hands:

"Doesn't matter Mathia, I say we shove a bar up his ass to his throat, there are so many others to wreck tonight..."

Raphaël spun around: already four men were surrounding him, a fifth still approaching.

"I have no way out, he realized, I am dead."

The man with the iron bar swung it wildly, like a drummer warming up for a baseball match. The guard-dog barked and snickered at the same time, relieved to no longer be the victim for the next few minutes.

"Or worse," he feared, "the next few centuries."

The death squad was now upon him, just a few steps away. He began to tremble, ants crawling up his spine.

"This is the end," he concluded.

Then, a flash of thought crossed his mind, quick and fleeting, and he thought it moved too fast for him to catch it. An idea, materialized like a virtual particle, and almost immediately gone. But he managed to catch it:

"I know where Eustass is hiding," he said with a trembling but assertive voice.

The men stopped, wary. Or rather, dumbfounded, as if they had haunted these corridors for decades and had gradually forgotten why they were there. Maybe they even took him seriously.

"Good God, this might be my chance..." he whispered under his breath.



"Son..." Mathia began behind him.

Then Raphaël raised his arm and pointed to the kitchens:

"He's hiding in a cupboard."

And miraculously, they turned their heads in that direction, frowning and baring their teeth, as if the solution was obvious, as if it was indeed the very last place they hadn't searched.

"Go on, now you run," he thought.

His feet remained glued to the ground.

"Go on, damn it, run, it's your only chance..."

He was so afraid, a voice in his head telling him that if he didn't move, if he let it happen, everything would be fine for him. His shoes were in cement.

"Come on, take control..."

The confusion lasted only a moment, but it was enough for Raphaël to react. He lunged, bumping into the man who called himself Mathia. The contact with his shoulder was sharp: his body was cold and slimy, and the unpleasant sensation stuck to his skin.

"Shit, catch that son of a bitch!" he heard behind him, but he was already speeding out of the dining hall.

"You can always run, but we'll always catch up to you, mate!" shouted another.

He crossed a large corridor, thanking whoever would listen that all the gates were still open in this block. Then, he arrived in the atrium and stopped dead: a hundred corpses were hanging along the floor, their feet swinging at the height of his head. The bodies were decomposing, some greenish in color and with a texture resembling moss.

"Release the dogs!!" he heard snicker in his back. He turned his head and saw the naked guard chasing him on all fours, screaming and barking. He resumed his run towards what seemed to be a guard post, but in the panic, everything was blurry around him. A rope snapped and a body collapsed just in front of him, but he jumped over the obstacle to avoid it. He looked up: a member of the squad had sawed the rope from the floor above, laughing heartily. Ahead, another man also cut a rope. The corpse also crashed about ten meters in front of him with a sound of broken bones, but as he approached, still in full run, the body began to rise. It helped itself up with its skeletal hands and stared at Raphaël with its eyeless sockets. He swerved, just in time for the revenant to brush his elbow, but failing to grab him. He passed the post, his lungs on fire and acid running in his veins. He passed two turns barred by several gates, when in front of him, he discovered swinging doors marked "RECEPTION". A wave of hope passed through him, a delicious wave accompanied by a whip crack: he increased his speed and threw himself against the swinging doors which opened on their own just before he reached them. Taken by surprise, he stumbled out of the corridor, and crashed against an obstacle anchored to the ground. It did not move; it was Raphaël who sprawled on the ground.

He looked ahead and saw a pair of dirty socks in front of his eyes, containing two feet. He screamed and jumped up: the obstacle was a man standing upright, completely motionless. At first, he thought it was a mannequin, dressed in a pair of jeans and a hoodie. Moreover, his position was not natural: his legs were stretched, but his body bent in half as if he wanted to touch his feet. His arms were raised in the air, his fingers stretched in different and improbable angles, as if he was being electrocuted. Even though he did not move an inch in this improbable position, Raphaël immediately knew that it was not a mannequin. Next to him, a man stood with his forehead against the wall, a urine stain at his feet. Not far, a completely naked woman in her twenties was arched, her head and feet on the ground, her breasts pointing to the ceiling. Her face was frozen in an expression mixed with terror and amazement. On his right, a shirtless man sat cross-legged, his head resting on his knees. The fingers of his left hand were eaten away by necrosis, the tips black contrasting with the completely exposed white bone on the rest of the phalanges to the palm, like five decaying lollipops. Another had one foot and one hand on the ground, the other two limbs stretched in the air, a drool thread reaching the ground. A woman leaning against the wall still had her needle in her arm. Several were simply standing, others lying down and curled up, sometimes with three layers of sweaters, sometimes naked.

The room was filled with motionless zombies, frozen in time: Raphaël's heart sank in his chest, facing a scene from his past he thought he would never have to relive.

"Dad?" he said.

He slowly approached a man standing with his back to him. His pants were down around his ankles, revealing his frail and thin legs. His head was pointed towards the sky and his arms arched backward. With a fearful gesture, he placed his hand on the man's shoulder. But at that moment, all the heads turned towards him, staring at him with their vacant faces. His gaze returned to the man he was gripping, and he too was staring. Or rather, he was staring through him, as if lost in his cosmic contemplations: it was indeed his father. How could he be there? It was impossible. His chest began to rise and fall in a frantic rhythm, and he felt each breath spread panic through his body like poison.

Then he ran.

He continued through the room to the other end: he vaguely distinguished the counter to his right, the one he had seen when he first arrived, and the door still lying on the floor. Crossing it, he was surprised to find himself in the external parking lot, facing his car. Barely had he felt the fresh, dust-free air on his face, he was already in the driver's seat, inserting the keys into the car's ignition, as if he had had a lapse. The car started, as if time was leaping forward. His hand was on the gear shift, when he stopped abruptly:

"Emilie..." he said aloud.

He had to go back for her. She was still in the same place, he knew the way now. He just had to get out of the car and go back into the building.

His hand did not move.

He looked up: already, the squad was crossing the parking lot to meet him.

All he had to do was get out, avoid them, go back in, cross five or six rooms.

Risk getting caught.

Risk encountering Thomas again.

Risk stumbling upon the motionless figures.

"All you have to do is not panic," he told himself. "Just go straight, go back for her. No question of running away."

There were three men on the left side of his car, two others on the right.

"Come on, courage."

The guard was shouting at him, held back by a leash on the wrist of the gang leader:

"YOU'LL BE THE ONE ON A LEASH SOON!! YOU'RE GOING TO STAY HERE FOREVER WHILE THEY TAKE CARE OF YOU!!"

The rest of the gang was approaching, they were only five or six meters away.

"You get out, you run. Everything will be alright."

The leader threw the severed head against the car, which crashed onto the hood with a bang, as if he had thrown a brick.

"Don't panic, don't panic..."

He pulled out the butcher's knife, a smile stretching to his ears, and mimed mutilating his groin, then pointed the knife at Raphaël.

"It's now or never, no more doing nothing, I'm getting out now, now I get out and I go."

One of the men was now right next to the driver's door. He tapped the window with his stick like a police officer in a traffic stop.

"Don't panic, don't panic. Think of a plan..."

The man reached for the handle and triggered the mechanism.

He panicked.

The tires screeched on the empty parking lot, and the car sped off, the bumper scraping against the slightly elevated concrete of the very last guard post. Raphaël sped onto the road, swerving between the left and right lanes while dialing Jordane's number. After what seemed like an eternity, she answered.

"Jordane!" he shouted, "we're getting out of here, now!"

## Interlude: Letter to the Police, June 17th

Dear Commissioner Voglth,

I passed by the station late last night, and your light was still on. Were you still poring over my case? I am flattered, yet so angry that the taxes we pay (including mine!) go to funding idiots as incompetent as you! 21 times and you still haven't figured it out! How many more will there be?

Each of my thoughts is invaded by the darkness that dwells within me. This rage and violence swirling! Each time the phone rings, I hope it's you. Each time there's a knock on my door, I pray it's you. The relief I will feel when you finally catch me!

Only the death penalty can free me.

Yet here I am, still here, still killing. I cross a police car, blood still on my hands, but it's as if I am invisible. Your stupidity disgusts me. If I am not caught in the act, you will never catch me. And too bad for you, I leave no witnesses.

Sometimes, I pass by your house. And I think to myself that you wouldn't even be able to stop me even if you found me with my hands around your wife's neck.

The truth is, you can't stop me.

I am violent because society is violent.

I hate women because society hates women.

I am everyone's instrument.

There is a part of me in each of you.

You will not stop me because I am you. Wearing your mask. Carrying your sins.

Let the carnage continue.

P.S.: You'll find a gift in the bedroom at 122 Tilleuls street. It's number 22.

Catch me before number 23.

Cold Blood.

## Chapter VI: The Escape

She was awakened by a sound.

"Mom?" she groaned, "is it time already?"

But it wasn't her mother. The noise was more like the chattering of teeth. And footsteps, slow and steady. She opened her eyes: she was sitting on a toilet, in a stall with the door closed. A dull pain screamed in her head. She couldn't feel her leg, and when she looked down, she saw it had turned a dark purplish color, smeared with dried blood.

The footsteps got closer. The chattering had turned into creaking.

It was when she saw the pair of multicolored striped sneakers appear under the door that she finally remembered where she was.

The shoes stopped right in front of her stall.

Her teeth started chattering too, but with fear.

The door slowly creaked open.

Thomas, towering over her, now had a burned and decomposing face. His teeth were so filed down they almost disappeared under his blackened gums.

"I should have left this damn city when I had the chance," she said in resignation.

"Yes," he said. "But you didn't."

"Go to hell," she spat.

He smiled.

"It's the end of the hunt, it seems. Your friend is gone. But whatever he does, he can't stop what's going to happen tonight..."

He raised his gun at her.

"No," she replied, "he said he would come bac..."

The scream of the gun drowned out her voice, and her head was swept against the wall. Tiles flew everywhere, and the noise echoed for a few seconds after he released the trigger, dying slowly and giving way to silence.

The cartridges continued to roll on the floor and the smoke from the barrel rose to the ceiling as the bloodstain spread under the other stalls. Then, the monster put the gun in the mouth of his host and fired. The top of her head shot forward and crashed against the wall. The rest of the body collapsed on the floor like a bag of cement, the lower jaw still attached to the rest of the body, the tongue aflame. Then, silence returned, and this time, it lasted.

\*\*\*

Raphaël was driving thirty kilometers an hour above the speed limit, tears of rage in his eyes. He wasn't heading towards Jordane, but in the opposite direction: home.

He had called her, asked her to wait for him to come and get her and leave this hell. She had replied that it was their responsibility to prove that something was happening in this town. That innocents had died, and that others would too if they didn't put an end to it all. Raphaël knew all too well that there had been victims; but it wasn't up to them to handle it. They had argued, and the last sentence she said before hanging up had stung him:

"If you still want to run away, that's your problem. I don't need you, so you can go back."

And that's what he did: a U-turn in the middle of the road, and he went back the other way. Who did she think she was, damn it? He was disoriented and furious. Him? Run away? It was rather she who wasn't living in the real world. What was she going to do when she met something like he had seen? Wouldn't she run away then?

He tried to calm down. Already, the light was becoming rarer and the night was beginning to fall. A parasitic thought latched onto his mind: he thought of his ex. He didn't know why, but at a moment like this, he thought of her. How it had ended between them. It wasn't his fault, he had been accepted for a new job on the other side of the region, a great position, but she hadn't wanted to follow him. Well, why was he surprised? She was a dentist, and she had her own practice. With a whole clientele. She wasn't going to drop everything like that. And in fact, he hadn't been sought

out for this position. He had applied. Why? Why had he applied for this offer knowing that it would end his relationship?

He didn't know.

He didn't even know why he was thinking about all this.

He saw on his right the direction sign indicating the next exit for Duli, three hundred meters away. He resisted the urge to swerve and rip the sign off; but he was distracted enough to see the woman standing in the middle of the road at the last moment. When he saw her, it was too late: he could only watch in horror, his mouth mimicking a scream, the girl staring at him. She had a bloody leg, a tourniquet on her thigh. She looked sad, or rather disappointed. Disappointed that he had abandoned her, that he had left without her, to leave her to her fate.

He braked and turned the wheel: but he realized, too late again, that she was no longer there. That she might not have been there to begin with. The car's tires screamed, and the vehicle slid sideways. He overcompensated, and he went off the road: the left side tore the guardrail, and he crashed against a tree, activating the airbags, and sending him into the limbo of unconsciousness.

## Interlude: There's Someone in the House

"Mommy, there's a monster in my room."

Kya was lost in a deep sleep, immersed in a strange dream where she was once again a cashier on weekday evenings during her studies. She was scanning items in an endless stream on a conveyor belt. The monotonous beep sounded as she scanned each barcode.

*BEEP*

"Mommy."

She thought she heard something, a distant voice, but she was so focused on her task: every time she looked to her right, the belt was crammed with items, almost spilling over the sides.

*BEEP*

No matter how fast she worked, she couldn't keep up.

"Mommy, there's a monster in my room."

That voice again, intruding on her, while she had so much to do. If she stopped for even a second, the flood of items would overwhelm her and she'd hear a cacophony of shrill sounds as the barcodes piled up at the scanner.

*BEEP*

But she recognized that voice. She didn't know why, but it was important.

"Mommy, wake up."

*BEEP*

"Honey," she murmured in her sleep. "Go back to bed."

Her dream was losing its grip, she felt herself starting to wake, but she wasn't fully conscious yet.

"Mommy, did you hear what I said?"

"Hmmm..."

She needed to fall back asleep, to finish her shift, to scan all the items.

"Mommy, I said there's a monster in my room, do you hear?"

Kya woke up abruptly: her daughter was standing beside her bed. She recognized her silhouette in the darkness of the room. Her door was ajar, but the house was still dark, all lights off. She started to come to: it was a silly dream, something about a supermarket, but the details were already slipping away, leaking out of her head like a sieve. Without thinking, she put her hand on her daughter's forehead: no fever. Then, she checked her daughter's undergarments: no, she hadn't wet the bed. She felt somewhat relieved, no emergency room visit or bedsheet changing tonight.

"What's wrong, little one?"

"There's a monster in my closet," she repeated.

Kya sighed: this was the third time she had pulled this stunt. It had started one or two weeks earlier. It was normal for a child her age to imagine things, but Kya thought she was done getting up at night to tend to her. At seven, she hoped she could finally sleep through the nights. The previous two times, she had gotten up, gone to her room, and had to search it thoroughly before her daughter could fall back asleep.

"Monsters don't exist," she said, turning over in her duvet. "Go back to bed."

"But mommy..." she protested.

"No buts, Clara, go back to bed, that's final. There's nothing in your room, I promise you."

Then she tried to fall back asleep. She clung to her dream, it seemed like she was a student in it, to maybe return to it more quickly. But she felt Clara's presence behind her. She heard her breathing, saw that she was stunned and didn't dare to protest any more. But she also didn't dare to go back to her room either.

"Fine," Kya said with a hint of anger in her voice. "I'll check, but this is the last time."

"Yes..."



"If we take a look and there's nothing, you'll never bother me with these stories again, got it?"

"Yes..."

She sighed and turned on her bedside lamp. She turned to her daughter, and her heart tightened: she really looked scared. She clung to her pajamas as if holding back from going to the bathroom.

"Do you need to pee, honey?"

She shook her head in response. She seemed scared, and Kya wondered if she should consider taking her to a psychologist. Maybe she was having night terrors, and it would be good to address the problem before it became ingrained.

She got up, and Clara reached out her arms to be picked up. Kya obliged, and left the room carrying her daughter, her hands firmly around her neck, her face buried in her shoulder. She turned on the hallway light and headed towards the house's hall: Clara's room was right in front, its door open, and her nightlight casting a reddish glow that dimly lit the room. She was about to enter, but something caught her attention: to her right, at the end of the hallway, was the kitchen. And in the kitchen, the pantry door was slightly open, she could even see it in the dark. The nearly invisible white door was surrounded by a stark black halo, a sign that she had left it ajar. Was that possible? Normally, she kept it closed. Or was it Clara? But why? She hesitated to go close it, but she was too tired to make the detour. She wanted to quickly check Clara's room, then go back to bed before her alarm went off at six-thirty.

She turned to her left, towards the front door: the alarm light was blinking green, a sign that no one had broken in. She felt reassured: since her divorce, she had been alone in this big house - or with Clara every other week, who wasn't exactly a bodyguard, even if she knew how to be clingy - and she didn't feel entirely safe. She had found a company that installed alarm systems, and it was the owner himself who had come to do the work. A certain Richard, very charming. Since then, she had been able to sleep soundly again.

She entered the room and set Clara down on the floor.

"Alright," she said, "we're going to look, and we're going to find nothing. You are safe in your room. There are no monsters, nothing at all."

"But..." she began.

"No buts! Maybe if your room was tidier, you wouldn't see shapes everywhere!"

Clara looked down, and Kya started her search, eager to get back to bed. She began with the basics: she knelt down and peered under the bed.

"Nothing here," she said.

She got up, wincing as her knees cracked, and headed towards the teepee. It was a tipi with a white cloth featuring typical - and probably caricatured - Native American patterns. She parted the curtain, but found only a pile of stuffed animals. She noticed that some had missed her laundry rounds for a while, and mentally noted to take care of them the next day.

"Nothing here either."

She crossed the room to the last place a "monster" could be: the wardrobe. It was wide open, and one of her jackets had fallen to the floor.

"Mommy!" panicked Clara as Kya was about to enter.

She had picked up one of her stuffed animals and was sucking her thumb, strangling it in her arm.

"What?"

"The monster was in there..."

Her gaze returned to the wardrobe: there was nothing here, except a jacket that Clara had knocked down. She bent over to pick it up, and hung it back on its hanger. Once inside the wardrobe, she looked around: of course, there was nothing.

"And there you have it," she said, emerging from the closet, "no monster. Nowhere."

"But mommy, it was right there," she complained. "It was watching me sleep!"

"That's enough!" she began to get angry. "You're too old to believe in such things! It's just your imagination!"

She closed the wardrobe door a bit louder than intended, and Clara jumped.

"Go to bed now! I don't want to hear another word."

Her daughter complied silently. She burrowed under her comforter, her stuffed animal still clutched tightly.

"Goodnight," Kya said, a bit too sternly.

"Goodnight," Clara replied almost inaudibly, looking at the wall.

Kya stood motionless for a moment, then left the room, closing the door behind her. She took a deep breath, then returned to her own bed. Despite herself, she cast a fleeting glance towards the pantry: the door was still ajar. But she continued on, turning off the hallway light behind her, then went back to bed. She glanced at her clock radio: it was 2:30 in the morning. Just four more hours of sleep before another day...

She thought she was too agitated to fall asleep, but she immediately plunged into the arms of Morpheus. She sank into a deep, dark, dreamless sleep. Just unconsciousness. It seemed like all the lights had gone out in her brain, as she floated in nonexistence. It felt like an eternity, as if she was dead, waiting to be reborn. No thoughts, no sensations, just emptiness. She would wake up the next day, to the sound of the alarm.

Then, something.

A sensation crept over her. It was the only thing she could perceive. An unpleasant feeling. She wanted to keep sleeping, but the sensation became more and more insistent. Something uncomfortable. A danger. A presence. Yes, that was it: she felt like she was being watched.

She opened her eyes wide, waking up instantly. The clock radio, in front of her face, read 3:15. A shiver ran through her: she indeed felt a presence in the room. It was still dark around her, but she slowly turned her head: a man stood at the foot of her bed. Just a silhouette in the dim light, motionless, but he was there.

Her lungs inhaled deeply, ready to scream, to wake the dead; but before she could open her mouth, the shadow moved its hand and an object streaked through the darkness with a silver reflection. She froze.

"If you scream, I'll slit your daughter's throat from ear to ear," the man simply said.

Kya exhaled involuntarily, without a sound. Her body paralyzed.

"Where are your car keys?" he continued calmly.

Kya didn't know what to say. She had heard him perfectly, but she simply couldn't understand what he meant, even by putting the words together.

"Your car," he repeated. "Give me the keys, and I'll leave without hurting anyone. Do you understand?"

"A burglar," she managed to formulate in her head. She knew, from her job, that the best thing to do was to comply. She would give him her car, and he would leave. And then, she would call the police. She didn't think for a moment about the alarm, the "monster" her daughter had seen, nor that the voice seemed almost familiar. For now, she only thought about the little white and pink ceramic pot that Clara had made her in kindergarten, for Mother's Day.

"The white pot in the kitchen," she finally said.

"Good," he replied.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out something she couldn't make out. Then he approached, circling the bed adeptly in the dark. Kya wanted to scream, but she restrained herself. She nearly sat up and crawled to the back of her bed to try to get away. He came to her bedside and threw the object in front of her.

"Tie your hands behind your back," he ordered, "wait until I'm gone, count to a hundred, and only then call the police."

Her eyes fell on the object in question: it was a piece of rope. Two loops were already prepared, she just had to slip them on and tighten. From there, she noticed that the weapon she had taken for a butcher's knife, with its silver reflection, was actually a large screwdriver. She looked up: the man was wearing a black hood. She could only see his blue eyes, a calm and cold gaze, that was driving her completely insane. Why was he so calm? He wore a nondescript sweater, and equally nondescript work pants, except that they had a lot of pockets.

He pointed his weapon at her, seeming to lose patience.

Without time to think, she complied. She took the rope, passed her hands behind her back, and slipped her hands into the loops. Her assailant was so calm, so fluid, that she felt like she was going through a formality. That if she did everything he said, everything would be fine.

He lunged at her, and she nearly screamed, but he simply moved behind her to tighten the knot. The string cut into her hands, lacerating her flesh. She grimaced in pain, but said nothing: "God please let Clara sleep, please let her wake up tomorrow and not be involved in all this, God I beg you..."

To her surprise, he flipped her onto her stomach with a firm motion. Her head crashed into the pillow. He grabbed her

legs, and a few seconds later, she felt another string compress her ankles.

“Hey!” she protested.

“Shut up,” he simply replied.

He tightened the knots to the maximum, leaving her bound on her bed, and then simply left the room.

“He’s going to take the car,” she thought. “He’s going to steal my car, and he’ll leave. I’ll never see him again. I’ll call the police, and tomorrow I’ll take a taxi to work. I’ll take Clara to school by taxi, she’ll like that. And then I’ll go to work, as if nothing happened.”

She imagined hearing his footsteps heading towards the kitchen, she perfectly imagined the shrill sound of the keys clashing as he reached into the pot to search. She even imagined the sound of the pot breaking on the floor; but all she heard was the front door of the house opening and closing. Puzzled, she listened, her cheek against the cushion, her ankles and wrists on fire: nothing more.

She wondered if she should get up. If she should call for help. But what if it was a trap? And if he was still hiding in the house, ready to pounce on her if she left the room, or if she screamed? Should she count to a hundred, maybe? Maybe it was over, after all, maybe he had left?

But she didn’t have time to start counting, when she heard the door open again. Footsteps moved somewhere in the house. Heavy, determined steps. She heard a muffled sob:

“Clara?!” she screamed despite herself. “Clara!!”

Then the man reappeared in her room with a bang: in one hand, he carried what seemed to be a toolbox. In the other, he carried Clara. She was bound, just like her, and had a gag in her mouth. The man put the toolbox on the floor and threw the little girl into a corner. She crashed to the floor with a muffled cry, and Kya screamed even louder. The man jumped on the lawyer and stuffed a gag in her mouth to silence her. He had removed his hood, and his face was inches from hers. He had crazy eyes, a predator’s look. And she finally recognized him. She wanted to scream, but it was too late.

“We’re going to have some fun,” the man said, “and your daughter is going to watch everything.”

And the night finally began.

## Chapter VII: The Taxi

Jordane sat on a bench near the Duli police station, her head pulsing with waves of pain, the bump from her temple hitting a wall still not subsided. She stared blankly at the old "FOR SALE" sign on the front of a large store but thought of Inès. Her letter was true: there were indeed monsters here. She didn't know how it was possible, but she had witnessed it. A wolf bringing back voices from beyond the grave, no less. But was he the only one, or were there others? He had spoken of a human, who was involved in this story...

Then there was the prison riot. The various pieces of information she had gathered suggested nothing more than an outbreak of violence from prisoners tired of their confinement. Maybe that girl they had met was right, that she was indeed haunted. Perhaps even like the mine accident, something had driven a prisoner to start the slaughter.

What would Raphaël find there? Was he in danger?

"No," she thought, "it's Raphaël. He knows how to handle himself, nothing will happen to him."

And like her, he was an investigator: their mission is to unveil the truth, unmask impostures, and for the first time, the stakes were much higher than a simple article. Who knows how long the residents of Duli had been suffering from these evils, how many had already died at the claws of these monsters, and how many more would succumb without anyone taking interest? Someone needed to put this town under the spotlight, it was the only way to save its inhabitants. She had to find Inès; it was her best lead: she hoped to find necessary information at her last known place of employment. And she had to admit that the circumstances of the closure of the palace of the strange were at least suspicious. The collapse of a mine, a massacre in the enclosed space of a prison, and now a mysterious accident on the opening day. What was the extent of the accident? The cause?

Her instinct told her that something had whispered in a prisoner's ear just before the riot, like with the mine. And that something had also whispered in someone's ear during the park opening, and that was precisely the accident. Except this time, it had been hushed up. Were there any deaths? How many? What did they succumb to? The owner must have had the means to silence the newspapers. This Oswald... He inspired no confidence in her: and that was exactly why she had to dig into his affairs before meeting him. That way, she could have the upper hand when she turned the conversation into an interrogation.

She watched a pickup approaching her direction, reminding her that she needed to find a taxi. It parked not far from her, in the police station parking lot. The door opened, and the driver unfolded himself from the vehicle, the roof barely reaching his shoulders: it didn't take long for her to recognize the giant she had met the previous day at the café. Today, he wore a red plaid lumberjack shirt tucked into his jeans. He bent over to pick up an object from the passenger seat and headed towards the sidewalk, closing the old pickup's door: Jordane noticed his suede moccasins that completely broke his look, and she smiled.

The man headed towards the bulletin board, whistling absent-mindedly, and she was taken aback when she realized he was holding a rolled-up paper. He unrolled it sharply and moved existing thumbtacks to post it on one of the few remaining blank spaces on the board of ghostly looking faces. She approached to peek at the flyer: the man noticed her, seemed to freeze for a moment, as if thinking, then started a conversation:

"Myrtille, my neighbor's cat," he said.

The poster showed a photo of a black cat grimacing at the camera. Below, a small text described the animal's dimensions, along with a touching paragraph about its playful nature and soft fur inviting caresses. Under the title "LOST CAT," a modest reward was offered for its return.

"Madame Rosalie can't get around much these days, I promised I'd help her find her beast."

His smile was warm and somewhat charming, and she couldn't help but return it:

"That's very kind of you," she said, "Madame Rosalie is lucky to have a neighbor she can count on."

"It's really nothing," he replied, blushing. "If we don't help each other as human beings, what's left for us?"

She nodded, but her smile had faded: a feeling seized her, like an instinct, and she became acutely aware of the number of faces staring at her from the bulletin board. It seemed like they were trying to speak to her, to warn her: she realized the number of disappearances this town had swallowed, and for a moment, she almost wanted to flee.

"It's sad, all these missing people," he interrupted, pulling her out of her reverie. "Strange times."

She gathered her thoughts, and she saw that he was pointing at the bulletin board in front of them. His eyes were bright blue.

"Yes," she finally replied, "but I think it's more a problem of the place than the time."

"What do you mean?"

"It's the first time I've seen a town with so many unresolved cases," she continued, "on top of such a loaded history."

He shrugged:

"I don't know, I don't live here. I have some construction sites around, but it's rare. I look at the work and the amount on the check. But I know a lot of people pass through here, so I brought a poster."

"You're a worker?"

"I'm an entrepreneur," he corrected. "I have employees who do the work for me, until they realize I'm not much use except to cash the check. My official title is business manager, but I've been called the 'do-nothing manager' for a long time."

He burst into natural laughter, and she could only laugh in return.

"But I talk, I talk," he continued, "but you, are you from around here?"

"No," she said. "Tales from the Crypt, do you know it?"

He searched his memory, stroking the corner of his mustache:

"No, I don't think so."

"It's a magazine, I publish articles on paranormal phenomena, unsolved mysteries."

"Ah yes?" he said, "and you're well served here?"

"Quite," she answered seriously. "Do you know the story of Inès?"

"Who?"

"Never mind, apparently it's a well-kept secret by the locals."

"I see," he chuckled, "but nothing that can stop you so easily, am I wrong?"

"Exactly," she said, feeling a surge of strength. "Not much can stop me."

"I like that attitude," he exclaimed. "Nobody wants to face their demons, so someone has to do it for them, right?"

This remark made her reflect: yes, that was exactly it. The inhabitants of Duli lived under the influence of their demons, and instead of fighting, they chose to remain unaware. How could the miner have lived all those years in that network of dark galleries, instead of working to find a way out? Ironically, the only place where he thought himself safe was evidently his lair. The same went for Ed, who had experienced a traumatic event in the forest, said it was hard for him to be there, so why had he agreed to accompany them? And Inès, how could she have endured so much bullying, stayed in the town where she was sure she had seen a monster - and Jordane was now convinced of it too - instead of fleeing?

Indeed, she was the only one who could save them. Or at least, to open their eyes.

"That's exactly it," she finally said.

"And your friend," he continued, "he's not with you?"

She raised her eyebrows, somewhat taken aback. He laughed and made an apologetic gesture:

"Guilty as charged, I recognized you: the girl who doesn't watch where she's going in cafes!"

She recalled the scene, bumping into him as she left the day before.

"Yes," she said, a bit embarrassed, "it's not like me to be so distracted. My friend has gone on an errand for me, he should meet up with me later."

"I understand," he said, "demons never sleep."

"You got it," she concluded. "Speaking of which, I should already be on my way, I can only hope there are taxis in this town."

"Where does your investigation take you, if I may ask? Just to know which places to avoid if I want to live a long life."

She hesitated for a moment: the stranger was warm, and despite his large size and imposing physique, he seemed harmless. He radiated no aggression, no ego; but his questions seemed to slide off him, and in the end, during this exchange, she had revealed more than he had. Had she come across someone more skilled than her at gathering

information? She smiled at the thought.

“Were you present during the opening of the Palace of the Strange, about ten years ago?”

Again, he took a thoughtful look and stroked his mustache between his thumb and index finger of his left hand: she briefly spotted a wedding ring on his ring finger, and was surprised to feel disappointed - what was she thinking, he was at least ten years older than her...

“You mean the old abandoned fairground, about twenty kilometers away? Sure, that place is a bit creepy. Is that where you’re going?”

“Yes,” she said. “The owner seems quite shady.”

He shrugged again, looking into the void. Then, he returned from his imaginary world and clapped his hand into his palm, as if he had a revelation:

“But of course, what an idiot!”

She raised an eyebrow.

“I actually have to pass by there, I have some equipment to pick up at the sawmill right in front. It’s barely a kilometer before, it wouldn’t be a big detour to drop you off. If your friend meets you there, and he has a car, I mean, I’ll drop you off and go back to my business.”

Jordane pursed her lips: was she going to get into a car with someone she had just met? She felt rather good about him, he had been very pleasant. The alternative was to look for a taxi, but would she even find one? And there, too, she would end up with a perfect stranger. It was a short trip, twenty little kilometers. Just this morning, she had survived much worse than that. She weighed the pros and cons, but her caution lost the duel:

“Alright,” she said, “let me just tell my friend.”

“Great,” he said, “I’ll wait for you in the car.”

“At least,” she thought, “if I get slaughtered, Raphaël might remember what he looks like. Or else, my head will end up plastered on that damn bulletin board, on top of another long-forgotten resident. And one day, a few years later, or even months, someone else will be posted over my portrait.”

She pulled out her phone while the man got into his pickup. One ring, then two, then three: damn, he must be busy. Her heart pinched at the thought that he could be more than just busy, but she pushed that thought away: she needed to stay focused on her goals, he would join her in due time. She started writing him a message, searching for words while staring into space, when something caught her attention.

She was looking at the bulletin board, and something had caught her eye. A somewhat different poster from the others. She absentmindedly put her phone in the back pocket of her pants and approached the wall. She tore off an old poster and looked at it in horror: there was no photo on the piece of paper, no description, no reward. It was a drawing. A sketch of a face. The man depicted on the paper had rough features, but his piercing eyes were very clear, and especially his smile. A carnivorous smile she had seen before. Unlike all the other posters, the title was not “MISSING,” but: “HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?”. And below, in smaller font: “IF HE APPEARS IN YOUR DREAMS, FLEE BEFORE IT’S TOO LATE.”

Yes, that was it: it was the face she had seen in her nightmare. The one who watched her and laughed. The sketch was very crude, but her heart squeezed in her chest, indicating there was indeed something.

The pickup started next to her, and she jumped. The man questioned her with his eyes from his seat, and Jordane, disconcerted, crumpled the paper and threw it in a trash can. Disturbed, she approached the car, her mind wandering: was it a coincidence? It had to be. It was impossible otherwise. How could she have recognized that face just from a dream? Her mind must have played tricks on her.

She tried to chase that thought from her head: there was no point in tormenting herself with this information, better to focus on her current task, the Palace of the Strange.

“And if I dream of him again tonight? What if it’s really him?” She forced herself to sweep away this parasitic thought.

She reached the elevated vehicle, opened the door, and hoisted herself into the passenger seat.

“By the way,” she said, “we haven’t introduced ourselves. I’m Jordane.”

The man engaged a gear, and turned his head towards her with an unexpectedly serious look: “I’m Richard, like my grandfather.”

The engine roared, and the vehicle, emblazoned “DAGARD ENTERPRISE,” slowly moved along the main street, heading towards the north exit of the town.



## Interlude: All things come to those who wait

Richard parked in an outlying lot of the downtown area, where only a few wrecks lingered. He had taken his wife's car for his outing; his name wasn't emblazoned in red letters on the side of the vehicle, making it more discreet. He got out, cracking his back and grimacing involuntarily: this damn sedan was much lower than his pick-up. He breathed in the air of Duli with disgust: it felt like arriving at a dump. It reeked of rot and mustiness. This city was a sad, empty shell, but that's exactly why he had come: it was full of transients, and even the locals seemed forgotten by society.

Easy prey.

He headed towards the parking meter, and although he was convinced that no officer had checked it in the last five years, he bought a ticket by sliding some coins in: people like him had been caught before over such small details, but nothing was trivial to him. Richard was meticulous. He placed the ticket under the windshield - an hour, more than enough for love at first sight - and set off into the deserted streets.

He passed a few shops with lights out, an almost empty children's park, save for a homeless person sleeping on the slide, an empty wine bottle at his feet, but he paid little mind.

His mind was wandering.

No, that wasn't it, let's be honest.

His fantasies were tearing him apart.

He had lost control. His sick mind craved blood. He was driven only by a sinister rhythm beating in his skull like the drums of Viking longships: "**KILL... KILL... KILL... KILL...**"

He needed to taste it again, like a junkie in withdrawal. To calm his thoughts, his imagination, it was really time to start again. He knew the next one would only satisfy him for a while. Sure, it would be ecstasy: he knew exactly what he wanted, how he wanted it. He would take incredible pleasure in executing his fantasies. Then, for a while, he could relive the echoes of that magical experience through the little talisman he would retrieve. The memory. He never knew what would work, but when he saw it, he knew it was right. An ID card, a necklace, a lighter. The memory was a relic, calling to him as soon as he saw it. But in the end, it would all fall flat. The void would return. The void that ate away at him like acid, then the void would make room for his fantasies. They would fill his mind again to saturation, as was the case that day. And then, he would have to kill again. To regain some control. Richard passed by a café window, and stopped dead: there she was.

He watched the girl talking with someone, seated at a table. She had magnificent smooth chestnut hair, sparkling green eyes, and a posture so straight, like a doll. She was sublime. Her aura seemed to shine in the dull café, almost blinding him. It was her, no doubt. He noticed the man with her starting to stand up, then, instinctively, he pushed through the heavy glass door. He passed the boy without even seeing him. The girl stood up, and he deliberately got in her way.

"Sorry," she said after they bumped into each other.

His eyes were drawn to an object almost hiding under the collar of her blouse: the little thing shone in the dimness of her cleavage. Even more, it seemed to emit a light that illuminated far beyond the room, like a relic endowed with magical powers. A silver cross.

He absolutely had to have it.

"No worries, miss," he retorted, "it's my fault: I'm too busy looking at door frames and chandeliers to watch where I'm going..."

This comment seemed to make her nervous, and she replied in a low tone:

"Good evening."

She left, and her sweet perfume lingered in his nose for a moment longer: no doubt, this girl was going to become his darling number twenty-three.

## Chapter VIII: Darling Number Twenty-Three

"And then," Richard laughed, "this time it's my daughter coming to me saying, 'Daddy, daddy! I saw the ghost too! The church is haunted!' So, I put on my shoes, cross the street, and from a distance, through a parish room window, I see something white flapping. I cross the road, nearly getting run over three times by the morning traffic, and when I arrive, I see this ghostly, white figure bobbing up and down..."

Jordane also laughed, swayed by Richard's steering adjustments to keep the car on the straight path, using her hands to mimic the scene.

"...I press my face against the window, and then the ghost turns around abruptly to scold me: 'Hey there, you! Is it nice to spy on people in their homes?' And there, I recognize the priest in his white sermon robe, with a gym exercise video on his TV!"

She burst into laughter, gripping the door handle as if she might fall.

"Oh my gosh," he shook his head, "I heard about that story for a while... I had solved the mystery of the church ghost that scared all the neighborhood kids, but I had to work hard to make the parents, and especially that old priest, understand that I wasn't some kind of voyeur..."

"See," she replied, wiping her eyes, "you could be hired for 'Tales from the Crypt', you'd make some very entertaining articles."

"I don't think so," he said, "it was just because my two brats were bothering me about it all day long, otherwise I wouldn't have paid it any attention for a second."

She nodded slightly: her driver seemed the type to be level-headed and down-to-earth.

"Have kids..." he added, shaking his head, which made Jordane laugh even harder.

"Come on," she said, "admit they are your rays of sunshine!"

To her surprise, he shrugged:

"My two kids are fantastic," he said, looking at the road, "I love taking them everywhere and do everything I can to give them the keys to a beautiful life. But once the initial euphoria wears off, you think it might have been better not to have them, it's too much stress and work."

Jordane fell silent: she thought about her parents, wondering if they had her just for the sake of having her. If they had done what their parents did, and their parents before them, just to continue the tradition. Or was it just the biological clock ticking too loudly? Either way, when she thought about their lack of emotional investment, she wondered if sometimes they didn't think like him.

"But I'm sure your parents adore you," he said, as if reading her thoughts.

She started, then replied more sharply than she intended:

"If that was the case, they wouldn't have gotten rid of me by sending me to a boarding school."

"I'm sorry," he replied. "Sometimes parents want to fit their children into boxes, but the more you force, the less it fits."

She snorted: it resonated quite well with what her own parents had tried to do.

"And you, what box are you trying to fit yours into?"

She immediately regretted what she had just said, realizing she had thrown a jab at a guy who had kindly agreed to take her in his car without asking for anything in return. But instead of getting angry, he simply answered the question:

"None, my kids will do whatever they want to do."

She pondered his words, wondering if he was an open-minded father, or if he felt nothing at all for his children. She tried to focus on the road, the tired asphalt jolting the pick-up over its cracks, the tall pines surrounding them on each side, some leafless, with gray trunks. She thought back to her parents despite herself. How long had she cut them out of her life? Eight years. As soon as she could, she had left.

"I'm sure your parents read your articles and feel proud of you, even if many find it hard to say."

She burst into sincere laughter:

"I seriously doubt that, sometimes I even wonder if I didn't choose this profession just to annoy them."

This time, it was he who laughed out loud.

"Me too, when I was young, my parents didn't understand me at all. I kept my hobbies to myself, like a little secret garden. Even today, I like to keep a bit of privacy."

He turned right at an intersection, seemingly taking them deeper into the dense forest. The road was still wide enough for trucks carrying logs, which reassured her a bit, but she was starting to look forward to reaching their destination. To find what? She didn't even know.

"Anyway," he said after a silence, "fortunately, there are still people like you and your friend who think of others. But what's actually going on here?"

She took a moment to think about what she was going to say: if she told him about monsters, about little voices in the mine, he would stop immediately and leave her on the side of the road. Or maybe he would believe her: he didn't live here, he might be a bit more neutral. He might have seen things, too. But she judged it wiser to keep her cards close to her chest for now.

"All these disappearances, these accidents over the years, I find them a bit too suspicious."

"You mean the mine, right? I've heard of it. You think they're not accidents?"

"Yes, sort of."

"And the police?"

"They don't care at all. They do the bare minimum."

"Yeah," he laughed, "they're all idiots. They wouldn't be able to catch a killer if he waved a knife under their noses. So there's a criminal in Duli?"

"Not exactly," she said. "I get the impression that the residents are suffering from a malady."

Strangely, Jordane thought she saw relief on his face, a shadow that passed so quickly she wondered if she had imagined it.

"Some kind of collective hysteria?"

"If you like," she said. "Have you never seen anything strange in this town?"

"No, not since the pastor doing his exercise," he laughed.

He seemed sincere, and Jordane wondered if she could trust him, or if he would think her crazy for talking about monsters.

"Apparently, just before the mine accident, the workers heard voices. Just before the prison riot a few years later, it seems the inmates saw things, too. And I want to know what happened at the opening of the Palace of the Strange. What was so bad that it was closed, and especially what silenced the press?"

"Interesting," he replied, "it'll make a sensational article, no doubt. And your friend, he went to the prison area?"

The man's perceptiveness should have raised an alarm in her head, but she was too busy trying to beat around the bush without admitting she thought the town was really haunted. Raphaël would call her soon, and he would tell her he saw a monster there, and they had to go to the Palace to follow Inès' trail.

"Yes," she finally said.

"Well, you have to be pretty brave to go alone to places like that. If someone asked me to explore an abandoned prison, I think I'd park, my knees would be knocking, I'd start the car fast and say 'I didn't see or hear anything, sorry, better luck next time.'"

"I have faith in Raphaël," she said. "Even if he needs a bit of a push, he wouldn't shy away from danger."

But the sound of this sentence had a bitter aftertaste, lingering in her mouth: back in the mine, when they had fallen, she had convinced him to look for a way out; he had almost preferred to stay put. Once they had managed to escape, he wanted to give up and go home. If it hadn't been for her, he would have been home long ago; but she was not him. Inès had asked for her help, she might even be in danger. She had tried to warn the locals, but no one listened: something malicious lived here, and it was her that Inès had called for help. Jordane found herself wondering if Raphaël was fierce enough to follow a trail, wherever it might lead. What if he missed something she would have noticed? She now regretted sending him alone, not being there to search in her own way. She started to fear missing clues, and the lack of control over the situation brought a surge of heat – was it anger?

No, she trusted him, she had just said so.

"Yes," she repeated, "if there's something there, he'll find it."

"That's good," said Richard, who almost seemed amused, "I had a lot of trouble when I started my company. I had to let the employees work, and all I wanted was to be behind them, breathing down their necks to see if the work was done right. It's not easy to delegate, you always feel like you know better. The worst is when you find a trustworthy guy, and then he quits. It always hurts a bit."

She nodded silently: for a moment, she imagined Raphaël handing in his resignation, leaving without her, leaving her alone in her predicament. But she pushed the thought away.

"We're here," suddenly said Richard.

Jordane looked up and saw a wide dirt trail plunging into the forest to their right. Richard signaled, even though they were alone on the road - they hadn't crossed paths with anyone since they left - and turned. The tires screeched on the gravel, and they arrived in front of a gated fence, secured with a large padlock. Richard stopped the car and got out. Jordane stayed inside, looking at the heavy gate that didn't seem to move often. A sign hung on the gate read 'PRIVATE PROPERTY - DO NOT ENTER', another displayed a safety helmet. She heard Richard walk around the pickup, and felt the vehicle sink as he climbed onto the back. She glanced at the rearview mirror: the window at the back of the cabin was closed with a cover, probably to prevent curious eyes from seeing the contents of the bed if the pickup had its cabin installed. She wanted to pull the cover to see what he was doing, but refrained. She heard a toolbox open, then someone rummaging through tools. She jumped when a wrench fell with a dull sound onto the bed, followed by Richard's loud "Damn." He continued for a few more seconds, then she felt the pickup sway as he closed the box and stood up. He jumped off the side, then slowly headed towards the front, passenger side. Jordane saw him arrive from the right mirror: she could only see his left hand, which was closed around a small object. He reached her level and passed her, brushing his hand against hers on the outside of the door.

She shivered.

He positioned himself in front of the gate and inserted the object he was holding into the padlock. He had to force it before it finally opened with a shrill squeak. A taste of rusty copper instantly filled Jordane's mouth. He dropped the chain to the ground and pushed the gate aside. Behind it, there was only a large dirt parking lot filled with sawdust and bordered by piles of dry logs. Richard returned and resumed his seat at the wheel.

"The amusement park is that way," he said, pointing to the dense forest, about a kilometer behind those trees. "I'll just take a few minutes to gather my equipment, then we'll get there quickly."

"Alright," Jordane replied.

He restarted the car and drove down the path, skirting the deserted parking lot. The road formed a bend darkened by trees, with a few sickly ones looking like ghostly white figures watching from afar. Driving slowly to avoid potholes, they arrived a few meters later in front of the sawmill: the large rusted sheet metal hangar housed imposing machines for stripping bark, cutting wood. Heavy chains hung here and there, discs the size of Jordane, turned orange by the rain, were stacked against piles of logs. The place was deserted, layers of sawdust turning into humus.

He stopped near the entrance and turned off the engine. He saw Jordane, who seemed thoughtful beside him.

"Worried?" he asked.

"Why?" she replied sincerely.

He inhaled through his teeth, as if searching for the right words without offending her; but his expression seemed almost insincere.

"About sending your friend off on his own."

The remark hit her like a slap, and her face turned red. A spike of anger invaded her, but it was mostly shame she felt, to her surprise.

"Not at all!" she protested a bit too loudly. "He agreed to go, and we've always done it this way! He always grumbles a bit, but he gets through in the end."

"I understand," he assured her, "but for example, I avoid leaving my most complicated projects to my less determined employees. And I get the impression that in your duo, it's you who represent that quality."

She wanted to deny his words, but her mouth stayed open without making a sound: what did he mean by that? Yes, it was true that Raphaël always kept one foot out, to be sure he could drop the hot potato if there was trouble. It was present in all aspects of his life, she had noticed it a long time ago. Just the story with his ex-girlfriend: they made a great couple, but as soon as it got too serious for him, he made up this ridiculous story about a promotion and moving away. He preferred to flee rather than take the risk of a lasting relationship. As a friend, she had pointed it out to him, pushed him to call her back, but he just diverted the subject with a joke, or simply shrugged and muttered a lame excuse to land on his feet.

Initially, he didn't want to go to the prison. It was the same in the mine: he only thought about returning. Didn't he understand the importance of the situation? Human lives were at stake: when would the next disaster strike? What monster was still hidden somewhere, waiting for the opportunity to attack? And Inès. She had called her for help, *her*. It counted. It had to count. Every piece of the puzzle was important, and if he didn't do his part, if she couldn't count on him, she wouldn't make it.

"I trust him," she said in a flat tone.

He nodded absentmindedly, and his detached reaction infuriated her, and she wanted to slap him. Who was he to throw her into these painful reflections, and act as if he was only talking about the weather?

"You can stay in the car if you want," he said curtly.

She was so surprised by his dry tone that she remained silent while he opened the door and walked towards the building with a casual stride. She barely noticed that he now wore a small tool pouch strapped to his waist, so furious was she.

"How dare he ask if I'm worried about sending him off alone? He said yes, I just asked him."

"I should have gone with him, I'm sure that riot didn't break out on its own."

Thoughts swirled in her head like bats, their enraged fangs injecting the poison of doubt into her mind with each pass. She tried to focus on something else but failed to settle on a single thought, caught in a rage whose source she didn't understand. She didn't even notice that the place had been abandoned for years, that no construction had taken place here in ages. She failed to realize that the only tire tracks on the dirt path came from the same vehicle. Her vision was clouded by frustration, fixated on how Richard had unfairly suggested she was asking too much of Raphaël. Someone had called for her help, and she couldn't even find them. She had been considered crazy all her life, and if she couldn't prove she was right, no one would.

"Always do what's right."

One of Father Donovan's favorite sayings came back to her, eliciting a nervous laugh. The School of Good Conduct was far behind her, but apparently not far enough.

Gradually, Jordane returned to reality after getting lost in her thoughts: how long had Richard been gone? Ten minutes? The door to the sawmill offices was still open, but still no sign of life. She hesitated to leave the car but decided first to take a quick look at her driver's vehicle while he was away. Just a precaution. She opened the glove compartment: it was perfectly orderly, containing all the documents of the pickup, as well as a reserve of bulbs. She looked down: even the floor mat at her feet was spotless. Odd for a construction truck, but it probably showed that good old Richard was a neat freak. She then reached into the door pocket, also impeccably clean. She lowered the driver's sun visor and pulled out an old photo: it showed Richard, a bit younger, with a little girl on his shoulders, and a much smaller woman, a baby in her arms. That must surely be Mrs. Richard and their two children. This family photo full of smiles and sparkling eyes reassured her about the character.

She settled back into her seat, but it was becoming increasingly uncomfortable: it wasn't her forte to sit idle. She needed to be in action, always productive. Every time she sat on a couch, or turned on the TV, a small voice would sneak into her head: "Are you sure you don't have anything more useful to do? Are you up to date with your daily tasks? Yes? Then start getting ahead for tomorrow..." and she would sigh internally before getting back to work. Once, she was watching a movie, sprawled on her couch with a fever and a runny nose, when Raphaël had shown up at her place with a tray of sushi and a box of painkillers. She had jumped, and in a reflex, turned off the TV before rushing to the kitchen to start the previous day's overdue dishes. When he came into the room to greet her, she pretended to look better and refused the painkillers, only taking the sushi.

Today, the little voice was back: her fingers itched, her mind looped, and she heard: "What are you doing right now? Get to work, come on! You have a million things to do!"

She couldn't continue sitting here, so she got out. The sun was still high in the sky, but the air was beginning to cool. The place was perfectly calm: no car sounds, no rustling leaves in the forest disturbing the immobile trees. She took a few steps, breaking the heavy silence with her shoes on the gravel covering the road. She glanced at the still-open door, inviting her to enter; however, she headed towards the back of the pickup instead. She climbed onto the back with great difficulty, nearly tearing the back of her pants as she lifted her leg so high: against the back of the cabin was a brand-new red toolbox. She approached, grimacing as her steps made the pickup's suspensions squeak, then tried to open the box: locked.

"Typical," she thought, "Mr. Richard likes his things in order."

She jumped off the pickup, almost sprawling on the ground, and pondered her next move as the dust cloud at her feet slowly dissipated: she could try to walk to the Palace of the Strange, but she didn't want to follow the road for God knows how many more kilometers. She could also go back to the car and wait for Richard's return: no, she needed to be proactive. She patted her palms against her thighs and headed towards the entrance of the sawmill.



The power must have been cut in the premises, as it was dark, very dark.

“Richard?” she called.

No answer.

She continued forward: directly to her left, a small staircase went up at a right angle with a “MANAGEMENT” sign, but she assumed Richard would be more likely in the workshop. To her right, a closed door led to the loading area.

Through the glass, she managed to make out “EMPLOYEES ONLY” written in red letters on the thin sheet of paper. She continued, calling him again: the silence was total in the abandoned premises. What kind of work could he have here? Or was he recovering unused raw materials? She didn’t know, but she wouldn’t fail to ask him.

She arrived in front of a break room: a dozen chairs were placed on a large camping table, an empty fridge had its door wide open, and the two coffee makers on the sink were connected by long spider webs. She entered and ran a finger over the table: a thick layer of dust remained on her index finger. She wiped it off and continued her exploration while calling for Richard, to no avail.

“Jordane?”

At first, she thought she had imagined it. She listened intently but heard nothing, only the dull thumping of her heart in her ears.

“Jordane, is that you?”

This time, she was sure she hadn’t imagined it.

“Richard?” she shouted.

“I’m here!” she heard in return, very faintly.

She made her way to the end of the corridor, arriving at a workshop. She reached the doorway and stopped abruptly: she thought of the wolf. What if it was a trap? No, he was trapped in the mine, they had collapsed tons of rubble on him. Maybe he was even dead.

“What about what I saw in the rearview mirror, leaving the forest?”

A long shiver slowly crawled up her spine: what if, when she entered this room, she saw two yellow eyes staring at her from the depths of darkness? She froze, unaware of the shadow that blocked the corridor just behind her, almost touching the ceiling.

“Jordane?”

She screamed as she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned around, recoiling: Richard stood before her, looking confused.

“I thought you were in the car,” he said simply.

“I almost had a heart attack!” she yelled.

But the giant didn’t seem inclined to apologize, which got on her already frayed nerves: her heart pounded in her chest, and she felt pins and needles in her fingertips. Instead, he simply said:

“It’s dangerous to wander around places like this. You can quickly get hurt, or worse.”

She was about to ask him to move aside so she could go back to the car, but at that moment her phone rang: Raphaël was calling.

She answered on the second ring:

“Raphaël?”

“Jordane!” she heard crackling from the other end of the line. “Where are you?”

He sounded completely panicked, and she could hear the roar of his car’s engine through the microphone, making her fear the worst.

“I’m on the road to the Palace of the Strange,” she replied, “and you?”

“Great,” he shouted, “once you get there, especially don’t go in, I’m coming to join you right away!”

“Why shouldn’t I go in? What’s happening to you?”



"Jordane, we have to get out of here! I'm coming to pick you up, this place is too fucking dangerous!"

"What's going on?" she replied, trying to think at the same time, "did you go to the prison?"

"Yeah! They're fucking dead, he killed them! I couldn't do anything, I swear, but I'm not going back to that town, ever!"

Her heart stopped. She moved away from Richard: she didn't know if he had heard what was being said, but things seemed to be getting serious.

"What?"

"Yes, the riot didn't start by itself, there's a damn monster in that prison!"

"I knew it!" was the only thing she thought.

"What's the connection with the mine?" she replied. "Is it related to the Palace of the Strange?"

He remained silent on the other end of the phone. She could still hear the car driving, but he said nothing.

"Well?" she pressed.

"Jordane," he said, sounding stunned, "are you listening to what I'm saying? We don't care, if we stay in this fucking town, we're going to die!"

She felt herself starting to get angry but took the time to step outside to be alone, Richard stepping aside to let her pass. She tried to remain diplomatic:

"Listen, Raphaël, you said it yourself, there is something nefarious here. Inès was right, and if she's in danger, we have to help her. Her and everyone else."

"No, no, no," he replied, now irritated. "We're going to get killed, that's it. There's no way I'm going back there. People should just move, end of story. I'm coming to pick you up, and we're leaving!"

She thought about what Richard had said: he sent his most determined employees to the important sites. And if he didn't have any on hand? He went himself. She was sure of it. Shouldn't she take care of this story alone, this time?

"Raphaël," she said calmly. "Go home. If you don't want to continue, you can leave. But I'm staying, I'll put an end to this story, and only then will I return."

He was silent again, but she felt from here that she had hurt him. Again, she regretted the words that came out of her mouth, but it was too late to take them back.

"You're unfair," he finally said. "You didn't see what I saw. And I don't even know why I went there. I don't know why you're being stubborn, but I'm going to the Palace. I'll wait there for five minutes. No more."

This time, it was she who felt stung. Before she could realize it, she started shouting into the phone:

"ME? UNFAIR? LOOK AT YOURSELF, RUNNING AWAY AS SOON AS IT GETS TOO HARD! DID YOU REALLY EVEN GO THERE? THESE PEOPLE NEED US, LEAVING LIKE THIS, ABANDONING THEM TO THEIR FATE, THAT WOULD BE UNFAIR!"

She gasped for breath. He remained silent, still with the rumbling of the Mercedes in the background. He wasn't going to respond, she knew. He wouldn't fight, he would let her have the last word, and that would be all. She hated him for that. So she did what she expected of him:

"If you want to run away, run away. I don't need you."

And then, she wished she could take it back. She knew she had done something irreparable, that there was nothing left to fix things, but she had done it anyway. She was going to drive away her only friend. But anger had gotten the best of her. She didn't know why, she kept thinking about what Richard had said: no one wanted to face their demons, someone had to do it for others. She had to do it, right?

"Ok."

That was the only response he gave before hanging up.

She couldn't believe it. She had just sent Raphaël away, and she didn't know why. "You can stay in the car if you want," he had said. "...The least determined employees..." his words echoed in her head. "There's a monster in my town," Inès had written in her letter. "There's a monster under my bed," Jordane had told her parents. She felt like crying.

"Are you okay?" Richard asked from behind her.

She faced away to hide the tears threatening to run down her cheeks.

"Yes."

"I'm finished," he continued, "do you still have a meeting with your friend?"

She burst into a terrible laugh:

"No, I don't think so."

She heard him take something out of his pouch, just behind her. Then, she felt his breath on her neck:

"Perfect."

Two needles lightly pricked her back, and her entire body was instantly traversed by a wave so powerful that the world disappeared around her, drowning out the sound of the electric discharge going CLACK-CLACK-CLACK...

\*\*\*

Shapes and colors danced before Jordane as she slowly opened her eyes. She didn't know where she was, but her entire body ached, as if seized by severe cramps. Her skull screamed as her vision began to adjust: the blurry room gradually came into focus. She saw a row of lockers, some still open but empty. A few had faded fluorescent green post-its with handwritten names on them. The spinning bench before her stopped, and she noticed a pair of safety shoes placed underneath. Then, the smell of mold hit her nose: she lowered her eyes - even this motion pained her - and saw she was lying on a sticky, old mattress. She tried to move her hand to get up, but it stayed in place. She attempted to stretch her legs and felt a slight pressure around her neck. She stopped moving and took the time to breathe: gradually, she regained her senses. Her numb arms were behind her back, her legs folded upon themselves. She felt the rough touch of a rope against her wrists and ankles. Panicking, she wanted to struggle, but the knot around her neck tightened her throat further. She let out a moan, not yet understanding the situation she was now in.

A noise sounded in the distance. She strained to listen and soon distinguished footsteps approaching. The echo grew closer until she saw a shadow block the faint daylight at the doorway. The man entered the room and placed a heavy red, brand-new toolbox on the floor in front of Jordane.

"Help, somebody help," she managed to utter.

But Richard left the room without paying her any attention. His steps, measured and confident, faded away completely. She heard the pickup truck's door open and close, and the engine start. She thought he was leaving, abandoning her tied up there: she tried to turn over, but moving her leg violently tightened the knot around her throat, cutting off her breath. She wanted to scream, but no air could escape her lungs: she put her leg back in place, almost against her buttock, and the rope loosened just enough for her to gulp air, but the nylon's contact still burned her skin.

She heard the car's engine from the other side of the room, probably at the back of the building, then the noise ceased. Moments later, slow, regular footsteps approached, and only then did she begin to grasp what was happening.

Richard entered the room silently. He held a thin cord in his hands, winding it with military precision and agility. He finished by tying a complex knot frighteningly quickly and opened the toolbox with a key to store it.

"Richard..." she whispered painfully.

He met her gaze for a moment, then turned away as if uninterested. He delicately reached into his box and lined up several tools on the ground: a screwdriver, a pair of pliers, wire cutters, a mallet.

Jordane's blood ran cold, and at the same moment, a sharp pain bit her thigh: the cramp was so intense she wanted to straighten her leg, but she only tightened the rope around her neck until it dug into her throat. Her breath cut off, and she could neither scream nor plead. The thread sliced her skin, and she felt as if her lungs would explode. Suffocating, her eyes widened, her mouth opened without a sound. She writhed in pain, but the bonds only tightened. Richard stood up and positioned himself in front of her, watching her closely with crossed arms. She wanted to beg him to release her, but her throat was completely blocked.

"The more you move, the tighter it gets," he simply said.

She tried to bend her leg, even though the cramp's pain screamed the opposite, but the bond did not loosen, and air still could not reach her lungs. Her body jerked, trying to force inhalation, but in vain.

"Now that you understand how it works, I'll loosen the knot a bit if you promise to stay still."

Her vision started to darken. She tried to look up at Richard, but she could no longer see him.

"Nod if you understand."

It took her a moment to process his words, her brain beginning to starve of oxygen. Her body convulsed, but she finally nodded frantically, tears in her eyes.

"Good."

He bent down, fiddled with something behind her back, and she felt the ropes unravel: she inhaled deeply, the air burning her throat like lava, and she began to cough, spit, breathless. Her entire body burned, and she tried to regain her breath by moving as little as possible. Tears streamed from her eyes as Richard delicately removed her makeshift collar. His cold hands against her skin sent shivers down her spine. He examined the object for a moment, then put it in the back pocket of his pants.

"What are you going to do to me?" she whimpered, out of breath.

He completely ignored her.

He picked up the pliers and snapped them repeatedly, as if warming up. The metallic clicking drove Jordane mad, and she began to scream.

Richard kicked her in the stomach, cutting off her breath: she doubled over in pain, and the rope tightened its grip on her throat, silencing her.

"Dolls don't talk," he simply said.

She wanted to argue, to plead, to try to reason with him, anything, but the thread was already on the verge of strangling her, and she was too afraid of suffocating again. She looked up at him with a dark glare that had no effect on him. As if reading her thoughts, he explained what was going to happen.

"I am Cold-Blood," he simply said, "you have been chosen. We will spend the evening here together, and by the end of the night, you will be mine. You will become my slave in paradise, with all the others."

"He's completely insane," she thought. "What kind of maniac is this? What's going to happen to me?"

He knelt in front of her and began unbuttoning her shirt. Jordane trembled, crying with rage and fear, but she knew what would happen if she moved.

He slid his hand under her bra, and that's when she struggled: she turned suddenly, escaping his grip, but the thread cut off her breath. She choked, each jolt of pain tightening the trap further. She tried to scream, but no sound came out. Her lips seemed to form "Don't touch me."

"Be good," he said reasonably. "Just let it happen, and everything will be alright."

Her face turned red, her vision blurred again, unable to breathe. Tears now stained the dirty mattress.

"Calm down, and I'll loosen it."

She let out a groan of rage, which seemed to tear her lungs apart. She thought she would die at any moment. She thought of Raphaël: he wouldn't come to save her. She was alone. And it was all her fault. She was going to die here in terrible pain, all because she had rejected the only person who could help her.

She tried to relax her body as much as possible and became still. Only her chest rose in spasms, struggling to inhale air. Black dots danced before her eyes, but she held on.

"I'm calm, I'm calm," she told herself in her mind.

"Good," he said after what seemed like an eternity to her.

He loosened the knot again, and the pain she had felt the first time returned, magnified tenfold: it took several attempts to get air to her lungs, and what passed through her throat felt like molten metal. She gasped and spat more fiercely, and when Richard exposed one of her breasts, this time she did nothing.

"Good girl," he commented.

Then he grabbed the pink tip with his pliers and squeezed with all his might.

The pain sent her to another world, a wave surging through her body like the explosion of a star. A sensation she never thought possible. A scream slowly rose in her throat, but she arched so violently that the rope silenced her instantly, digging into her skin. Her eyes rolled back, her whole body tensed like a spring. She nearly passed out, but Richard loosened the tie.

She regained consciousness, but the pain was so intense she couldn't tell if she was breathing again or still suffocating. She met Richard's gaze, who simply looked at her with dead eyes. She cried even more. He dipped his pliers into her shirt again.

"DON'T TOUCH ME! DON'T TOUCH ME! DON'T TOUCH ME!" she screamed in vain.

He repeated his action, and this time it was as if the entire earth turned upside down: she tipped backward, swept into the void, and a veil of perfect blackness enveloped her vision as she lost consciousness.

Jordan was thirteen years old. Having just entered junior high, her lack of self-confidence had driven her to emphasize her passion for the world of horror: dark clothes, a Dracula t-shirt, skull pins on her backpack. After school, instead of playing with her dolls, learning to sew or cook, she spent her evenings reading comics about a demon that had settled in a quaint town and began to spread terror among the inhabitants with his bloodthirsty monsters. To her parents' dismay, she avidly followed the hero trying to prove the existence of these grief-causing monsters, buying each new volume as soon as it hit the local store. It wasn't exactly an activity that helped develop her social skills, as she spent hours wandering in her imaginary world, collecting true crime articles and posters of artists with obscene makeup. That's why she had tried to do what some children do when they need to assert themselves: build her personality around a single trait, a unique interest. She had broken her piggy bank for the start of junior high: her parents had prepared her little plaid skirt, thick tights, and pastel-colored polo, all neatly folded on the bathroom furniture, a cross necklace placed on top.

Jordan's parents were loving and attentive, but to survive in this world, they desperately needed to be governed by immutable rules, a strict code of conduct, and that everything in their universe had a purpose, a greater design than themselves. That's why each of them had turned to Religion, met at church, and lived according to the Holy Book ever since. As the world evolved around them, the society moved, their faith had been transformed into a kind of constant dread: they had once embraced the Holy Scriptures, now they clung to it. Jordan's father had long been a good industrial designer, drawing complex parts with only a ruler, a well-sharpened pencil, and his skilled hand, and the gradual arrival of computers and design software terrified him. Rather than trying to adapt, make the most of his experience, and replace the pen with the mouse, at the risk of becoming a beginner again, even for a short while, his fear of change took over, and he categorically refused to touch anything that worked with a screen. He found meaning in his fears: software will never be as precise as a human. Computers are a fad that will soon disappear. The Holy Book was written by hand, it's in this pain that he had to work.

Of course, computers did not disappear. His contracts did. They gradually retreated into their comfort zone, the world of saints that never changed, never asked anyone to question themselves.

That's why Jordan's interests made them so uncomfortable. And why they put so much energy into controlling her image. No matter that she read impious texts alone in her room, but in front of their community, meaning anyone setting foot on the marble floor of the church, she had to appear happy and fulfilled, an example of the benefits of a pious life. Otherwise, what was the point of all these sufferings?

And that's also why on the first day of school, she put on her tights, her skirt, her polo, kissed her parents goodbye, and in the school restroom, she opened her backpack to bring out her arsenal of the damned, clothes that really made a statement.

The day went very badly.

The children mocked her, calling her a slut, accusing her of smoking in secret or doing weird things in cemeteries or deep in the forest.

At thirteen, Jordan was already stubborn, so she didn't get discouraged: she was what she was, and she had to own it. Whatever the consequences. She hated religion, the way people used it to govern you, tell you what to do, what to think, how to dress. She preferred the uncertain, the discovery.

During the first term, the bullying gradually stopped at school; but at home, tension was rising. Her parents began to get feedback from other parents. They were asked if she was a Satanist. If she was depressed. They could help with prayers, have her come to church more often: these remarks infuriated Jordan's parents. Every morning, her mother searched her bag. She took her right up to the school, waiting for her to enter the classroom. But Jordan held on. She always managed to hide one or two pins. She remained silent in front of the priest, at church, despite her mother's sighs behind her.

She held on until the last day before the school holidays.

"Sit down," the principal had said, pointing to the seat in front of her.

Madam Eleau had led the elementary school all her career. Soon to retire, she let nothing slide and evidently intended to carry her image of an authoritarian principal to her grave.

Jordan sat down, called to this office for the first time. Madam Eleau sat straight, her eyebrows furrowed behind her glasses, her hair pulled back. Her prominent cheekbones were set in a severe air, her lips so pinched they turned white. In front of her, on her impeccably tidy desk, lay a cigarette butt; but not just any butt, one of those you roll yourself, with a piece of cardboard instead of a filter.

"You know why you're here," she said dryly.

Jordan shook her head. She wondered why Madam Eleau was picking up the trash that lay on the ground. Or if she was the one smoking, which surprised her. She prided herself on appearing impeccable, without weakness. And a dependency on any substance would have been seen as a sign of weakness in her eyes.

"Don't lie," she growled, "I know it was you who smoked this cigarette!"

"It's not true!" she protested loudly, "it's not mine!"

This butt had been found on the windowsill by the janitor, in front of the toilets. The principal didn't know who had dared to bring drugs into the school premises, but she was determined to unmask the culprit to settle the matter. Only an expulsion would save her image and that of the school.

"Young lady, I would appreciate it if you lower your voice when you talk to me," she intimated. "You are in serious trouble! We were wrong to let your offensive attire pass, look where it's led you now!"

"But I didn't do anything! I've never smoked in my life! It's disgusting!"

"Silence!" she yelled. "A student saw you! You are the disgrace of this school! Your parents are on their way, we'll see what they think!"

"No!" she cried in despair, tears in her eyes. "Please! I swear it wasn't me!"

But Madam Eleau wasn't listening. Jordan's parents arrived half an hour later, their cheeks red with shame and anger. They calmly discussed the situation with the principal, accepted Jordan's one-month expulsion while profusely apologizing, and drove home. During the trip, no one said a word. Only Jordan sniffled loudly in the back, tears streaming down her cheeks. It was only when they arrived home that they exploded and yelled at her all evening.

What no one knew was that it was Tommy, a classmate of hers, who had smoked the joint. He had stolen the cigarette butt from his older brother, which was stuck between the slats of the terrace decking, and had puffed on it in front of his friends to show off. He vomited his guts out on the way home from school and never touched a cigarette again in his life. But the next day, when the principal went around the students to extract information, and it was his turn, he was so scared of getting caught that he pointed to Jordan, a designated victim.

The following week, Jordan's parents imposed a strict regime of various punishments on her, such as cleaning, writing lines repeatedly, mandatory church sessions, and confiscated everything not related to religion in her room, replacing posters with crosses and comics with terrifying brochures about hell and what awaited there. These brochures were the only ones she leafed through with an unhealthy interest.

But it was a few days later that everything changed.

"What's he saying, I can't hear anything!" said Jordan's father to his wife.

"Shush!" she replied, "I'm listening!"

About thirty people had gathered in front of the church that afternoon, and the priest was trying to speak over the hubbub of all his parishioners talking and shouting at the same time.

"Sixty dead! My God, how is that possible!" someone said.

"Young people today, they have no values anymore!" another replied.

"It's the devil!" someone shouted. "Society is collapsing!"

"Please calm down!" the priest shouted.

"What are we going to do, father! We need to write to our representatives, this can't go on!"

"And if it was my child, in that school!" a woman yelled, with murmurs of agreement rising in the assembly.

The priest was backed up against his door, struggling to speak in front of the panicked crowd.

"Silence!" a man with a deep voice shouted, "let him speak! For the love of God!"

Finally, the mouths closed, and heads turned towards the priest.

"Right," he said, clearing his throat. "I have spoken with the police chief. It seems the killer has made twelve victims, plus about twenty injured."

Murmurs of horror rose from the assembly.

"Among the victims, there are children and teachers. God bless them."

He made the sign of the cross, and was imitated by everyone else. A woman burst into tears somewhere.



"The killer is a high school student," he continued.

Sounds of "My God...", "Lord!" were heard.

"And if it happens in our town!" a man shouted.

Panic rose.

"It seems he was a Satanist!" a woman yelled.

This time, the crowd erupted, and the priest struggled for a moment to speak again:

"Alas, the police chief confirmed it to me."

Cries of horror arose, some made the sign of the cross, others knelt in prayer.

"He would have engaged in rituals, all kinds of occult practices, it's true."

The crowd lost its mind. Calls for the death penalty, for the killer and all Satanists, arose. It was said that the demon had carried him away. That the Last Judgment was approaching. Quickly, names were designated, people who lived on the fringes of society, others who listened to Rock, or even those who had not been to church for a while. Some eyes discreetly turned towards Jordan's parents, as if afraid to meet their gaze, and terror seized them: how long before everyone knew that Jordan had been expelled? How long before they realized she regularly came to church for her problems with her impious fantasies?

Jordan's parents were not afraid that she was a Satanist and that she would decimate her class, but they were terrified that she would be accused of Satanism and that they would both be rejected from the church. They discreetly left the assembly and returned home by car, discussing, arguing, conspiring.

When they arrived, they burst into Jordan's room: they found her at her desk, she jumped as they rushed at her. They shouted gibberish, talking about a boy possessed by the devil killing his friends, about hell, church, and excommunications. They searched her room, turning around her as she stood still, stunned, not understanding what was happening. Her father got hold of one of the religious magazines they had foisted on her. The cover showed Jesus on his cross, and out of frustration at being unjustly punished, she had drawn horns and a pointed tail on him.

This was exactly the excuse her parents were looking for: the argument erupted, and they ordered her to pack her bags for a "reprogramming" course to cure her of her illness. She protested, trying to explain that she didn't care about religion, that she just liked horror comics, that she found werewolves cool, that she liked music with a bit of punch, that she was not a Satanist, but it only fueled their fire. The argument ended when they slammed the door as they left her room, leaving her in tears, trembling.

As Jordan gathered her things and tidied her room, she heard them talking on the phone, but she couldn't make out what they were saying. The call lasted all evening, and when they finally hung up, the house became silent as a grave.

Jordan didn't know that the storm was going to hit her in the middle of the night.

Many years later, she took an interest in that famous shooting. She even wrote an article about it, which earned her the job offer at Tales from the Crypt. The shooter's name was Morvan. He was seventeen years old. One day, he stole his grandfather's hunting gun, arrived at his school, and opened fire in his classroom. By the time the police arrived and did nothing for forty minutes while encircling the building, he had shot sixty-two students and teachers, killing twelve on the spot, and twenty-one more died from their injuries at the hospital. He eventually turned the gun on himself, sending his brains against the still-on projector displaying the diagram of a sedimentary rock layer sliding over a limestone layer. They entered twenty-five minutes after the last fatal shot, some students having remained hidden in the same classroom where the shooter had committed suicide, not daring to move.

This event created panic among parents throughout the region. They were all terrified that the same thing would happen near their homes. They sought the cause of this massacre, something tangible, that they could point to, forbid. To have the feeling of having control over it, and sleep peacefully. This movement dragged the police forces along with them, and being harassed to find the cause of this massacre, they had to find one. They couldn't say "nothing indicated he would do this, let's just cross our fingers it doesn't happen again", so they found – or rather were whispered in the ear – that he was a Satanist, a kid part of this new youth losing their parents' traditions. The news spread like wildfire, panic erupted, the witch hunt began. Just a young person listening to Hard Rock, wearing a skull t-shirt, or not having a crew cut could end up in custody. Church attendance skyrocketed, people were packed standing up, the doors could barely be closed behind them. The donation envelope swelled.

And Father Donovan's school started to fill up.

The Satanic panic caused damage. Jordan paid the price. One could say she was there at the wrong time, in the wrong place. A designated victim. And in the end, what did all this stem from? It all stemmed from a single event, something very, very important that happened to her when she was seven years old. She didn't realize it, but it was important for her to remember what had happened when...



... It was as if the hand of God Himself grabbed her hair and pulled her out of the dream world, back into reality. Her mouth and nose burned as though she was breathing sulfuric acid. Her eyes, bulging out, stung so badly she thought needles had been thrust into them. She couldn't catch her breath; she was hyperventilating. Gradually, her body remembered the pain she had felt before passing out, and it resumed its terrible screams. She was back in the sawmill, curled up on the mattress, tied up. Richard squatted in front of her. When her vision adjusted, she saw he was holding a bottle in his hands.

"Welcome back," he said. "You think you can get off easy by fainting?"

He shook the nearly full bottle.

"This is ammonia," he continued, "to keep you awake all night. I have a whole bottle of it!"

He set the bottle on the bench and began to gently stroke her face. He wiped away her tears with his thumb, pushing aside the hair that stuck to her skin.

"You're perfect," he said.

He stood up to take off his jacket.

Jordane was in excruciating pain, but the ammonia kept her mind alert: she had fainted. And she had dreamed. And it seemed to her that one detail was important. What was it?

He hung his jacket on a hanger, in an empty locker.

It was her school, in middle school. No, not that. She was being punished. There had been an accident.

Her mind was racing a thousand miles an hour, while a hammer pounded in her skull, a dull pain that almost prevented her from hearing herself think. Richard lined up the pliers with the other tools on the ground, and picked up the wire cutters instead.

"No, not an accident, the massacre," she thought. "The guy who slaughtered her classroom."

This idea had jumped into her head, but she didn't know why. The story had made the headlines, she had written about it. They had labeled him a Satanist, because it suited all those self-righteous fools that it couldn't be one of their own who did it, that to prevent it from happening again, all they had to do was set hundreds of lives on fire and blood, as long as you weren't wrongly accused and the pitchfork turned against you. Every tragedy had to make sense, and they had to be on the right side of the stick.

But she had dug deeper.

They said they found a whole collection of violent video games in the killer's room. But he had posted dozens and dozens of photos of himself and his room on his blog, and he didn't have any of that. There were school books in the photos, not video games. There was an adult magazine poster on the wall, not Satan.

Photos... Yes, he had taken a picture of himself pointing a gun at the camera lens. There was a text with the photo, but she couldn't remember it. His blog... how had she come across it? Because no one else had.

Yes, that was it. Three students' mothers had filed a complaint with the police because the killer had made death threats to their children, at school. They had given the blog address, because he bragged about it to anyone who would listen. But the cops never did anything. Even with the photos where he posed with a weapon.

"Coming soon to your neighborhood. Right, Vincent?" That was the text under the photo. He was going to kill Vincent and many others a few weeks later.

He bragged about his blog, but not just about the weapons. No, not just that. He was a terror at school, it was said that pets tended to disappear near his house, but not just that.

Richard opened and closed the wire cutters several times, pleased with the sound of the two blades pressing against each other.

He bragged about the result of his psychological test.

Yes, that's it. That's what Vincent's mother had shown to the police. Just before he posted the photo with the gun, a carnivorous smile on his lips. He had posted the result of an online personality test. And it said he had psychopathic traits.

Because that's what these guys are. These killers. Psychopaths. But why was she thinking about this?

She looked at Richard: his eyes were black, as if empty. As if he was focused on the task, and that was all there was.

This guy was a fucking psychopath.

He plunged the wire cutters into her blouse.

No matter if she choked, no matter if she died, she contorted in a reflex to avoid being mutilated. The rope tightened its grip, and again her breathing was cut off, and it was even more painful than the last time.

"You still don't get it?" he said calmly.

He watched her choke, writhing in pain, tightening the knot even more.

"This guy is a psychopath," she thought, "I'm screwed."

But a glimmer shone in her mind. A glimmer so faint, smothered by the lack of oxygen and unbearable pain, she almost missed grasping it.

"What is a psychopath?"

She clung to that thought.

"Someone who's not wired to have empathy."

Then she clung to that one, like a drowning person to a lifebuoy.

"He loves lying and manipulating."

Black spots returned to her vision.

"Because it gives him control over others."

She felt herself almost go, and Richard loosened the knot. Air rushed into her lungs like a cloud of radioactive dust: this was the last time she could endure it, she felt that next time, she would die. But no, Richard would make sure to keep her awake until he decided it was over.

"What do you do to destabilize someone who seeks control?" she thought. Then: "Yes, I have to do it one more time, I can do it."

Richard resumed his work.

"You deprive them of control."

He didn't have time to plunge the wire cutters again when she used all her strength to kick, knocking over the bench with a thunderous crash. The rope snapped against her throat, then there was a sound of breaking glass: the ammonia poured onto the sticky floor of the locker room.

"FUCK, WHAT KIND OF BITCH ARE YOU!!" suddenly screamed Richard.

He threw himself to the ground, passed his hand over the wet spot, but it was already absorbed by the grime and dust.

"WHAT DID YOU DO, YOU FUCKING WHORE!!" he roared.

He lunged at her and slapped her, causing blood to flow from her nose; but she felt nothing, still choking.

"HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO DO THIS NOW! DON'T YOU DARE FAINT ON ME NOW!"

He went back to the broken bottle and tried to recover some liquid, anything that had got stuck in a shard of glass.

"YOU RUINED EVERYTHING, YOU FUCKING WHORE!" he raged, on all fours, his back turned. "I'M GOING TO HAVE TO CUT YOU UP! YOU HEAR THAT, BITCH??"

But Jordane wasn't listening. She was busy trying to find the rope along her back. She could hardly feel her fingers, but she had managed to grab the wire cutters he had dropped on the mattress. She managed to find it, and was about to cut it. But no. Her fingers wouldn't move anymore. Her vision darkened. Her chest sent uncontrollable spasms: she felt like she was drowning. She lost almost all her senses, she felt a gentle breeze rocking her.

"No, not now."

But her body was getting heavy, as if she was going to sleep, and her mind was becoming light as a feather. All these troubles were going to fly away. This was the last time she was losing consciousness.

"No, no way. I can make it."

She gathered all her willpower, delved deep into her being, and fought with uncommon ferocity to emerge. She came back to the room. She smelled the faint, bitter odor of the evaporating ammonia. She felt her lungs catch fire. Her body cramped up. The unbearable pain in her left breast. Blood returned to her hand, and she cut through.

The rope detached, the knot loosened, and she could breathe again, what seemed like a layer of burning tar.

Richard flung the debris he held in his hand with a furious cry and plunged into his toolbox.

“YOU’RE GOING TO SEE WHAT YOU GET, YOU FUCKING WHORE, IF YOU DEPRIVE ME OF MY PLEASURE, I’LL HAVE FUN IN ANOTHER WAY!!”

She didn’t wait to see what he would pull out next: she had already freed her ankles by cutting the string, and she was wiggling her wrists out of the loosened knot. As he pulled out a hacksaw and examined it with fury, she finished freeing herself and leapt to her feet.

She dove for the exit door, but blood rushed to her head, spinning the room around her: she fell. Cramps in her legs caused her agony, her brain temporarily out of service after the rush of blood.

“You...” Richard said, grabbing her arm with an iron grip.

Her head was still spinning, the hallway danced before her. She was about to vomit.

“I shouldn’t have gotten angry,” he continued. “But I’m calm now. We’ll start all over again, you and me.”

With her free hand, she grabbed the screwdriver at her feet, and plunged it into Richard’s thigh.

He fell backward as he screamed in pain.

“I’m going to kill you this time!” he roared.

But she was already getting up: he didn’t have time to limp toward her before she was already sprinting down the hallway. She clung from wall to wall, fighting with all her might not to fall. Richard pulled the tool from his leg with a moan of pain, and began to chase after her. Jordane didn’t know where she was, but she followed the corridor. She turned left and miraculously came upon the main entrance. She threw herself at the door and burst out. The air was fresher, the pines beginning to block the sunlight: night was about to fall. She scanned for the pickup, but remembered hearing him hide it behind the sawmill. She turned around: he hadn’t caught up yet, the open door only showed an empty corridor.

“What if he went to get his car?” she thought.

If she tried to reach the road, he would catch up and run her over without a problem: so she started running and plunged into the forest.

Jordane had been running for several minutes through the woods, avoiding roots and low branches as best she could. Every time she stopped, out of breath, it seemed she heard Richard screaming her name in the distance, or a branch cracking, so she resumed running.

She didn’t know where she was, but she came across many dead or sickly pines, so she must still be around that damned cursed town. She was still in pain everywhere, especially under her shirt, which she had buttoned up a little earlier. She thought back to her dream earlier: it seemed she had remembered something, a detail she had on the tip of her tongue. She was about to say it just before she was pulled out by her torturer. What would have happened to her if she hadn’t escaped? She would still be being tortured. Coming back from the realm of dreams over and over, as if condemned to relive the same terrible day until the end of time. Or at least, until her body gave out for good, and her photo really ended up on Duli’s notice board. For a moment, she wondered if Richard was also a monster, but she knew that even if he was, it wasn’t the kind of monster she thought. He was indeed human, she could feel it. But maybe Duli had a particular power of attraction, or even, that it was she who attracted monsters.

She remembered with what dexterity and fluidity he had acted in the locker room of that sawmill, and she was convinced she was not the first person he had taken care of. But maybe she had been the luckiest. In any case, she hoped she had been the last.

She now began to walk, tired of running, and kept an alert ear in case anything manifested behind her. Her hand touched her neck, and she brushed the burn from the rope with a grimace of pain. She buttoned her shirt a little higher to hide her wound, as if she still had someone to hide her condition from.

“Raphaël...” she thought.

She had ruined everything with him. She had lost her temper over nothing, likely driving him away for good. She wondered if she should call him back: she thought it was possible he wouldn’t even answer. And then, he had chosen to leave. She was alone now.

Something caught her attention on the horizon: she looked into the distance and saw that the line of trees was thinning out before her. Yes, it seemed she had reached the edge of the forest. She quickened her pace, always on guard, and as she moved forward, the trees parted more on her path. The light of the late day first revealed itself timidly, then suddenly, when she reached the last tree.

Her mouth opened, and she stepped onto the concrete surface of the parking lot of the Palace of the Strange.

## Chapter IX: The Awakening

Raphaël was nine years old. His mother had been dead for three years.

"Son, I won't be long," he had said.

Raphaël had just returned from school, a day spent daydreaming while his teacher tried to instill a passion for ancient Egypt. He excelled in mathematics, loving to manipulate the colorful little bricks to add units, tens, and hundreds, but history tended to bore him.

He had come home, ignoring the pile of garbage bags almost blocking the hallway, went straight to the living room, and carelessly threw his school bag onto the coffee table, knocking over one of the many empty beer cans stacked next to each other. He sat on the old leather couch eaten away by dampness - they had found it on the street - and settled next to two ashtrays brimming with cigarette butts. He turned on the TV and immersed himself in his favorite cartoons.

"Ok," he replied to his father without looking at him.

His father nodded, hesitated as if unsure, then nodded again and left.

Raphaël continued to watch television programs, only emerging from his stupor when his stomach started to growl. He got up and headed to the kitchen, ignoring the swarm of flies buzzing over the sink. He opened the fridge: empty.

"Dad!" he yelled, "we have nothing to eat!"

No response.

"Dad!"

Then he remembered: his father had left. He looked at the clock: seven-something. He had started learning to read the time on a clock and was doing pretty well with the hours - he knew it could be seven in the morning or evening, and that the hand went around twice a day - but not yet the minutes. Anyway, he knew it was past seven in the evening because the hand was really close to eight. Usually, he had already eaten by this time.

Fear engulfed him when he realized his father had been gone for several hours, and his first instinct was to run to his room. He opened the door, walked past his mattress on the floor, and went straight to his closet. He rummaged through the pile of toys and pulled out a large pale pink piggy bank with a straight slot on its back. He didn't need to shake it to know it was empty: the plastic lid on its belly was gone.

"He took my money!" he whimpered aloud.

He returned to the entrance, a mix of fear and anger overcoming him: it had happened before that his father took his savings, and each time, it led to other troubles. Once, he had even ended up at the police station.

His stomach growled again: he didn't know when his father would return, but what he knew was that he was starving. Maybe he wouldn't even come back tonight, so how was he going to eat? He didn't even have any money left to buy a bag of candy at the grocery store. What should he do? Wait for him to return? But when would that be? He knew that when his father took money from him, he was up to no good: and even at nine years old, he knew where he went to get into trouble. Wouldn't it be better to go look for him, and ask him to give back his money so they could buy something to eat for tonight? Maybe he could even take him to get a hamburger and fries, he would like that.

Decided, he put on his shoes and left the house without bothering to lock the door - his father always forgot to lock, or even close the door behind him, so they had simply decided to stop locking it.

It was a beautiful day outside, not a single cloud, slightly refreshed by a gentle breeze, very pleasant. He crossed the unkempt garden, passing two wooden chairs with holes and bleached by rain and sun, a small blue inflatable pool filled with stagnant water and various debris, and entered the street. At this time, neighbors began to gather on the sidewalks, pulling out tables and playing cards. Some just sat on a camping chair in the middle of the street, eyeing passersby suspiciously.

He never felt in danger. Just once, a young man had asked him if he had money on him. He had shaken his head, and the man had run his finger under each of his socks, before nodding his head and crossing the street. But other than that event, everyone seemed to ignore him.

He continued for a good kilometer, cramps crushing his stomach every time he passed a restaurant. He wondered if he would really find his father there: nothing told him he would be, but in a way, he was convinced.

He stopped suddenly: he had arrived at the den.

He looked up at the sky and observed the steel bridge that carried the tram over the street. He had heard a lot about it, but was seeing it for the first time. A shuttle passed overhead at full speed, roaring with rage, making the structure vibrate as if it were made of matches.

It was the gate to Zombie-Ville.

Everyone knew this part of the city: in his class, they said that zombies haunted the streets, ready to devour any little boy daring to venture there. But Raphaël knew they weren't real undead, just adults making bad choices.

To his right, a man curled up on himself slept in the shadow of a row of stairs. He wore torn pants at the shin and no shoes, only two mismatched socks. The space around him was littered with all sorts of garbage: half-empty alcohol bottles, plastic bags filled with clothing or balled-up blankets, cigarette butts. A car slowly passed him, an old diesel with grimy windows and a scratched body, scraping the only hubcap remaining with an unpleasant screech. The vehicle remained still for a moment, then a man emerged from the building, rushing down the stairs without a care for the homeless man sleeping beside him. He headed towards the car while the driver lowered the passenger side window. The man leaned into the opening and seemed to talk for a few seconds, hidden in the rusted metal. He then reemerged with a bill in his hand, which he discreetly stuffed into his pocket. He left at the same time as the car, scanning the street nervously from both sides.

Once the street was calm again, Raphaël took a deep breath and moved forward. He passed the homeless man, forcing himself not to look at him, fearing to discover a real zombie, but he soon spotted two more people on the ground, across the sidewalk. They were two women, one wearing only a t-shirt and panties, the other with a needle still stuck in her arm. He realized his knees were shaking, but he forced himself to keep going: if he wanted to eat something tonight, he needed to find his father.

So, he continued his journey, encountering more people: groups leaning against walls with vacant eyes, others sprawled on the ground, asleep, or dead. No one paid him any mind, except the few still conscious, the men sitting on chairs, counting bills and glaring fiercely at him. He was terrified: as he moved forward, the street became more and more crowded, yet it remained just as dead. Everyone he passed was motionless, unconscious, or perhaps even deceased. He turned at an intersection, and horror struck him as he arrived at the heart of Zombie-Ville.

The main street was crowded, yet it seemed frozen in time. The undead were indeed there: men and women standing in uncomfortable positions, yet immobile like statues. Some had their limbs arched, curled up like dead insects, others simply stood with their heads resting against the wall. Many were standing but with their heads down, as if they were tying their shoelaces or had dropped a coin; but all had the same fixed and vacant gaze, as if they had looked Medusa straight in the eyes and turned into statues. It seemed like the whole town was there, and he knew his father was somewhere in the crowd.

He made his way through the first zombies: none of them moved, staring at the sky or the ground. A woman had her head in a trash can, completely naked. Raphaël's entire body trembled. Thoughts raced through his head: would one of them suddenly move as he passed by? Would he see a pair of eyes suddenly roll in their sockets and fix on him? Were they real zombies, after all? Was he going to be devoured? By his own father?

"What are you doing here, brat?" he heard behind him. "This is no place for you, unless you also want some tranquility."

It was one of the men on the plastic chairs. He ignored him completely, lowered his head, and quickened his pace. He bumped into a man wearing a beanie and a heavy jacket in the middle of summer, apologized, and noticed with disgust that the man with his legs spread and one arm raised to the sky had feces running down his pants to his shoe. Starting to panic, he almost ran, avoiding obstacles with difficulty, whether they were trash or humans.

"Human trash," he thought to himself.

The crowd thickened, as if it were a horde of zombies encircling him.

"Dad!" he cried out unwittingly.

He bumped into another person in his frantic run, who fell like a sack of potatoes, without a sound.

"Dad, where are you?" he cried.

He ran, tears in his eyes, suffocated by the smell of decomposition and all kinds of bodily fluids, when he suddenly stopped: he recognized the red jogging pants with white stripes and the t-shirt from a jazz festival that had taken place before he was born. The man wearing them was standing with his back to him, bent over, his arms on the ground. He did not move an inch.

"Dad?" he murmured.

The man immediately turned around, and gazed at him with his eye sockets swarming with maggots: his skin was decomposing, his open mouth dangling a swollen and black tongue, wrapped by a centipede that ran down his throat. A liquid of the same color flowed between his yellow teeth and along his gumless gums.



"Son!" articulated the undead, a moth escaping his cadaverous-smelling mouth.

The nine-year-old boy looked around him: everyone had turned into zombies, their bodies decomposing, eyes white and insects crawling out of every orifice. All but one, a single man watched him from afar, across the street. That one was normal, but so distant, as if he was not part of the scene. As if he was watching from an even deeper reality. And he was laughing. Laughing loudly, as if mocking him. He felt like he knew him, had seen him somewhere before.

Around him, the zombies approached, enveloped him, and his own father sank his rotten teeth into his flesh.

Raphaël woke up with a start.

He opened his eyes with difficulty, still half-sunk in a sleep that seemed to have lasted an eternity. He only saw blurry shapes dancing around him, and he had to fight not to spill the contents of his stomach onto his knees. Was he asleep? He seemed to have had a nightmare: something with zombies, and someone who seemed to be watching him in his own dream, someone from another reality.

His head began to ache, and now, the pain spread throughout his body. He rubbed his eyes, shook his head, and the scene around him sharpened, the contours became clearer: he was in his car.

Except that, he was off the road.

Two shrunken and withered white bags hung from the steering wheel and the glove compartment: the airbags. The driver's side window was cracked, his door dented by the tree his car had hit. He looked in the rearview mirror: first, he saw his slightly puffy face, his eyes haggard and circled. Then, he looked beyond the reflection and spotted the road, the four black tire tracks tearing up the asphalt to his location.

"The accident," he thought.

He remembered Emilie, as she had appeared in the middle of the road. Had she escaped from prison? No, he knew that. It wasn't really her he had encountered.

This thought overwhelmed him with shame, and he instantly lowered his eyes.

"What happened back there?" he wondered.

"You panicked, and you ran away, that's what happened," a voice in his head replied. "You're a coward."

He pursed his lips: he felt miserable, sitting in his car against a tree at the curve of a road lost in the forest. He had abandoned that girl to her fate, and he had been rejected by his best friend. She was right, he wasn't cut out for this kind of thing. What suited him was working on his computer. Logging in remotely, writing reports. But not finding himself in a life-or-death situation.

This experience proved that he was better off alone. No one to disappoint. He looked around him: the sun was beginning to set, and a grayish light was starting to settle in the already gloomy place. What should he do? Call for help? No, he had only one desire: to go home and sleep. Even Jordane had told him: he should just run away.

He turned the keys in the ignition, and the car sputtered for a few seconds before giving up. He tried several times, but the old Mercedes refused to start. He threw a furious fist against the steering wheel, and screamed as pain exploded in his wrist, releasing curses into the void.

"Why does this have to happen to me?" he thought.

The vision of Emilie on the road came back to him, followed by the one where he had left her in the restroom: "I'll come back, I promise," he had said.

He chuckled: "What a damn liar!"

He would not return. He would never set foot in that damned town again. All he wanted was to get far away. Start over. Change cities. Change countries, try to live abroad. Anything, as long as he was far enough from Duli, from Jordane, from everything else: it would be just a bad memory, which he would take care to erase from his mind. He suddenly envied his father: he had had no scruples about leaving. The phrase the monster had spoken came back to him: "We'll find you a family that loves you," the social worker had said. And in the end, his foster family had done the job. Even though it was hard, they had made the effort, sacrificed to pay for his education, were there when he needed them. While his real father was floating thousands of miles away, probably on a sidewalk, pockets empty and underwear full.

This thought brought him back to what he had seen in prison: a scene straight out of his childhood memories, so realistic that he really believed he had traveled back in time, or simply imagined his entire teenage and adult life, but that he had remained that child.

"What am I going to do?" he said aloud.

Jordane no longer needed him, Emilie was probably dead, there was really only one thing to do: get out of here. He

tried to start the car again, just like that; but to his great surprise, it coughed like an asthmatic, and started with a racket from hell. The car trembled, the body scraping against the bark of the tree. Stunned, he pressed the accelerator. The tires scratched the ground, doing a burnout, the door produced an unbearable screech, but the vehicle finally freed itself from the tree and moved slowly and noisily back onto the road. He got out of the car, in the middle of the passage, and walked around his beloved: the left door was dented, part of the bumper torn off, but other than that, it seemed intact.

“Can you take me home?” he spoke to it.

It continued to buzz as a simple response.

“I promise,” he continued, “if you take me home, I won’t get rid of you, I’ll take you to the body shop, and I’ll make you young again!”

He was about to get back into his wreck, when he saw something far ahead of him, on the side of the road.

A sign.

**DULI <- 6**

**ALL DIRECTIONS -> 4**

He thought back to Jordane. What she had told him. That she no longer needed him. And she was right, this wasn’t for him, all this. He wanted to feel safe, forget everything. Move forward. He tapped the hood of the car, got in, and put it in gear: he knew where he was going.

## Chapter X: The Palace of the Strange

Jordane entered the large, abandoned parking lot. It was divided into several wings, marked by large colorful signs. There were the Magician's wing, the Ghost's wing, the Cyborg's wing, the Time Traveler's wing, the Alien's wing, and others. Each represented a character in their element. The alien was in his flying saucer, the magician was reading what appeared to be an ancient grimoire, and the cyborg was repairing his own circuits.

She headed towards the entrance, her body still aching. The park was protected by a huge wrought iron gate with sharp spikes. The entrance, comprising six ticket booths, was topped by a huge sign presenting the place: a mad scientist with thick glasses was pressing the button of a strange device, a caricature of science fiction. The antenna on the end spat a blue lightning bolt, narrowly missing a family: their hair stood on end, as if from static electricity. The mother was shocked, the father angry, and the little girl laughed uproariously, her two braids exploding into a cloud of unruly hair. The lightning streaked down to the bottom of the sign, where in blue, whimsical writing, as if part of the lightning bolt, it read: "The Palace of the Strange."

Jordane looked closely at the little girl on the sign: she was laughing so hard she was crying.

A little further on, an old white car was parked near the entrance. It must have been there for several years, as it was covered in dead leaves, and all four tires were flat. It looked as abandoned as the park itself.

She looked around: the silence was absolute, no one in sight. She placed her hand on her neck, feeling her wound through the collar of her blouse. Richard knew she was supposed to go to the park, and maybe he was on his way right now to find her. She quickened her pace towards the ticket booths.

Empty, and covered in a layer of dust, they were as they had been left a decade ago, at the opening. The grilled door was closed. A sign listed the rules for a safe stay:

- *Do not run within the park*
- *Always follow the safety instructions specific to the attractions*
- *No alcohol*

A fourth line had been added as a half-torn sticker slapped onto the panel, as if it had been added for an event:

- *Do not enter the park after dark, you may not come out alive!*

Jordane shivered: perhaps because this sticker was probably added by the team for the special opening on Halloween night, and it had indeed turned into a disaster; or perhaps because night was falling, and it sounded almost like a warning.

But she nervously looked behind her: her thoughts were preoccupied with her previous assailant, and the mere idea of hearing his pickup truck in the distance filled her with terror. So the idea of entering an abandoned amusement park at night didn't seem like such a bad idea. She looked beyond the gates: the park hid behind a palisade of trompe l'oeil buildings several meters high, jealously guarding its secrets from the curious still paying their tickets or parking their cars. There was a futuristic city part, with large buildings of strange shapes and flying vehicles, a part for wild laboratory experiments, with strange specimens in jars and ever more extravagant instruments. In front of her, the ticket booths led to a path of pink paving stones narrowing to the entrance, the gaping mouth of the gigantic head of the mad scientist from the entrance sign. However, for the park's opening on Halloween night, fangs had clearly been added to the mouth of the scientist, and a swarm of flat black steel bats flew from the orifice, held by thin rods of the same material, almost invisible.

In front, a cartoonish robot statue from her grandparents' time, resembling a structure of pots and pans with its smooth metal skin, held a box of park maps. It had two spotlights for eyes on the sides of its head that probably once lit the path. Facing it was its doppelgänger, which should have only been present for the evening, and not a decade: a scarecrow lifting a similar box, but surely containing the flyers for the special evening program.

This mix of styles in the amusement park, science fiction and horror, was quite astonishing.

What was not surprising, however, was that when she pushed one of the entrance gates of the ticket booths, it opened with a sinister creak.

"Am I really going to do this?" she thought. "Am I going to go in there, where God knows what abomination might be waiting for me?"

She thought of Inès, of her letter: she knew the answer was yes.

Even the sound of her shoes scraping against the flaking paving stones seemed an affront to the oppressive silence

here. Wild grass had had time to climb between the blocks of pink sandstone, and her stomach clenched when one of them tickled her ankle. She passed the two motionless guardians, fearing that the robot's eyes would suddenly light up, freezing her like a deer in the middle of a road, or that the scarecrow would start to talk, to move. But none of that happened, the two mannequins were lifeless. The flyers had mixed in their boxes into balls of gray pulp, probably due to the rains. The robot was starting to show signs of rust.

She continued until she arrived right in front of the enormous mouth. She only had to reach out her arm to touch one of the vampire fangs; but what made her most uncomfortable was that even when directly under the nose of the monstrosity, feet on its hanging tongue, its eyes stared directly at her, two large, mad, bulging eyes. Watching her with malice, until the very last moment.

"It's not the time to back down, you need to be brave," she thought.

So she plunged into the wolf's mouth. She entered the dark tunnel, almost completely black, almost fearing to see it constrict in an obscene gulp and swallow her. But instead, she emerged on the other side, struck by the decor of the various attractions.

She found herself on a large square of the same pink paving stones as the entrance. All around were barriers for queue lines with red velvet guiding ropes and gold metal posts, once guiding the crowd to the various buildings. Most lay on the ground, overturned by the weather - or perhaps the panicked crowd? - but others still promised to take you to an attraction: to her left, Jordane observed "The Laboratory of Strange Energies." It was a square building resembling a factory with its tinted windows, steel and sheet metal walls. Huge Tesla coils protruded from the walls and roof. Above the door, which resembled an airlock, the famous mad scientist was depicted with a test tube containing a viscous green liquid in one hand, and a sophisticated remote control in the other. He was still laughing uproariously. Jordane approached and read the information panel in front of the entrance:

*"Discover the Laboratory of Strange Energies: a captivating adventure at the heart of mystery! Dive into a world of unexplained energies and enigmatic phenomena, where science meets the strange. Here's a glimpse of our incredible thematic rooms:*

*Electromagnetic Experiments Room: Electrify your curiosity by exploring the secrets of strange electricity! High-voltage machines create fascinating sparks and bright flashes that will leave you speechless. Witness electromagnetic forces at work and prepare to be electrified!*

*Magnetic Phenomena Chamber: Immerse yourself in a captivating magnetic universe where the laws of gravity seem to bend. Levitating sculptures and gravity-defying objects will leave you in awe. Explore the mysteries of magnets and discover how magnetic forces can transform our perception of reality.*

*Cosmic Energies Gallery: Let yourself be taken on an extraordinary cosmic journey! Breathtaking projections of stars and galaxies will transport you into the infinity of the universe. Discover the most captivating cosmic phenomena, from supernovas to black holes, and delve into the heart of the mysterious energies that animate our cosmos.*

*Telluric Energies Room: Explore the depths of the Earth and feel the pulse of our planet. Walk on vibrating tiles to understand earthquakes, admire models reconstructing the movements of tectonic plates, and discover the underground energies that shape our world. A captivating experience at the intersection of geology and telluric strangeness.*

*Antigravity Corridor: Prepare to defy the laws of gravity in this astonishing corridor! Walk on an inclined floor, but be surprised to stay perfectly balanced. Objects seem to mysteriously float in the air, defying the rules of gravity. Be amazed by antigravity and discover a world where nothing is as it seems.*

*Dive into the unknown, explore mysteries, and push the limits of your imagination at the Laboratory of Strange Energies. A unique experience that will leave you in wonder and make you question everything you thought you knew about the world around us. Get ready for a breathtaking adventure that will give you unforgettable moments. Don't miss this opportunity to explore the palace of the strange and push the boundaries of knowledge!"*

She stood in front of the tinted glass door but found no handle. She saw a motion detector above her head: she waved her arm in its direction, but nothing seemed to move. She gave up, almost disappointed, and continued her visit.

She went to the next attraction: a large church with complex architecture, completely different in style. Stone structures protruded from the walls, casting fascinating shadows. Light games drew the eye to the black and white stained glass windows. The entrance was a heavy wooden door, with intricate and meticulous patterns. The place's description, barely visible, was projected onto the wall from a pattern Jordane couldn't even see. All she saw was that the letters danced on her fingers as she passed her hand over the projected text:

*“Explore the dark mysteries of the Shadow Hall: a fascinating experience where light meets darkness. Dive into an intriguing world where shadows come to life and reveal unsuspected secrets. Here’s a glimpse of the unique experiences you’ll have in this enchanting room:*

*Shadow Labyrinth: Lose yourself in a maze of dark passages where shadows dance and deform. Follow the flickering lights and try to find your way through this mysterious labyrinth. Optical illusions and light play will challenge you, while shadows guide you into the unknown.*

*Animated Shadows Wall: Witness the magic of shadows coming to life before your amazed eyes. Projected silhouettes on a wall transform into fascinating images, creating captivating stories. Be transported into a universe where shadows morph into characters and give birth to enigmatic tales.*

*Shadow Puppet Theater: Attend a unique show where shadow puppets take the stage. Master puppeteers skillfully manipulate silhouettes to tell enchanting stories. Let yourself be carried into a fantastic world where imagination blends with the magic of shadows.*

*Silhouette Workshop: Discover the ancient art of silhouette cutting in this fascinating workshop. Learn basic techniques to create striking silhouettes and let your creativity run wild. Light and shadow play will bring your creations to life, allowing you to explore the evocative power of cut-out shapes.*

*Eclipse Room: Enter a room where total eclipse reigns supreme. Plunged into darkness, this chamber evokes the unique sensation of a moment when light is swallowed by darkness. Breathe in the mysterious atmosphere and let yourself be enveloped by the enchanting ambiance of this celestial phenomenon.*

*Dare to venture into the dark corners of the Shadow Hall and be fascinated by the subtle interplay of light and darkness. Dive into a universe where shadows reveal hidden mysteries and where your perception will be tested. An extraordinary experience awaits you, ready to unveil unsuspected secrets. Don’t miss the opportunity to live a captivating adventure in the heart of the Shadow Hall.”*

Jordane tried to push the heavy door, but the result was the same as her previous attempt. She returned to the central square, walking over the fallen posts and ropes. There were many other attractions: “The Cabinet of Curiosities,” resembling an old antique shop, promising to showcase shocking and unsuspected creatures; “The Hypnosis Theater,” a large building resembling an opera house; but these were not what she was looking for. After all, she hadn’t come to visit, but to investigate. In the center of the square, she found a large round block with a map of the place.

“Bingo!” she thought.

She studied the marble-surfaced map: the park was large, very large. There were other attractions further away, spread out along the three avenues of the Palace of the Strange. Restaurants, a hotel, restrooms, but nothing interesting. However, she had more than one trick up her sleeve: she wasn’t looking for what was displayed, but rather for what wasn’t. And when she found an area of the park simply painted in gray, without any attraction, green space, or anything, she knew it was the administrative offices. She just had to head in the direction of the “Haunted House,” and continue until she came upon a narrow, empty space that would give a tourist the impression they were lost. There, she would surely find a door, or a turnstile that would take her where she wanted to go.

She cast her gaze beside her, to the glass cabin of Zoltar, the fortune teller. Ordinarily, this robotic mannequin with the air of a fakir would predict your future in exchange for a fifty-cent coin, to be inserted into the slot. But here, Zoltar wore a cherubic angel mask, and instead of his crystal ball, he clutched a bloodied butcher’s knife. Strands and splatters of blood speckled the inside of the glass.

“If only I could take it home...” she thought.

She began to turn around to head towards the “Haunted House”, when she heard a faint clinking sound, and a flood of intense light blinded her.

“Who’s there?” growled an authoritative voice.

Jordane jumped, shielding her face. She wanted to speak, or even scream, but the pain in her throat burned, rendering her mute.

“This is a restricted area! What are you doing here?”

The voice was feminine. Intimidating enough to scare a hardened criminal, but it was indeed a woman’s. And moreover, the voice seemed almost familiar, but she had the light shining in her face, and if she removed her hand, she couldn’t see anything. She couldn’t manage to make a sound, her throat still sore. She didn’t know whether to raise her hands in the air or start running. Disoriented, she could only wait for what came next, dazed and defenseless.

"I'm talking to you!" the voice repeated, louder. "You better tell me what you're doing here!"

Seeing that she was paralyzed by fear, the person lowered their flashlight. Jordane removed her hand from her face, and had to concentrate for a few seconds for her eyes to readjust to the darkness. Black shapes danced in front of her, then gradually everything became clear. Until she could finally see her interlocutor, and her heart stopped in her chest when she recognized the woman she had met in the tunnel the day before, what seemed like a million years ago.

The woman was the spitting image of the apparition she thought she had seen that night. Except she was wearing black clothes, heavy boots of the same color, and a badge on her chest, marked "SECURITY." Jordane's brain operated more on instinct than thought, and she let out a sound:

"Inès?"

The woman flinched slightly, but quickly regained her posture and responded in a wary tone.

"Do we know each other? Because I've never seen you in my life."

Jordane didn't know where to start, and she stuttered for a moment before managing to articulate, clearing her throat with a grimace of pain:

"I'm Jordane," she murmured. "The letter."

The woman seemed bewildered, as if searching her memories but recalling nothing of the sort.

"What are you talking about? Are you trying to confuse me? Because I don't have time for games, either you tell me what you're doing here, or I'll hand this over to the police."

Jordane felt desperate. Was this really Inès? She felt it deep down. But the woman in front of her seemed to be about her age. If the legend was true, she should have been a decade older.

"If it's really her," she thought, "I want her secret for having skin like that."

She saw her interlocutor begin to fidget, so she tried to focus: for now, each word cost her, her lungs still hurt with each breath. Every syllable she uttered seemed to fill her mouth with tar.

"The monsters..." she finally muttered, "this town is indeed full of monsters."

Against all odds, the woman lunged at her, her face suddenly filled with rage.

"Is that why you came? To mock me?" she yelled at her. "To dredge up that story from so long ago? Will you never move on?"

Jordane shook her head frantically: how could this conversation have gone so wrong? She tried to plead her case.

"I'm not like them," she replied. "I believe you! I saw it! I went into the mine, and I saw the miner who attacked you! There was also a monster in the mine, it's true! I believe you, I swear!"

The woman studied her face, still stern, before replying after an eternity:

"And so, what are you doing here?"

She still seemed wary, trying to size her up. Jordane forced herself to answer in complete sentences:

"I came to find you, I thought you had disappeared, or that you didn't exist! The owner of the park told me he had documents about you..."

"Oswald!?" she interrupted, indignant. "What does he want from me? What did he tell you?"

"He said he knew you, that he would help me find you."

"What is he up to," continued the woman, seemingly ignoring Jordane.

Then, she resumed, this time looking her straight in the eye:

"Did he seem shady to you?"

Jordane nodded: yes, that guy seemed extremely shady. Maybe he was indeed hiding something?

The woman clicked her tongue, and seemed hesitant to say more. She looked around nervously.

"I want to trust you," she whispered, "but I barely know you. You say you've seen something supernatural?"

Jordane nodded again, and the woman seemed to think.

"Did it have anything to do with Oswald?" she asked.



"I don't know," replied Jordane. "Maybe not directly."

"I see. You know my story? What I saw in the tunnel... It was real, I'm not crazy."

She said this with a defiant tone.

"Yes, I believe you," replied Jordane. "There are monsters in this city, and we need to stop them."

"I've seen others," she said as if she had ignored her last remark. "This city is teeming with them."

"What is..."

"Listen," Inès interrupted, "this may sound crazy, but I think there's something inhuman in this park."

She seemed even more nervous, then she approached Jordane, almost whispering in her neck:

"That guy, Oswald, he's shady. No one is allowed to enter the Haunted House attraction, not even me, who's supposed to have all the keys! He's hiding something in there, for sure. A guy, a mechanic, told me he saw something not normal, one day, looking through a door crack. And why wouldn't we be allowed to go there, huh?"

The hairs on Jordane's neck stood on end.

"Do you think there's something in the Haunted House?" Jordane asked.

"I'm tired of all these oddities," continued Inès, "if all these things really happened, if everything I saw is real, then it must be true for the Haunted House."

Jordane nodded slowly: what could this Oswald be hiding?

"Go home," she continued, "it's time for me to go in there, while I still can."

"No," Jordane protested, "let's go together."

"No way," she retorted, "firstly, if it's dangerous, it's up to me to go. I am part of security, after all. And besides, I don't trust you, you'll cause trouble."

Jordane should have been outraged, but instead, she was trying to think of an argument to accompany her. She began to open her mouth, when Inès interrupted her:

"Shush! What was that?"

Jordane froze: she hadn't heard anything. But perhaps the security agent's ears were more attuned? Maybe she knew the old sounds of this park by heart.

"Besides," she thought, "why would Oswald hire someone to watch over an empty park? Does it have something to do with the mayor's visit?"

"I heard something," Inès hissed, alert.

Then she turned to Jordane:

"You, get out of here. I don't want to see you again. If I spot you again tonight, I'm calling the cops straight away. Besides, if I were you, I'd leave this damned town while you still can."

She then departed, disappearing behind one of the attractions, leaving Jordane standing there, dazed, as if she had never appeared.

\*\*\*

The sign right in front of her read "The Haunted House". Taller than it was wide, its structure of wooden planks - maybe pine? - was placed on a large concrete base, like a model displayed in a museum for giants. Above its three floors with green, peeling paint, the steeply pitched roof was made of terracotta tiles and featured a white frieze of ornate lambrequins. Some shutters were closed, others slightly open, held open by being nailed against the wooden facade. The grimy windows revealed curtains turned gray by the passage of time. Two round dormer windows on the roof made the antique building appear to have eyes, and its solid wood mouth had a simple wrought iron handle. Jordane read the rest of the attraction's sign:

*"The story of Duli's Poltergeist is probably the oldest legend of this town. Until now, this fascinating chronicle could only be explored in old newspaper clippings yellowed by time. But today, dear adventurers of the strange, we offer you the exclusive opportunity to experience this legend with your own eyes."*

*Dare to cross the threshold and penetrate the darkness that has imbued these walls for almost immemorial times. Are you ready to relive the events that have haunted this place for so long? The doors open just for you, curious to discover the jealously guarded truth within these walls.*

*Breathe in the oppressive atmosphere that surrounds you, as whispers of the past echo in every dark corner. Shadows dance, doors creak, and objects come to life. Will you witness the unexplained phenomena that have so tormented the brave souls who dared venture here?*

*The Haunted House of Duli promises you unforgettable chills and supernatural surprises. Do you dare to face your deepest fears and uncover the truth hidden behind this legend? Prepare for a terrifying and bewitching experience that will shake your senses and test your bravery. The question remains: are you ready to face the unknown and reveal the buried secrets of Duli's Haunted House?"*

"Incredible," Jordane said aloud.

She passed her hand over her hip, one of her old journalist reflexes; but her camera still lay in the depths of the mine, probably lost forever. She realized internally that she hadn't given up on writing her article, despite everything she had experienced today, and this idea made her smile. A miserable smile.

Inès had told her to leave, to get out of town. Maybe she had changed her mind and wanted to protect her, to know she was safe, but in that case, she didn't know her well. If there was something in this house, she was going to find it, with or without Inès.

"What are you hiding in there, Oswald?" she pondered.

She thought that the story of the Poltergeist must have been a well-kept secret for her not to know about it. She had scoured all the press articles mentioning the town, but she had seen nothing. However, she had started her research from the mine accident and hadn't gone back further than its creation: given the state of this house, this legend was much older, no doubt.

"Did you uproot this house to bring it here, or did you simply build the park all around this haunted place?" she thought aloud.

She looked around: the park seemed completely empty. She didn't know where Inès was, when she would return, but she didn't want to wait here for her to be forced out. So, she climbed the concrete step and found herself in front of the house's door. The handle was black steel with a roughly welded floral motif at the end. She placed her hand on it. It was ice cold.

"Monsters don't exist," she thought.

Then she burst into nervous laughter.

She gathered her courage and pulled the handle: the door opened with an agonizing creak. A musty, stale smell took her by surprise, and she almost backed away; but she stood firm and let the smells escape around her like sad ghosts. She stepped into the house. A window slammed somewhere above her, eliciting a scream.

"It's just a draft..." she tried to convince herself, but she was pale.

The corridor was narrow, almost claustrophobic between the two walls with their dull, tastelessly patterned wallpaper, some stains and scraps hanging here and there. To her left was a small ebony dresser hidden under a layer of dust. Only a round trace revealed the dark wood surface, maybe an old vase. To her right, a wooden staircase ascended and disappeared towards the upper floor. White traces on the wallpaper suggested family portraits that must have been there years ago. Two doors followed to her left, and at the end of the corridor, some kind of storage room. There was a pile of furniture and other debris hidden in the darkness, almost resembling a human form.

"Good day, madam," said the silhouette in the dark.

Jordane froze: before she had time to react, the glass chandelier flickered and the bulbs slowly lit up, illuminating the room. In front of her, what she had taken for a pile of rubbish spoke again:

"Please, come in! Don't be shy!"

The thing had a red velvet jacket adorned with gold buttons, a matching hat, and the lower body was just a large piston welded onto a metal plate. The thing moved its arms in a jerky motion, producing a sound of split ball bearings and unlubricated gears, beckoning her with its gloved hand in pristine white. Its face, painted and carved in wood, wore a bright smile. The eyes, glass balls, shone with a mischievous light. The voice of the automaton crackled, as if coming from a speaker.

"Welcome! Welcome to the Haunted House! What a chance to visit such a monument!"

Jordane swallowed, her eyes wide in astonishment: the puppet was staring at her motionlessly, in a posture inviting her to come closer. It resembled the old doormen who welcomed guests into luxury hotels, the kind of attire only seen in period films.

"Madam," it said with a hint of impatience in its interference-filled voice.

Involuntarily, Jordane took a step forward.

"What is this..."

"Allow me to introduce myself, I am Billie the automaton," interrupted the robot. "I will be your guide during your fabulous journey through time and history."

"What is this place?" asked Jordane, astonished that she was speaking to a machine.

Billie tilted its head to the side with a creaking noise that was almost teeth-grinding, yet maintaining the same enthusiastic air. Jordane thought she heard gears whirring somewhere inside the robot's head. It looked up briefly, as if it was waiting for something, or listening to someone upstairs that only it could hear, then continued as if nothing was amiss:

"Madam does not seem to be from the city, I see! But do not panic! Your guide is here to explain everything! I will tell you the story of the Poltergeist of Duli!"

It struck a theatrical pose, its poorly oiled piston buzzing, agitating its ball bearings and rusty gears with the noise of an orchestra tuning up before a concert.

"Now, let's turn back the clock, if you please."

Its singsong voice crackled occasionally, and there was something unsettling about its tone, as if its messages had been prerecorded. Yet, it seemed to be engaging in dialogue with her.

"I'm not talking about a few months, a few pairs of years, but try, rather, some eighty-six years ago. Your father was not yet born. Your grandfather, perhaps not even yet. What was your great-grandfather doing? Was he in the fields? Was he gone to war? A photo of your great-grandmother tucked inside the fold of his khaki jacket? Here in Duli, there was no mine yet. Only a lumberjack camp, gradually attacking the surrounding forests. Duli had only a hundred inhabitants. Everyone knew each other. When people needed something, they went to the city, about thirty kilometers to the east. The lumberjacks took their horses, the sawmill owners their cars. Boisterous machines, not yet very efficient, but oh so shiny..."

"The Jagger family," it continued, "had recently settled in the area. Rodolphe, an honest merchant, and his wife Maggie, a homemaker, had two delightful little girls, Adélaïde and Justine. Everything was going wonderfully until one day, strange events began to occur, escalating progressively until a terrible tragedy struck the family. And it is with honor that I will accompany you throughout this journey of the strange."

The creature looked her straight in the eyes, still with its mischievous glint, and Jordane had to look away to keep from going mad.

"What are you, exactly?" she said.

"Allow me to introduce myself, I am Billie the automaton," it repeated. "I will be your guide during your fabulous journey through time, and history."

Not knowing what she had expected as an answer, she tried her luck with another question:

"And what if I'm not interested? If I want to get out of here?"

Billie sprang into action amidst a mix of creaks and clicks, and placed its hand on its chin, looking upwards, as if thinking. A few seconds later, its crackling voice resumed:

"That would be regrettable. Once you embark on an attraction, you must see it through. But perhaps, exceptionally, we could make it interesting for you?"

It froze, appearing to wait for a response. Jordane bit:

"What do you mean?"

"Well," it continued cheerily, "let's say if you manage to solve this mystery, dear Madam, I will reveal the mystery of this park to you. I will show you what happened on the evening of its opening."

Jordane blinked: the thing was offering her the chance to find out what happened during the park's opening accident, which could be the missing link in this whole story.

"And if I can't solve it?" she asked.

The robot only returned her gaze with its playful and mischievous look, remaining silent.

What choice did she have? Wander around the park until she found an administrative building, break in and hope to find incriminating documents? If she took up this challenge, she could get the answers she wanted directly. Maybe even, put an end to this curse plaguing the town.

"I agree," she concluded.

"Splendid!" exclaimed the automaton in its seemingly prerecorded voice.

A mechanical scraping sound was heard, like a crank turning, and a small, thin, rectangular object, like a piece of paper, emerged from a slot in its torso that she hadn't noticed. It grasped the object with its mechanical fingers and held it out:

"Please take your ticket, if you would."

Jordane didn't move, her body refusing to advance. The automaton waved the ticket in front of her:

"Please take your ticket, if you would."

Ignoring her instincts, she stepped forward. The floorboards creaked under her steps. She passed the staircase, with Billie still motionless, waiting. She walked past the two closed doors, covered with wildflower-patterned wallpaper, and stood before him. His eyes shone, reflecting the chandelier's light. He stared at her eagerly, his immutable smile on his lips. The ticket was gold-colored, finely printed. It read:

ADMISSION TICKET 00089

THE HAUNTED HOUSE

JORDANE V. FONTAINE

NON-REFUNDABLE

The mention of her full name sent an unpleasant shiver up her spine. She took it with a trembling hand, praying not to touch his white silk-gloved fingers, praying not to feel the moist touch of flesh that might be hidden underneath. She didn't touch his finger, and Billie simply lowered his hand with a mechanical creak. She was right in front of him, wondering if she couldn't hear his breathing.

"Calm down, Jo, this is not the time to falter," she thought.

"Perfect," Billie resumed, "if you would care to proceed."

He activated his gears to ceremoniously point to the door on his left. Jordane moved forward, realizing she couldn't bear the proximity to the automaton. She placed her hand on the doorknob, and the door opened with an agonized creak.

She discovered a typical room of the era: numerous dark wood furniture pieces with intricate ornaments adorned the room. Shelves displayed fine china, white porcelain with painted scenes of farmers plowing fields or hunters strolling through forests. A long-since extinguished fireplace must have warmed the house in winter. At the back, several sofas surrounded a coffee table filled with period objects: a pipe, a crochet set, a pair of spectacles. In the center of the room, around the large checkered tablecloth-covered table, sat the Jagger family.

Contented and fulfilled, they shared a meal, all smiles. Rodolphe was a stocky man with an elongated nose and pronounced chin. He was bald but sported bushy sideburns. He wore an emerald green suit and had round, gold-rimmed glasses. He held a soup spoon in one hand, and the local newspaper in the other. He smiled towards his wife, who sat opposite him with an empty plate. Maggie appeared worn but happy. With a delicate face and dark circles under her eyes, she laughed while watching her two daughters, her long red braid resting on her chest. She wore a thick burgundy-colored dress. Adélaïde and Justine, one about ten years old and the other probably six, held hands and burst into laughter, sitting side by side. This family scene was perfect, one felt as if they were there, sharing this delightful evening with them.

If it weren't for the fact that all the people around the table were wax mannequins.

"It makes you want to have your own, doesn't it?"

Jordane jumped at the sound of the voice. She looked to her right and nearly had a heart attack seeing Billie seated at

the back of the room, between two sofas. He stood upright, hands clasped in front of him. Jordane, still in the doorway, turned towards the corridor and looked at the corner where her interlocutor had stood moments ago, now empty.

"Impossible," she thought to herself, "did he move?"

"I am your guide, dear Madam," he said, as if reading her thoughts, "I will be by your side throughout this adventure."

"What am I supposed to see here?" she asked in a slightly aggressive tone.

His prerecorded voice was starting to get on her nerves. Despite its cheerful and dynamic tone, she could sense the coldness of a machine.

"This scene represents a typical day in the Jagger family. A happy and thriving family, respected by the community. At least, for now."

"Okay," she said, "and then?"

"I suggest you continue the tour and head to the bathroom, where it all began. Turn back, if you will, and take the first door this time."

Jordane hesitated for a moment, glancing back at the room: she wasn't sure if she was done with this space, or even what she was supposed to look for, to be honest. She disliked following the instructions of this infernal machine, entering its game, but she had no other plan. She then backed away and closed the door behind her, perhaps hoping to lock away this monstrosity and never see it again. But she didn't believe it much.

She found herself in the entrance hall, and retraced her steps to the previous door. When she opened it, heart tight, she came upon a small corridor, also lit, with a door to her left, and one in front of her, both closed. The wallpaper was now purple with white patterns.

"The door on the left," she heard just behind her shoulder, and her blood ran cold. She did not want to acknowledge his frightening presence with her gaze, and she moved forward without turning back. She opened the door, and covered her mouth with her hand when she saw a man.

No, it wasn't a man, it was Mr. Jagger's statue. And he was even more shocked than her. He was terrified. He stared at his own reflection in the mirror, frozen in an endless scream, both hands over his ears. He wore a white bathrobe, and the curtain behind him was drawn, revealing a large bathtub. An old-fashioned razor lay on the sink in front of him, along with several toothbrushes. The mirror was covered in fog - or rather, a sticker imitating the texture of fog - with a message written as if by a finger: "I'M WATCHING YOU ADELAIDE."

The room had a shelf filled with towels and various products. An old metal ventilation grille was set in the ceiling, just above the heavy cast iron bathtub. On the wall hung a sign similar to those presenting the park's attractions:

*November 18th.*

*The Poltergeist makes itself known for the first time.*

*Rodolphe testified that he was taking his usual bath when he started hearing voices. He spoke of children's songs, laughter, and beastly screams. The voice, which he did not recognize, started calling his eldest daughter several times. He panicked and got out of the bath to discover a sinister message on the mirror.*

Jordane inspected the room again: her critical mind whispered that this first supernatural encounter was nothing extraordinary. Good old Rodolphe could have invented the story of voices, and the mark on the mirror could have been made by his own finger. But she spent a few seconds contemplating the wax figure: the details were astonishing, it looked like his scream could come out at any moment, that he could suddenly come to life, running out of the room and knocking Jordane over on his way. This idea began to make her uncomfortable, so she left the small bathroom. She took a step towards the end of the corridor and cautiously opened the second door.

This time, she discovered Mrs. Jagger.

She was on her knees in the bathroom, scrubbing the floor. The room was small, the walls covered with thick wallpaper in white and beige stripes; at least, they had been. The toilet bowl overflowed with toilet paper, and all the walls were covered with a brown substance resembling mud, as if smeared by hand. Again, a sign was there to provide explanations:

*November 23rd*

*The Poltergeist wreaks havoc throughout the house for several days now, its pranks starting to become in poor taste. One morning, Maggie finds the toilets painted with fecal matter. It is from this day that the term "Poltergeist" is first pronounced. From this moment, the interactions will only worsen.*

"Okay," Jordane thought, "this is becoming a classic Poltergeist. A childish spirit wanting to play and making bad jokes. But again, this could be staging."

"I'll let you imagine the smell," Billie intervened from somewhere in the other corridor.

Jordane turned around, feeling she could talk to him without thinking she was losing her mind if he was in another room and she couldn't see him.

"For now, the lack of witnesses and solid facts make me think this story is just a simple masquerade, a setup by the family to make money. Maybe the heirs still get a portion of the revenue this old house makes?"

Billie let out a sardonic laugh, as if momentarily completely out of character.

"Madam with a critical mind, I see. But that is very fortunate, for it will be needed, to solve this case: I can promise you that this is just the beginning."

"Okay," she said warily, "what's next, then?"

"If you please, I would like you to pay special attention to the reading room, located upstairs."

\*\*\*

The corridor stairs were made of thin pine wood planks, and each step elicited a dismal creak, making one wonder if they might give way at any moment.

"Difficult for the girls to sneak out at night, one step here would wake the whole house," she thought.

She reached the top, encountering another corridor dotted with mold spots. The black rot sometimes spread in large patches, peeling the wallpaper in its wake. She faced a partially open door, and the corridor formed a "U" shape, continuing along the staircase to four other rooms.

"If you would care to enter," she heard from the other side of the door.

She then pushed the handle. She recoiled when she came face to face with a Maggie lunging at her, her face contorted in a terrible grimace. She was screaming, her eyes bulging out of their sockets. And she had reason to: she was being pursued by flying books. They seemed to emerge from various shelves, hurling themselves at her. Behind, the multicolored fabric sofa had transformed into a monster: it had an open maw filled with sharp teeth. It had eyes on its armrests with a menacing gaze. Jordane walked around Madame Jagger's statue to enter what seemed to be the reading room.

"Terrible scene, isn't it?" a crackling voice said to her right.

She wasn't surprised to find Billie, still affixed to his steel plate with a piston as his only leg. He followed her with his mischievous eyes, his neck creaking slightly. She approached the flying books: they resembled a swarm of bats, flapping their pages to fly. They were suspended from the ceiling by almost invisible fishing lines. The sofa had been cleverly made from a mix of fabric and wax. The automaton, with a polite gesture that broke the silence, invited her to read the explanatory sign:

*November 28th*

*The Poltergeist's activities become increasingly dangerous.*

*Maggie recounted that she was reading quietly in the room when the sofa suddenly came to life and tried to devour her. She fled, but the library's books came to life in turn and threw themselves at her. The door slammed shut behind her, and she heard the commotion continue for a few moments.*

"Interesting," said Jordane. "It's funny that fishing line was used to reproduce the scene of the flying books, because that's often how pranksters stage paranormal events."

"Madam leans towards the skeptical side of the scale, I see."



She opened her mouth to respond but fell silent: she was going to say that after all, the paranormal was just collective hysteria or trickery, but then again, she was talking to an automaton that seemed to have come to life.

"There are hidden worlds all around you, and you don't know it yet," he told her as if reading her thoughts. "Not yet."

"What does that mean?" she retorted.

But Billie just stared at her. Just behind her, a creaking sound was heard from the bottom of the stairs. She spun around in panic, but there was nothing.

"Is there someone else here?" she asked.

"No Madam," he politely replied. "Just you and me."

She studied the staircase again: still no movement.

"The house is very old," he continued. "You understand?"

"Where does this door lead?" she asked, changing the subject.

She pointed to an almost invisible door behind the sofa, on the side of the room.

"You have a keen eye, I must admit," he acknowledged. "It leads to a room you will visit, I promise you. But not now. To continue the story chronologically, I invite you to go back down for the moment and go past the living room to the kitchen."

She wanted to protest but reconsidered: she didn't want to upset him, fearing he might become even more alive than he already was, and anyway, the sooner she finished the tour, the sooner he would give her the information she sought.

"A haunted house tour, guided by a haunted automaton. Did you think you'd put something like that in your article?" she thought.

She cast one last glance at Maggie, frozen in her expression of horror, running towards the exit but never reaching it, like in a nightmare. But no awakening for this wax mannequin.

\*\*\*

After passing the Jagger family at their last happy and serene meal, she entered the kitchen. It featured a huge cast iron stove, several dish cabinets, and pans hanging from a shelf, suspended in mid-air. Here, she found Adelaide and her sister Justine around a table. The latter had her hands over her mouth, her eyes bulging out, watching helplessly as her sister protected herself as best as she could from two knives hurling towards her. The kitchen knives were about twenty centimeters above the table, held by a thin wire frame structure. In front of the stove, Maggie, looking fierce, waved her pan as if she intended to knock out the sharpened weapons with a well-placed blow.

Again, Billie watched her with his glass eyes, lurking in the shadow of the pantry.

This time, she didn't find a sign explaining the scene, but a framed newspaper article from the era on the wall, its almost parchment-like paper protected behind glass. The article was dated December 1st. Jordane deciphered the headline, written in capital letters with an aggressive font: **THE HOUSE OF HORROR.**

She smiled: there were already people like her a hundred years ago. The paranormal world has fascinated man since he became man. She struggled to read the body of the article, especially in this dim light, but she did her best:

*A terrorized family turns to a priest following a series of horrific events.*

*The Yagger family, tormented for weeks by a malicious spirit, decided to make their case public after an unimaginable ordeal, the straw that broke the camel's back.*

*"It's a Poltergeist," affirmed the priest, after young Yagger girl, Adelaide, shared her account: "I was quietly in the kitchen with my sister Justine, peeling potatoes, when the knives came to life and attacked me."*

*The horrified parents have testified to a multitude of paranormal phenomena starting several weeks ago. The activity seems to be centered on their eldest daughter, Adelaide.*

"This Poltergeist is quite determined to escalate the situation," Jordane commented.

"Indeed," confirmed Billie in her prerecorded gentle voice. "That was when the family called for help. If the Poltergeist was harassing Adelaide to play with knives, how far could it go? The day after the article was published, a priest came to bless the house. He slept in the living room to monitor the ghost's activity."

"They couldn't find anyone more impartial than a priest?" Jordane replied, shaking her head.

"Not in such a small village, ma'am."

Jordane thought the appearance of a clergyman would further complicate the story: just as a hammer was made to hit nails and saw everything as a nail, a priest was made to fuel people's fear of the afterlife, so for him, everything would be an authentic act of a Poltergeist. If the press had counted on his testimony, it would be even harder to untangle the truth among the exaggerations and dubious interpretations.

"For now," said Jordane, "I feel that any family member could be the culprit."

"Why must there be a culprit?"

Jordane eyed him from where she stood: his eyes gleamed in the dark, his smile of painted teeth shone, making him almost threatening.

"There's always an explanation," she retorted, "you just have to find it."

"I see," he replied, chuckling. "In that case, I'll leave you to go to little Adelaide's room upstairs, first door on the left."

Jordane didn't hesitate and climbed the stairs two at a time. She passed the reading room and entered the bedroom.

It was a typical room for a ten-year-old girl, except that there were no plastic toys, nothing that lit up and made noise, only rag dolls and wooden toys. There was a small dresser and a wardrobe. The room itself wasn't very big.

Jordane finally met the aforementioned priest: a small, chubby man, dressed in his white robe and accessories. In one hand, he firmly held the Bible. With the other, he wielded a wooden cross towards the small single bed at the center of the room. Adelaide was on it, or rather above it: suspended a meter from the mattress with several metal chains screwed to the ceiling. The priest seemed to be either performing an exorcism or simply witnessing a Poltergeist manifestation. Adelaide was terrified, desperately trying to cling to the sheets, her head down and legs in the air. Jordane shivered at this caricature of a religious scene.

A new article was framed on the wall:

### **POLTERGEIST CONFIRMED**

*The church's agent confirmed what everyone was whispering: the Yagger family is the victim of an evil spirit, a Poltergeist. He claims to have seen the spirit take hold of little Adelaide and try to pull her to the ceiling. Poltergeists are souls of children lost between worlds, seeking to play and inflict all sorts of pranks on the family they haunt.*

*Usually, the pranks become more and more violent, and church intervention becomes necessary before things get dangerous.*

"I suppose there were no other adults in the room at that time?" Jordane asked her guide, who was now in the room.

"No, ma'am, just his testimony."

"Children can be easily impressionable," she continued as if lecturing. "If an adult, especially one representing authority, releases a certain energy, the child can unconsciously enter their dynamic. In other words, if poor Adelaide was alone in a room with this priest, and he desperately needed to see a paranormal manifestation, her subconscious might have wanted to meet his needs, and she could have started doing strange things."

"I see we are dealing with a connoisseur..."

"It's like exorcisms," she continued. "Initially, you have a simple child suffering from mental illness, like schizophrenia, epileptic seizures, or severe depression, and the parents don't want to admit they're facing a disorder that may not even be treatable, over which they have no control, and which will require a lifetime of care. Instead, they choose to believe the problem lies elsewhere, a demon. It removes all responsibility from them, they think the problem can be solved overnight, and their child can return to normal, that is, as they want them to be. Once the priest enters the room, the phenomenon of mass hysteria begins. Adults see what they want to see, and the poor child has no choice

but to play along, withering away, sometimes to death.”

“Someone has a grudge against the clergy,” Billie noted with a tone full of malice.

Jordane glared at him: his remark felt like a cold shower, and she felt some anger at being analyzed by a cold, emotionless machine.

“The mother would make a good suspect,” she declared to change the subject. “Present at most of the scenes, coming out of the priest’s overactive imagination. She has time to prepare her moves if she’s a housewife.”

“Perhaps,” Billie chuckled. “She does indeed make a plausible suspect. But have you thought of everything? Have you considered the famous M triad?”

Jordane smiled at the mention of the M triad: it was a tool used by investigators to help solve a crime. To find a suspect, one needed to answer three questions: Means? Modus operandi? Motive?

For the means, Maggie could use fishing lines and all sorts of tricks. For the modus operandi, she could easily prepare her moves when alone in the house. But the motive? What could it be?

“Did they gain anything from this story? Were there books? Interviews? Did they sell the house at a good price?”

“That, my dear,” Billie replied, “you will discover soon enough. If you’re done with this room, I suggest you go up to the attic.”

Jordane frowned: “The attic?”

“Yes,” continued the automaton, “but rest assured, there’s no danger.”

“That’s what I’ll believe,” she thought.

She turned around, keeping an eye on Billie until she completely left the room. When she turned back, she found him in front of her, blocking the exit to the stairs, which had been free just a few minutes ago. Always the same mischievous eyes.

“It’s that way,” he said, pointing down the corridor, cleaning his gears.

Jordane stepped aside and delved into the hallway, reaching a dead end.

“Where should I go?” she asked.

“Look above your head, dear Madame.”

Jordane looked up and discovered a hatch in the ceiling, with a string hanging down.

“Of course,” she exclaimed in frustration.

She pulled the string, and a staircase unfolded to the floor. From her vantage point, she could see the house’s roof, simple tiles laid on wooden beams. A lamp cast a faint, yellow-tinged light.

“Come on, Jo, when it’s time to go...” she told herself.

She stepped on the first stair: the structure slightly bent under her weight, emitting a series of eerie creaks.

“Don’t worry,” Billie called from the other end of the corridor. “It’s safe.”

Jordane sighed and began climbing on all fours. Reaching the top, she found a confined space filled with various objects: trunks, a bicycle, furniture, and all sorts of other odds and ends. She saw Justine in the same position as her, eyes fixed on something in the back of the room. Jordane made out a silhouette almost indistinguishable from the darkness just under the rafters, but it was there. Next to it, she thought she saw an information plaque on the wall. Still on her knees on the last step, she began to approach, then froze:

“Billie, you’re not going to close the hatch behind me, are you?”

“Such a thing would never occur to me, Madame,” he retorted from his position.

She imagined his mischievous eyes and smile as he spoke those words, and she sighed. Nevertheless, she stood up and advanced, her knees knocking against the old wood. She passed Justine, who seemed captivated by what was in front of her. Jordane’s gaze fell on the silhouette: a black, human-shaped sign, about one meter twenty tall. It was like a shadow.

Jordane read the panel:

December 15

*After several weeks of tormenting the family, especially Adélaïde, the Poltergeist shifts its attention to her younger sister, Justine.*

*She recounted how she used to meet it in the attic, where it spoke to her and asked her to play with it.*

She turned around, moving carefully to avoid bumping into anything. She saw a small desk facing a dormer window. Outside, night was falling, and she had a beautiful view of the dormant attractions. She continued, noticing a sealed old garbage chute. Opposite it was a chest: awkwardly positioned in the middle of the path, unlike the rest of the stored items which were somewhat neatly stacked to leave room to pass. She then grabbed one of the handles of the box and pulled with all her might: the scraping noise it made as it moved became metallic.

"Bingo," she thought.

Once moved a meter away, she went to investigate: under the chest was a hidden black steel air vent, similar to one in a bathroom.

"Maybe I just found the origin of the voices that tormented poor old Rodolphe in his bathroom," she thought.

"Nice find, Madame!" Billie shouted from below.

Jordane turned towards the hatch, grimacing: she disliked how he knew everything she did. She decided she had seen enough and had a good idea of what had happened here, so she went back down. She found her guide where she had left him, at the top of the stairs.

"Are there many rooms left?" she asked.

"Only three. You're close to the end."

Then, he pointed to a door she hadn't opened yet. She did, and found herself in another, more spacious children's room. The bed was prettier, the furniture larger; however, all the toys were piled on the floor, all destroyed. Porcelain dolls shattered, cloth dolls torn and dismembered. Board games with boards snapped in half.

Justine sat on the floor, crying.

Someone had written on the wall: "Why won't you play with me?"

Jordane looked for the information plaque and found it on the other side of the bed. She approached it and read:

December 22

*After more than a month of haunting, the specter decides to focus on Justine, and no longer Adélaïde. This shift marks the beginning of the dark chapter of this story.*

Jordane surveyed the scene again: Justine was devastated by the loss of all her toys. Why change targets? Was Maggie tired of focusing on Adélaïde? Or was Adélaïde starting to suspect, so she took an easier prey?

"Why does the explanation have to be natural?" an artificial voice asked from the doorway.

Jordane's heart leaped in her chest, still surprised by the automaton.

"Because there's always an explanation for everything," she retorted hotly.

"Really?" he said in a petty voice.

Her eyes moved with a crackling sound to rest on Justine's bed. At the same moment, the duvet pulled itself away at a breathtaking speed to crash against the opposite wall, as if pulled by an invisible hand. Jordane stepped back quickly, letting out a cry of surprise.

"And there," he said triumphantly, "what's the natural explanation for that?"

"It's the same for this damned town!" she hissed angrily. "I will solve the mystery and find an explanation for all of this!"

Billie began to snicker, ignoring her last remark:

"In this case, you are quite right, there is a natural explanation for Duli's Poltergeist. But that's only half of the answer,

isn't it? Shall we continue in the master bedroom to try and solve this mystery?"

Jordane stormed out of the room, furious. She hated this machine, the way it followed her, saw what she did, read her thoughts. They had to finish this quickly, so she could get the truth out of it and leave.

She returned to the first-floor corridor and plunged into the only room she hadn't visited: she found herself face to face with Rodolphe and Maggie, screaming their heads off, lying in their bed. They weren't looking at anything in particular, just had wide, panicked eyes. Rodolphe was holding his head with both hands, Maggie was clinging with all her might to the duvet. Jordane almost left, slamming the door at this sight, but she kept her cool. Instead, she headed to the information plaque, placed on the wall next to the bed:

*December 27*

*Justine has been missing for four days. She remains unfound, despite her parents being woken up every night by her screams and cries for help, seemingly coming from the walls.*

*The Poltergeist no longer shows itself, and it's thought to have taken her with it, condemned in the in-between worlds.*

"The little girl disappeared?" Jordane wondered.

"Yes," replied Billie from the other corner of the room.

"What happened to her?" she pressed.

"That, dear Madam, you will discover in the last room of our exhibition."

"Where's that?"

"The basement."

Jordane left the room, hoping to finally end this last staging. She raced down the stairs, turned around, and reached the end of the corridor, the storeroom where she had first encountered Billie. She discovered a door under the stairs and opened it: it led to old wooden stairs plunging into the ground.

"How can it go under the ground if there's a concrete slab under the house," a voice in her head said.

She saw the shadow of her guide enveloping the last steps of the staircase.

"Please, come down," he invited her from the basement.

She descended cautiously and arrived in a cellar lit only by a bare bulb. At the other end of the room, the two parents were kneeling in front of an indistinct bundle, wrapped in white linen cloth. To her right was Billie, motionless for now, and next to him, the statue of Adelaide, staring at her parents with a vacant look and a distracted smile on her lips.

She advanced into the room: she realized that the two parents were at the foot of an old garbage chute. They had moved a heavy boiler to access it, as evidenced by the cast iron mass and the black streaks on the floor.

She knelt beside them and saw that they were crying. Her eyes fell on the bundle: a small hand was sticking out. Next to it, a newspaper article had been framed against the garbage chute, dated December 29:

### **DEAD**

*With the terrible discovery of Justine's body, the family of the House of Horror can finally mourn. Missing for more than a week, the cries for help from the six-year-old girl were heard day and night, despite a thorough search of the house by the authorities.*

*She was found in an old, condemned garbage chute, perhaps pushed by the Poltergeist himself.*

*The Church believes she died instantly, and that her lost soul was calling to be found, so that her mourning could end her torment. The Poltergeist's activity had ceased since Justine's disappearance, and we all hope that this family, stricken by this cruel twist of fate, can finally find peace.*

"What happened?" Jordane asked.

"That's for you to tell me," the guide retorted.

Jordane stood up and faced him:

"Fine, I played your game, followed your exhibition to end up with a dead girl. No more playing now, tell me what happened on the day the park opened."

The automaton stared at her with its shining eyes, still smiling.

"Have you solved the mystery?" the prerecorded voice asked.

"I don't care about this story!" she exploded. "It's Maggie, no matter!"

"No," he simply said.

"Then it's nobody! A collective hysteria, a little girl who went to play in an old garbage chute, and that's all!"

"Would you like a clue?" he replied calmly.

"No!"

"Well, then, what is the secret of this story?"

Jordane sighed, not knowing what he expected of her, and what had happened in this damned story.

"If you answer correctly," he continued, "I will give you a tool that will allow you to know what happened on the opening night, and why the park was closed for so long."

She tried to regain her composure, to gather her thoughts. She had to review all the clues thoroughly. She set her gaze on the wax doll representing Adelaide, the way she was smiling: it was chilling. Then, her deductive mind unlocked, and she traced back the entire trail: the master bedroom came back to her in a flash. It had a ventilation grille, just at the foot of the bed. The same grille was present in the bathroom, and another had been hidden by a large wooden chest, right in front of the attic garbage chute. How the silhouette there was the size of a child. The reading room, with an almost invisible door, leading to the room on the left she had visited: Adelaide's room. That smile, those empty eyes...

"It's Adelaide," she finally said. "She staged the Poltergeist story, and she pushed her sister into the garbage chute."

The robot began to laugh, shaking its metal frame, producing clinks and creaks in rhythm.

"Well done," it said. "You've solved the mystery. There was never a Poltergeist in this house. Only a ten-year-old girl full of ingenuity."

"But why?" she asked. "And how?"

"Don't worry, you will find out soon. In the meantime, I am a man of my word, and you have earned your reward. Are you ready to discover the truth?"

"Yes, of course," she replied as if it were an insult. "What is it?"

"Madam, have you ever heard of astral projection?"

\*\*\*

"Astral projection?" she repeated, incredulous.

"Yes," replied the robot. "All events happening somewhere emit energy. This energy can stick around, and even interfere with the world of the living. Like snippets of film being replayed. It's very rare to interact with these kinds of energies, but in the world they belong to, the astral world, they are much more powerful, and can be observed more easily. This house is filled with energy, from such a traumatic event. You don't see it as I do, but the ghosts of the past are everywhere. The same goes for the park. The phantoms of that night still buzz like a power station, and if you go to the astral world, you can relive that fateful evening."

"Wait," stammered Jordane, "you want me to take an astral journey, to find myself in another world and access a replay of events that happened here?"

"Yes," he said, laughing, "it's a bit simplistic and crude, but that's the idea. You've heard of it before, haven't you?"

"Yes, of course, but aren't there conditions, or restrictions, to go there?"

"There are techniques to achieve it, and I'm going to teach you one, are you ready?"

"Is it dangerous?" she blurted out despite herself.

"Not at all," he replied with his mischievous eyes. "As long as I'm here to guide you."



Jordane hesitated: could she trust him? It was extremely dangerous, but maybe it was the key to discovering the truth.

"Are you ready?" asked the automaton.

\*\*\*

From what Jordane knew, astral projection was a rather well-known phenomenon and widely represented in today's culture, but she thought it was a euphemism for relaxation after meditation, or a mirage produced by the brain when dreaming; the esoteric explanation stated that the body had a physical version, the one we see every day and can touch, but also a multitude of bodies made of energies, connected to different planes of reality - esoteric, astral, and many others according to beliefs and religions. Astral projection allowed one to leave their physical shell and explore another reality, the astral plane: this plane of existence was supposed to be made of energy and populated by spirits, whether good or bad. According to her readings on the subject, it was almost proven that astral projections were real, but that it was a creation of the brain when it entered a phase of REM sleep under certain special conditions: meditation, sleep paralysis, or near-death experience.

It was all linked to our good old frontal cortex.

"Are you ready?" asked the automaton.

"Wait, no, I haven't made my decision yet."

"Don't be afraid, dear Madam, it will be almost painless..."

Jordane wanted to back away, feeling that she was in danger. She began to head towards the stairs to escape, but as soon as she moved, the pre-recorded voice behind her resumed, seeming to whisper something directly in her ear:

"Look at the ground."

She saw herself running up the stairs, climbing each step, one by one, but she realized that she was still where she was, her eyes glued to the tiled floor.

"What?" she managed to think, but she could no longer take her eyes off the surface of the tiles.

"Look at the ground... And become aware of all the nuances of colors of this floor..."

She was now fascinated by the patterns of the tiles, beautiful and so perfect: such harmony hidden from the world's eyes for so many years was revealing itself to her.

"Now you see an old pot placed on a piece of furniture... look at its shape... its size... focus on the handle of the pot and the way the light reflects on the metal... imagine the smell of the stew coming out. Imagine the lazy white smoke coming out of it."

She observed the rusty pot and the spider webs that had firmly clung to it: the reflection of the bulb in front of her, and she imagined the smell of the stew that must have cooked there an eternity ago.

"But wait," she thought, "I can really smell it!"

She didn't know if her mind was playing tricks on her, but she now almost felt like she could see smoke coming out of it.

"By imagining all this, you begin to relax. And what you see helps you to go a little more inside yourself. Each element you focus on allows you to gently enter this pleasant hypnotic state. And it helps you to go a little more into this feeling of fullness."

Her eyes closed despite herself, and she felt her entire body relax: a soft and warm vibration of serenity was slowly enveloping her.

"You hear the sound of your breathing becoming deeper and deeper... and that of your heart beating..."

Her breathing was slow and regular, and her heart was beating the tempo of this gentle melody.

"You feel the temperature of the air on your face... there are also the beats of your heart... you feel each heartbeat in your chest... and you feel the weight of your body standing on the floor..."

She felt her body become immobile, like an anchor lazily resting at the bottom of the ocean.

"And you feel how some parts of your body become heavier and numb as you enter this altered state."

She now felt her body sinking, going down, but her mind becoming lighter and lighter: she felt like she was entering a dream.

"Now, open your eyes."

A woman was sitting, or rather slumped on the floor, resting against a corner of the wall, her head down. She was below, distant and hidden in the darkness, as if she were at the bottom of a well: Jordane recognized herself and understood that it was her own body, asleep in a corner of the room. Yet, she knew she was there: somewhere up high, overlooking the room, cradled in a soft light as if floating in the room, and not down there, sitting on the cold floor and leaning against the rough and dirty wall, lost in a veil of black and distant darkness.

She felt no physical sensation and seemed to have broken all contact with her fleshly body, but she nevertheless saw that it was still connected thanks to a long luminous and gray thread coming out of the sternum of her inanimate silhouette.

"This is the silver cord," said a voice behind her.

She turned around but saw nothing, still the empty room. Yet, the voice seemed to whisper its words in her ear.

"It is the chain that binds you to the physical world," continued the voice, "it prevents you from venturing too far and getting lost in the astral world."

Jordane half-listened: she was trying to get used to her new perceptions. She felt an extremely powerful emotion. A wave that engulfed her and poured into her entire being. She felt that the future held no tomorrow for her, that she had lost something incredibly precious, and that she would never find it again. She only wanted to sink into darkness forever, anything to no longer feel this crushing sorrow. She saw that the statues of Rodolphe and Maggie had come to life. The two parents were crying and lamenting over the white shroud: she understood that she was now reliving a scene nearly a hundred years old, and the emotions were rushing into her. She looked to her right and saw Adelaide. And that smile. A chilling coldness invaded her: her entire being instantly emptied, as if under the effect of a gust of wind. She felt nothing, except emptiness. An emptiness that, paradoxically, filled her entire soul and nibbled away at it more and more. She felt a very slight satisfaction, but it was a feeling buried under the incredible noise of this corrosive void.

Despite herself, her body began to rise: she felt herself leaving the stage, as if pulled backward, and everything became blurred, both the outlines and the emotions, as she moved through the floors. She was now in the attic. It was pitch black. Fear had taken hold of her. An immensely powerful fear. She had never felt so lost and terrified as she did now. She saw Adélaïde in her pajamas, using all her strength to move the heavy chest. She opened the ventilation grid and stepped back to open the garbage chute door.

A little girl's blood-curdling scream emanated from it, calling for help, and was quickly joined by the screams of her parents, trying to contact her in return. Adélaïde was snickering behind her hands, but the feelings she sent to Jordane were nothing but a graveyard filled with acidic tombs.

Jordane was violently pulled from the scene, and for a moment, like an interference, she saw another painting: worry, a feeling that instantly ravaged her. She caught a glimpse of the Yagger parents, dead worried about their little girl's disappearance. And Adélaïde crying in front of them, having lost her younger sister. But what Jordane felt was joy: the intense joy of deception, of pretending.

She now moved to another scene, still in the attic: Justine was curious, addressing the Poltergeist. But it wasn't a ghost. That shadow hidden in the corner, asking her to play with it in the garbage chute, was Adélaïde.

Once again pulled backward, Jordane rushed through the kitchen: a knife slowly dragged across the table towards Adélaïde, her sister, and her horrified mother, but Jordane saw everything, she saw the magnet under the table. This passage lasted only a moment, like the memory of a dream, and she found herself in the reading room. Adélaïde setting a mousetrap under a cushion on the sofa, with fishing lines connected to books. She used the hidden door to hide in her room. Jordane watched her mother arrive, sit on the trapped cushion, and go screaming, tripping over the wires, and sending books flying. Jordane observed Adélaïde return to the room, lock it, and ravage it. She felt her uncontrollable anger, the void devouring her. She thought of her assailant, Richard, and wondered if they were made of the same wood.

Then, the memories surged back to the origin of the drama. The last dream before waking up. She was in the living room, the whole family dining, happily. She felt a lot of joy, happiness. She watched the two girls play together, laughing, and her gaze stopped on Adélaïde: beneath her bursts of laughter, hid an incredibly powerful feeling. Jealousy. Extreme jealousy for the attention her little sister received. And the intense desire to reclaim that attention. The scene passed as if she were watching the landscape from a train window, and she found herself back in the basement, above her own body.

"Quite a story, isn't it?" said Billie, a meter below, looking directly into her disembodied soul's eyes.

"She made up this whole story to get attention, and to get rid of her little sister," lamented Jordane.

The robot nodded with a sound of rusted metal.

"Now," it said, "if you leave this house with your astral form, you will finally be able to discover what happened on the night of the opening."

She hesitated: she didn't know if it was wise to leave her body here, with this monstrosity, but the truth was so close, she just had to reach out to grab it. All the conditions were met, it would be a shame not to take advantage of it. So she crossed the wall and left the house.

\*\*\*

The park was identical to the one she had visited. Just as empty. Except that the buildings looked brand new, and not a single blade of grass protruded from the paving stones on the ground. The night had fallen, but all the lights were on.

She heard footsteps, and turned her head in their direction: she recognized Inès approaching the house. She wore the same uniform and had the same features, as if she hadn't aged until their meeting in the mortal world. She arrived in front of the door, looking around as if she were being followed, and took out a bunch of keys. She rummaged until she found the right one, still suspiciously looking around her, like a thief, and inserted it into the front door's lock, unlocking it. From the other side of the path, a figure appeared and started approaching erratically:

"INÈS!! INÈS!!" shouted the stranger.

Inès jumped out of her shoes and turned towards the voice.

"Damn it!" she spat, "what are you doing here, mom?"

"INÈS!!" the other shouted like a drunkard. "It's late! We have to go home! It's a school day!"

Inès cautiously approached her, as if dealing with a wild animal.

"Mom, you're not supposed to be here! You should be at the hospital, remember?"

She collapsed to her knees and began to cry:

"Oh Inès, please come back! Your father told me you were hired here, so I came to see you work. I miss you so much, please come back home!"

Inès sighed and squatted near her, trying to reassure her.

"Mom, you know that's not possible. You have to follow your treatment, I don't know how you got in, but you have to leave. Otherwise, I'll have to call the hospital."

Her mother raised her head abruptly, a grimace of indignation on her face; but before she could protest, Inès's walkie-talkie crackled to life, and she seemed agitated.

"Uh..." a crackling voice said, "does anyone know where the boss is? I don't know where he is, and the key box is locked... Uh, never mind, I'll check his office..."

"Damn," Inès cursed, "that idiot won't manage on his own... I have to go right away. Listen, get out of here. Go back to the hospital without making a scene, and I won't say anything."

"But..." her mother pleaded, arm extended.

"There's no but!"

She hesitated for a moment, let out a "damn it!" and left. Jordane studied the woman more closely: apart from her simple white dress, she was the spitting image of Inès, it was Ollie, no doubt. Ollie the madwoman. The one who had tried to kill her several times, and who had been sent to a psychiatric hospital. The one who occasionally came back to see Inès unexpectedly, causing her trouble.

She saw Olivia raise her head, as if someone was speaking to her. Jordane followed her gaze: her eyes were fixed on the door of the "Haunted House", which was ajar. She looked back at the woman: she nodded to the door, got up, and headed in its direction. She wanted to know more, but already she was pulled from the scene like an intruder, as she saw Olivia enter the house.

The world around her tilted, and she found herself in another place. Not far, just in the central square of the park. She saw the Zoltar automaton with an angel mask and a bloodied knife. It was a little later: the moon had risen in the sky. But most importantly, the park was crowded. Visitors flowed like an amorphous mass, emerging from the gullet behind the ticket booths, and spreading towards the various attractions.

Jordane moved through the crowd, bathing in their excitement and happiness as if in a rejuvenating water. The sensation was very pleasant. Wonder and anticipation tasted wonderful. She began to listen to the conversations, flitting in all directions:

"So cool this park! Thanks, dad! Best birthday of my life!"

"Look at the decoration, honey! These buildings are splendid!"

"A shadow show! Quick, let's go see it before there's too much of a line!"

She let herself be carried by the crowd, drunk on so many positive thoughts. She hoped to stay here until the end of time, feeding on all this happiness. She crossed the park to the rhythm of the human tide, discovering new attractions more interesting than the others. She was so happy that she didn't see the shadow beginning to creep into all this happiness.

She continued, and the lights began to dim into a pale hue. The crowd lost its color, turning black. Smiles tightened gradually, and a thread of worry began to taint her happiness. As she delved deeper into the park, positive thoughts pushing her forward, a hint of fear started to creep in from behind, chilling her veins. Suddenly, somewhere ahead, in the center of the park, a horror was moving toward her. A whisper reached her, freezing her blood.

"What kind of horrible decoration is this! It's not suitable for children!"

"Did you see what's over there? It's in bad taste, really!"

"Call the owner! I want someone to ask him to remove this decoration, it's not possible!"

Jordane continued, but already, the branches had lost their foliage. The colors became dull, and she was immersed in a wave of negative feelings, drowning her: incomprehension, confusion, fear. And she wanted to go back. To leave; but it was too late. The crowd pushed her towards the inevitable, the catastrophe. She wanted to scream at everyone to back off, to stop moving forward, but no one would hear her. They headed towards the horror, and the carnage was about to come.

"Someone come take down this filth!"

"I've never seen anything like this in my life!"

"What is that? Is it a decoration? It looks so real!"

"Let me through, I have to leave! Move, I tell you!"

"Back up, everyone back up! Give some space!"

Now, she found herself at a turn from the Horror. She just had to round the corner of the attraction, and she would encounter it. A black aura escaped from the corner, like squid ink in the ocean, contaminating all those who approached it, turning them black, mere silhouettes.

"Get down from there, my god! Hurry up, I tell you!"

The tension was palpable. The good mood had completely disappeared. The icy cold of fear gripped her insides, and the pain was unbearable.

"It's not a decoration!"

"You're joking, it can't be!"

She rounded the corner, pushed by the crowd, and discovered the source of the Horror: employees had placed a ladder against a pole, looking concerned. A decoration hung from the lamp post, swinging in the void at the mercy of the breeze. It was a woman, a rope around her neck, a simple white dress, a brown trickle running down the inside of her leg. Jordane recognized her immediately: it was Olivia.

"This decoration is horrible! There are children, take it down!"

"It's not a decoration! It's a real woman!"

"She hung herself! This woman has hung herself! She's dead!"

Fear turned into panic. This emotion swept through Jordane like a swarm of ice picks. It spread in the opposite direction, contaminating the entire compact crowd like a terrible disease.

"Let me through! I'm going to vomit!"

"Help, I want to get out! I'm scared!"

"She's dead! A woman is dead! Let me out!"

"Move! I want to get out! Move!"

"You're stepping on me! Help! You're crushing me!"

Jordane saw the employees take down Olivia's body: no doubt, it was a human being. She saw them ask the crowd to

disperse: an unstoppable movement began.

She was pushed in the opposite direction, enduring the waves of panic and haste. Once the crowd was set in motion, it was impossible to extract oneself: the row behind pushed you, and you could only push the one in front in return.

"Mommy, I'm scared"

"I can't stop!"

Jordane was pulled as the rumor spread, and the shock wave advanced. She went up the pink brick alley, spotting some visitors who had climbed high not to be trampled. Everyone was pushing; there was barely enough room to breathe. She reached the central square, and already the mass could no longer advance. People began to compress.

"I can't breathe anymore!"

"Help, I'm choking!"

Jordane glanced at the Halloween Zoltar: already, it was starting to raise its knife, preparing for the carnage. Even the moon hid, and the world plunged into darkness, lit only by the crazy attractions spinning in the void. A familiar soul passed her: Jordane recognized Inès, throwing herself into the crowd. She moved in zigzags, which allowed her to bypass the rows. She held her key ring in her hand.

"Inès!" spat her walkie-talkie, "Rally at the administrative building! The rescuers have arrived, the gates are going to open! I repeat, get your ass to the administrative building, it's too dangerous in the crowd!"

"Go to hell!" she spat back, "I have to go there, the rescuers won't be able to manage!"

Then, a familiar voice took over in the communication device, a much calmer voice: "Inès... Believe me, if you go to the ticket booths, you're going to die. Come back, it's an order."

In response, she threw the device to the ground and continued her advance. She managed to gain ground towards the ticket booths, moving diagonally, weaving through the compressed visitors. Jordane was swept along involuntarily and was pushed against the ticket booth grilles, unable to resist. Pain and despair engulfed her, along with the fear of dying. The visitors were crammed against the grilles like cattle. Some were bloody, others had fainted. She saw faces turned blue from suffocation, people trying to climb over the booths in vain. Hundreds of hands were stretched through the grilles, begging for help, or for air, as if zombies were trying to escape. The air and space were just there, on the other side of the grating, yet unreachable. The crowd continued to compress further, and it was like human waves crashing against the grilles, crushing the unfortunate, before the wave rebounded and spread in the opposite direction. Jordane had never seen anything like this.

"I'm going to die!"

"My heart! It hurts!"

Then: "Make way! Make way, I have the keys!"

Jordane caught a glimpse of Inès making her way through the mass, only her arm stretched with her key ring visible above the tide. She continued to advance, weaving in one direction and then another, and finally managed to reach the door. She twisted to insert the keys into the lock:

"Where are those damn rescuers!" she yelled, breathless.

She managed to trigger the mechanism, and the grilles opened.

She crashed to the ground first, at the foot of the Palace of the Strange, preparing to be trampled, but she looked up in horror: the crowd was so compressed that even with the gates open, the visitors couldn't get out. It was a wall of human limbs writhing in every direction, unable to disperse. A monster with hundreds of voices crying and begging. Inès got up screaming, trying to grab hands or feet and pull them toward her.

After an endless struggle, she managed to pull out one person, then others followed: the park then began to vomit the panicked, sweating, and crying crowd. All the visitors fled; Inès remained standing in front of the entrance.

"Oswald..." she said between her teeth, looking at the empty park. "It's you, isn't it? I know you're hiding something... And if you think I'm going to bother with the cops, no. If you have anything to do with all this, I'm the one who's going to take you to them..."

And she set off into the park, crossing the gaping maw in the opposite direction, disappearing into the depths of the Palace of the Strange.

Then Jordane turned her head towards the parking lot, and she saw him: a man standing alone among the cars, laughing. He was laughing uproariously, mocking her. Jordane saw his face more clearly, and she finally recognized him: it was the face she had seen in her nightmare, the one on the poster "HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?"

The same carnivorous smile. The same piercing eyes. It was Oswald himself.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and was forcibly turned around: the crowd had disappeared, the gates were open. The park was empty and abandoned, just as she had found it earlier in the evening.

Inès stood in front of her, alarmed.

“Inès?” Jordane stammered.

“What are you doing here?” she asked in a pleading tone. “I told you not to come here! I warned you last night!”

Jordane didn’t know what to say, completely lost. She opened her mouth, but it twisted into a grimace of horror: her Ariadne’s thread lazily unwound, illuminating the park floor with its silvery glow. It wound into the park, ending up in the gloved hands of Billie. His mischievous eyes had gone completely mad, and his painted mouth was a real steel jaw. He brought the thread to his mouth.

“No!” Jordane begged.

But the automaton bit into her Ariadne’s thread, and savagely tore it apart.

Jordane was instantly pulled backward, and the world became black, a perfect darkness. She plunged into an endless fall, spinning into the void, hearing Oswald’s insipid laughter in her ears.

“I told you not to enter the park after nightfall,” he mocked.



## Chapter XI: The Prodigal Son

Raphaël turned off his Mercedes. Night had fallen, heralding a starless sky. The moon peeked out, somewhere behind the pines. The forest seemed to breathe all around him, undulating to the rhythm of the gentle breeze. He forced the handle of his damaged door and managed to open it with a shoulder push. He got out of the car, careful not to hit the big red pickup parked right next to him. A person walked along the other side of his vehicle to join the crowd. A child passed in front of him, joyfully frolicking around his parents. An excitement, like electricity in the air, began to invade the almost full parking lot where he stood. He looked ahead, seeing the crowd grow bigger and bigger. He raised his eyes and observed the huge illuminated sign depicting a mad scientist electrocuting a family, their hair standing on end. The wind sent a flyer flying straight onto his windshield: he caught it and began to read.

TONIGHT, JUST FOR YOU,  
A SPECIAL SURPRISE!!  
THE PALACE OF THE STRANGE REOPENS  
ITS DOORS, AT LAST!!!  
COME IN LARGE NUMBERS, TRANSPORT  
YOURSELVES INTO A WORLD OF  
MYSTERIES AND ENCHANTMENTS!!

Raphaël crumpled the paper in his hand and threw it at his feet. Then, he took a deep breath and followed the crowd towards the entrance of the park.

\*\*\*

He was now a few steps from the ticket counters: already, the entrance acted like a funnel, and the crowd clumped together to get in.

“Where do we pay?” someone in front of him asked.

“Where are they? Why is no one here?”

“Do we have to pay later? Is this the right entrance?”

He arrived at one of the counters and noticed it was completely empty: judging by the layer of dust on the counter, it had been so for a while. He looked ahead, trying to rise above the heads: despite the lack of staff, the gates were open, and people were entering. He let himself be guided and crossed the park’s boundary in turn. He passed all the cardboard decorations, preventing until the last moment from laying eyes on the attractions. He glimpsed the crowd compacting further ahead to pass under a tunnel, the gaping mouth of the mad scientist, swallowing the visitors one by one. He wanted to slow down, even turn back, but already the people behind him were pushing him like a wall of flesh. He now felt completely powerless, only able to be carried by the human tide, entering straight into the trap without being able to get out.

“Like animals to the slaughter,” he thought.

He plunged into the monstrous throat, followed by the greedy eyes of the scientist until he entered completely into the darkness. The crowd buzzed around him, eager to rediscover the park and its attractions. He walked slowly, following the flow.

He emerged from the tunnel and discovered the main square of the Palace of the Strange: the Laboratory of Strange Energies, the Hall of Shadows, the Cabinet of Curiosities. Visitors exclaimed in joy and wonder at the elaborate decoration, a world unto itself. As he approached the square, the crowd began to disperse to join the queues of various attractions.

“Where are you, Jordane?” he thought, scanning unfamiliar faces. “Will I manage to find you in all this?”

Looking around, he noticed he had not seen any park staff yet. No one stationed in front of the attractions, nor at the snack stands.

"That doesn't bode well," he thought.

He took advantage of an opening to extricate himself from the throng and find a quieter alley. He continued on his way, the hum of visitors growing more distant. He passed other attractions like the Extraordinary Garden, a large greenhouse filled with colorful plants, or the Flying Carpet, an oriental palace with incredibly elaborate frescoes. However, he paid little attention to them: the fact that the park was open, that the lights were on, the decorations plugged in, but no staff were present to open the doors of the attractions made him uneasy.

"If I were Jordane, where would I go?" he thought. "She went looking for clues. Knowing her, she wouldn't have been afraid to sneak into the buildings. Did she find Oswald's office?"

He quickened his pace to try and reach the back of the park. Already, the silence had made its insidious return, and the darkness seemed more powerful: the attractions were darker, and the streetlights lit less far. He crossed a small bridge suspended over a river and finally found what he was looking for: a security gate. He approached and peered through: the area on the other side was not lit, and he could make out conventional-shaped buildings, concrete cubes, and electric shutters.

"There we go, I found the offices," he thought.

He tried to force the turnstile, but the entrance was locked. He looked around, and the only way past was to climb over the wall.

"Is that what you did, Jo?" he thought.

He decided it was wiser to make sure. He took out his phone, dialed her number, and called.

Voicemail.

He tried a second time.

"This is Jordane, I'm not available, please leave a message."

He heard the little "BEEP" indicating the start of the message, but he knew it was a trap: that click was a fake, her voicemail message was still playing, silently. Another person would have started explaining the reason for their call, scrambling to spit out the information clearly, and they would have been cut off by Jordane's voice suddenly emerging: "Got you! No need to leave a message, I won't listen to it anyway!" And then, the person would have heard the real voicemail "BEEP", followed by a mechanical voice: "Your correspondent's voice mailbox is full, please call back later."

He put away his phone with a sigh: was she out of battery, or could she not answer? He preferred the first hypothesis, and realizing he had to fend for himself, he clumsily hopped over the wall, landing on the other side with the grace of a drunkard.

On the other side, the pink cobblestone road turned into black tar, absorbing the last glimmers of the park. He advanced cautiously, crouching and walking quietly, but he quickly realized: this part of the park was deserted. The area was full of construction materials, industrial machinery, and pieces of disassembled rides. In the end, apart from the electrical facilities and the portable offices, there was only one building of interest. It was an ugly grey concrete block with square windows that didn't look like they could open. He walked along the harsh grey facade, afraid that a motion-sensitive light would turn on and he would freeze like a frightened animal; but he found the entrance door without triggering anything.

It was a simple white door with a "ADMINISTRATION" sign and a red-blinking card reader. He wondered if there was an alarm connected, and if a simple push on the handle or swiping an invalid card would set off sirens. Would there be cameras inside?

"It looks like I'm going to have to work overtime," he thought, pulling out his cell phone.

He turned on the Wi-Fi and waited for his smartphone to complete its scan. The device found only one source, named "ADMIN-PRIVATE."

"Perfect," he thought, "if they make my job easier on top of that..."

So, power was on in this part of the park too, and the friendly little router was going to be his entry point. He launched his professional software, the one he used to test his clients' security: it had an application that tested vulnerabilities on a Wi-Fi network. The tool started its analysis and listed two dozen vulnerabilities to exploit.

"Why am I surprised, this box must not have been updated for ten years..."

He chose one, and within seconds, he was in the network.

The next step was to find all the online devices: he only listed one. In the meantime, he had already figured out how to get into the router, and he was studying the history of connected equipment: there had been three computers. Nothing more. He retrieved the name of the currently powered device and typed it on the internet: he found the reference, and

it turned out to be the control box of the card reader. He downloaded the user manual, and easily found the default master card code.

“So, three computers, plus the badge reader. No cameras, no alarms on the network, nothing else. Or else, everything is on a separate circuit, and I’m screwed.”

Either the building’s security was very well done, or it was seriously lacking. It was a bet to make, but he already knew the answer: the truth was that most professional buildings had security no more robust than a sieve.

He then peeled off the silicone case of his phone and took out a white card with a small golden chip. He copied the master code written in the user guide, activated NFC on his phone, launched the writing application, and pasted the code in. He then placed his card against the phone, and a green icon indicated that the software had correctly written the code on the card. He hesitated for a moment, wondering if he was really ready, then he placed the card on the reader.

He heard a loud “BEEP,” and the red light turned green.

“It’s so easy it’s obscene,” he thought, “my boss would have presented them with a two-hundred-page report and a hefty bill...”

He took a deep breath and pushed the door open: when it opened, he was blinded by intense light. He ordered his body to turn around and flee, but he remained frozen. His eyes adjusted to the brightness, and he saw that it was simply neon lights on the ceiling.

“Idiot,” he told himself.

He looked around him: he was in a corridor with white paint, the walls covered with posters or cork boards containing even more posters. There were two doors on the left and one on the right, the corridor ending at a staircase going up on the side and the emergency exit in front of him.

He looked to his left: he saw a cable coming out of the wall where the card reader was outside, going up in a sheath and joining a small box attached to the ceiling, emitting a blinking blue light. There was a switch, and that was all. No alarm box, no camera.

“You see, security was just crap.”

He congratulated Oswald for being so negligent and began to explore the place, thinking that the neon light might possibly attract someone outside, even though he didn’t really believe it.

He passed the first door: “RESTROOMS.” He continued to the second. He opened it and found a completely empty office: there was just a large table turned upside down, its legs in the air, and the blue carpet was faded in square patches, where other furniture must have been. He closed it and headed for the third door: there was a sign “HUMAN RESOURCES.”

“It’s getting easier and easier it seems...”

He entered the room, and it hadn’t yet been emptied: he first saw document cabinets and shelves, then a standing desk, and - hallelujah! - an old computer. The desk was still strewn with personal effects. A red cup filled with pens, a wooden frame with a photo of two young children - were they adults now? - and several piles of documents. He picked up a stack at random and leafed through it carelessly: they were only boring accounting documents, columns filled with numbers and calculations in all directions, but that wasn’t what caught his eye anyway. It was the computer. That, he knew how to make talk.

He walked around the desk and knelt in front of the beast: he checked that it was plugged in, and pressed the power button to turn it on. The computer wheezed, an asthmatic fan whirring and choking in the dust, but it started. Raphaël glanced at the old screen: he saw the logo of an operating system from another age, and he let out a diabolical chuckle in his head. He was now faced with a login screen, where only the username ‘J. Theodore’ was written.

He tried a password: 1234.

No luck.

password.

Still no luck.

No matter: he started rummaging through the desk drawers, turning over papers, binders, pens, and staplers. He finally found what he was looking for, triumphant: a phone charging cable. It was ten years old, but it was compatible with his. He then connected his smartphone to the PC via USB while holding down the power button. With a nimble thumb movement, he launched another software that simulated an embedded operating system. When the computer rebooted, he hammered a key on the keyboard like a madman, and a black screen with white writing appeared. He

went to the startup menu, navigating almost with his eyes closed in the strange interface, and removed the PC's hard drive to replace it with the line indicating the secondary operating system, which was actually his phone. He validated, rebooted, and this time the logo was completely different from the previous one: a small purple USB key with cute eyes and a smile, and a lock on its belly. Raphaël's operating system finally launched: now, he had access to all the files on the hard drive, completely bypassing the operating system installed on the computer. He congratulated himself alone, still disappointed not to be able to show off in front of Jordane, and he began to sift through the folders.

After a few fruitless minutes, he frowned upon finding a strange folder named "Investigation." He double-clicked on it: the folder contained only one file, "transcription.pdf." Raphaël opened it, and his eyes widened as he read.

OFFICIAL REPORT 04575.

AGENT: R. Rivaldo

PERSON OF INTEREST: Oswald W.

REPRESENTED BY: Attorney ROLLINGS

**AGENT** - Well, thank you for coming, Oswald. I know you're very busy.

\* THE PERSON OF INTEREST NODS \*

**AGENT** - You have agreed to answer some of my questions, concerning the disappearance of Miss Inès Delcourt.

**REPRESENTATIVE** - Alleged disappearance... You have no proof of any sinister event, she could be on vacation.

**AGENT** - Yes, yes, you're right. However, we are exploring all possible leads.

**REPRESENTATIVE** - At the expense of the city's coffers, funded by the residents' taxes.

**AGENT** - Yes, certainly. Well. Since you highlight this aspect, let's get straight to the point: Mr. Oswald, Inès worked for you, correct?

**REPRESENTATIVE** - Yes, we have all the information in this file, which we will make available.

\* THE REPRESENTATIVE PLACES A BINDER ON THE TABLE \*

**AGENT** - Good, thank you. When did you last see her, Oswald?

**REPRESENTATIVE** - My client hasn't seen this Inès since the day before the park's opening, it's written black on white in his statement...

**AGENT** - Yes, yes, it is indeed mentioned. What a terrible incident during that opening... Did you know that the victim was the mother of the missing girl? And her daughter disappears the same night... strange coincidence, isn't it?

**REPRESENTATIVE** - You won't get far with coincidences and implications bordering on defamation against my client! I have included in the documents the medical file of Olivia. With a dozen psychiatric evaluations from several hospitals. This poor woman was ill. Her suicide is a tragedy, but only related to her mental disorders.

**AGENT** - We also have access to her file.

**REPRESENTATIVE** - Then why are you trying to unjustly incriminate my client?

**AGENT** - I'm just asking questions, nothing more, sir. But I have reasons to believe that these two disappearances are connected. Oswald, some witnesses report a certain radio communication, at the time of the crowd movement. It mentioned a death threat against Inès, because she didn't take her post at the back of the park with the other employees. Some swear they recognized your voice?

**REPRESENTATIVE** - Enough, my client will no longer answer any questions, we are done here.

**AGENT** - Are you joking? He hasn't answered any questions...

Raphaël looked at the creation date of the document: it was ten years old. So Inès had been missing all this time? And the story with her mother, her suicide? Oswald's threat...

All these questions swirling in his head were dizzying: such reflections were more Jordane's forte. She was adept at connecting information; he, on the other hand, was far too binary.

He continued his search, but found nothing except Inès's employment contract—Oswald hadn't lied about that—which informed him that she had worked as a security agent, and a photo of her let him know what she looked like. Irritated by such meager findings, he turned off the computer and left the office. He spotted the staircase leading upstairs on his left and headed towards his next destination. He ascended the raw concrete steps between the narrow, white walls to arrive at a lone wooden door, bearing the inscription "MANAGEMENT".

His heart started beating a little faster in his chest: was this it? Was this Oswald's office?

He placed his hand on the aluminum doorknob, its cool smoothness uncertain, not knowing if he had the courage to push it open. Was he there, waiting for him? Would he find him sitting in his chair, a predatory smile on his lips? There was only one way to find out, right?

He tightened his grip, but a small voice in his head was ordering him to let go, to run away and never return.

"You'll go abroad, start a new life, a fresh start, begin again from scratch," a voice in his head pleaded.

He was scared, alone in this building, left to his own devices in this park, his common sense screaming at him to get back to his car. But he held firm. Why would Oswald be there? Why would he be waiting for him? He inhaled a long breath through his nose, counting to five, held his breath for a second, then exhaled for five seconds, emptying his lungs. He repeated this several times until the anxiety subsided, almost leaving him entirely. Once his exercise was complete, he opened the door.

\*\*\*

The management office seemed to be part of the park's attractions: with its green carpet and thick wooden furniture, one wondered how Oswald had managed to fill the room through the narrow stairs. The ebony shelves held strange figurines, some of Amerindian or African origin, and others that could only be from the world of the occult. There were painted portraits of people Raphaël had never seen. A small bar displayed crystal bottles filled with bourbon or whiskey. There was a bookcase full of old encyclopedias: a collection of about thirty thick books with red covers, and two smaller ones bound in blue and gray leather. He moved forward, his steps muffled by the thick carpet, making him even more tense. The desk, placed in the center of the room, was filled with strange or ancient tools, like quills and an inkwell, and even a sextant. It had an emerald green wood and fabric chair, with golden stitching, which looked incredibly comfortable.

"This is the place he should have called the Cabinet of Curiosities," he thought.

Despite the splendor of the room, it seemed that no one had been there for quite some time.

He decided to walk around the desk, then take the boss's place: the chair was even softer than it looked. He opened the drawers one by one, but all were empty. He shuffled through everything on the desk, also to no avail.

"Okay, so what? Am I done here?" he wondered.

"No," said Jordane's voice in his head, "the job's only half done, you can do better than this."

He grimaced at hearing one of her favorite lines, which she had thrown at him countless times, but he had to face the truth: he was in Oswald's office, the one who had encouraged them to find information on Inès, and maybe even the one responsible for her disappearance. If one added the fact that several hundred people were currently swarming in the park, with apparently no one in charge, he had every reason to redouble his efforts to find information.

"What would you do, Jordane?" he said to himself.

She would search everything thoroughly, methodically, without missing anything, that's what she would do.

So what, was he going to pull each of these books from the library until he found one that triggered the motor that would move a cupboard to a hidden door? Lift every trinket until he found a switch that reveals a hidden trapdoor? No, he was so comfortable in this chair that he no longer had any desire to get up. He could have even closed his eyes and taken a nap.

Discouraged, he grabbed a fountain pen engraved with esoteric symbols, the steel nib forming a kind of skull. He examined it, barely interested, and tried to spin it between his fingers, as he did when he was bored in class as a young man. His technique was rusty, and he dropped the pen between his legs, splashing the carpet with a bit of bright blue ink.

"Shit!" he exclaimed.

He knelt down, careful not to get ink on himself, and contorted to retrieve the pen.

"Hey, what's this?" he said when he saw a small wooden button behind the drawers.

He pressed it, and heard a sharp click. He stood up and investigated the source of the noise by opening the top drawer: a panel had lifted, revealing a false bottom.

"I knew there was a story of a secret compartment!" he congratulated himself.

He removed the panel and transferred the contents of the false bottom to the desk: it was pieces of paper, some as old and fragile as papyrus, some rolled up on themselves, others crumpled. He began to unroll one of the papers. Its texture was rough, yellowed by time, and a message was written in black ink and shaky handwriting, as if it had been written by someone in rehabilitation:

*DO NOT GO INTO THE YAGGER HOUSE  
KEEP LOCKED DO NOT ENTER*

He frowned at this riddle, and tried another paper:

*ON THE NIGHT OF THE OPENING WAIT  
AND CLOSE THE GATES  
CALL YOUR SLAVES TO YOUR FEET  
AND DO NOT LET THEM APPROACH  
AT THE FIRST BLOOD SHED WE  
WILL BE AWAKENED YOU CAN  
FIND YOUR FREEDOM*

What were these messages? Raphaël was more and more lost, but he continued to pull papers from the pile:

*WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!!!??!!  
WHY WASN'T IT HER  
IN THE HOUSE??  
YOU RUINED EVERYTHING  
BRING BACK THE GIRL AND BRING HER  
AND KILL HER KILL KILL  
WE SAID TO KEEP THE  
SLAVES AWAY  
YOU LET THEM OPEN THE  
GATES YOU DEPRIVED US  
OF OUR FEAST!!!*

Raphaël threw the paper and picked up another:

*ON THE NIGHT THE GIRL WILL RETURN  
FINALLY TO THE HOUSE  
WHEN SHE IS HANGED YOU*



WILL CLOSE THE GATES  
DID YOU UNDERSTAND THE INSTRUCTIONS?  
BE CAREFUL WE ARE WATCHING YOU  
WE SEE EVERYTHING

He felt a thought beginning to form in his mind. Pieces moved inside his head, and a guiding thread slowly emerged from the darkness.

Another note read:

OZWALD YOU RUINED EVERYTHING  
YOU THINK YOU WERE SPARED  
BUT WE ARE HERE WE ARE ALWAYS HERE  
WE SIMPLY SLEEP  
BUT WHEN WE AWAKEN  
WE ARE HUNGRY I AM HUNGRY I AM HUNGRY  
A CHANCE TO CATCH YOU  
JUST ONE CHANCE  
OR THIS TIME IT'S YOU WHO  
WE WILL EAT  
WAIT FOR INSTRUCTIONS

Raphaël picked up a paper that looked much newer. It was still white and the ink hadn't faded:

OZWALD IT'S BEEN TEN LONG YEARS  
WE ARE SO HUNGRY  
THE TIME HAS COME IT'S TRUE IT'S  
TIME FOR THE NEXT MASSACRE  
WE HAVE FOUND THE PERFECT GIRL  
IT'S UP TO YOU TO LURE HER  
WE WILL SHOW HER TO YOU IN A DREAM BE READY  
THIS NIGHT BE PREPARED AND DO NOT  
RUIN EVERYTHING LIKE LAST TIME  
OR IT'S YOU WE WILL EAT  
CALL HER BY HER NAME SHE HAS A DELICIOUS NAME  
INES WAS NOT A DELICIOUS NAME  
AND SHE RUINED EVERYTHING SHE LET  
SOMEONE ELSE ENTER  
THE HOUSE AND SHE

OPENED THE GATE BUT THIS GIRL  
WILL BE PERFECT SHE HAS A NAME THAT  
SOUNDS DELICIOUS  
JORDANE JORDANE JORDANE JORDANE JORDANE JORDANE

Raphaël dropped the paper, pale. His brain was racing in all directions, reconstructing the story in his head. He picked up the pile of crumpled papers and read them one by one: the handwriting was completely different, that of an adult - or rather a human - and in the same bright blue ink that had come from the fountain pen he had just dropped:

*Dear Jordane,  
I am a huge fan of your articles.  
I unfortunately had a similar experience, and*

Another paper:

*Jordane,  
You don't know me, but I've read your articles so much it's as if I know you.  
Something is happening, and I need your help -*

The rest was scribbled. He unfolded another message:

*Dear Jordane,  
Your articles talk about the supernatural, and I think my story might interest you.  
I feel it deserves to be told. My name is Inès, I live in Duli*

The next one:

~~*To Jordane:  
Let me introduce myself, my name is Inès. Do you know the town of Duli? I was born there -*~~

Another:

*Jordane,  
I've long been your biggest reader. Your subjects fascinate me, and in a way,  
I feel close to you because it's as if I've lived all your stories.  
I was born in a beautiful town, Duli; but something happened to me when I was little.  
I encountered a monster, but no one believed me. I know you always uncover the truth, that in your opinion monsters don't exist, but today, something terrible is happening in my town. People are disappearing, and at night, in the dark, stories are whispered that remind me of what I saw that night.  
I've reached a point where I fear for my life and that of my companions, something evil lives in Duli, and I beg you to hear my story, perhaps lives are at stake.*

Raphaël could no longer breathe. He caught sight of the skull-topped pen, grabbed it in one hand, and with the other, he drew a line next to the neat handwriting: it was exactly the same ink color, the same thickness. He threw the pen across the room and swept the papers off the desk with the back of his hand, sending them flying all around: it was indeed Oswald who had written the letter Jordane had received. Deep down, he knew something bad had happened to Inès on the night of the park's opening.

If it was Oswald who had lured Jordane here by pretending to be Inès, then it was a trap. But why?

He remembered the strange messages: Inès and her mother had played a role in the accident at the park's opening. The visitors had been put in danger, but Inès had saved them, apparently against all odds. Her mother had committed suicide. Was that what triggered the accident? But this story of the wrong person... Did her mother go in her place?

He had to find Jordane, and fast. She was in danger, either Oswald, or worse, the correspondents who wrote these terrifying letters had planned something with her.

There was one more rolled-up paper on the desk, which he hadn't read yet. It also seemed recent, so he forced himself to open it:

OZWALD  
TONIGHT IS THE BIG NIGHT  
HAVE YOU DISTRIBUTED THE INVITATIONS?  
THERE MUST BE A LOT OF PEOPLE  
TONIGHT WE ARE VERY HUNGRY  
I HOPE YOU MANAGED TO TRICK JORDANE INTO COMING  
TO THE PARK TONIGHT HER FRIEND IS  
GONE WE MADE SURE OF IT  
SHE WILL BE ALONE AND I HOPE  
YOU WON'T RUIN EVERYTHING  
AGAIN  
WE WILL LURE HER  
INTO THE HOUSE WE WILL TAKE  
HER BODY AND WE WILL TRIGGER THE DISASTER IT WILL BE LIKE  
TEN YEARS AGO BUT THIS TIME  
THIS TIME I BEG YOU DO NOT RUIN EVERYTHING THE FENCES  
MUST ALWAYS BE CLOSED  
OR WE WILL REALLY  
ANGER OURSELVES  
IT WILL BE A MASSACRE

Raphaël dropped the paper, and the heavy chair fell to the ground with a crash as he rushed towards the exit of the office.

## Chapter XII: Astral Journey

Jordane felt herself falling into an endless drop, but she paid it no mind: a sense of fulfillment had taken hold, sweeping away the icy hands of fear as she saw her mortal shell drift away, perhaps forever. Nothing mattered anymore, nothing else existed except this sweet contentment. The pain in her throat had vanished. Her wounds on her wrists, her ankles, and the rest of her body had disappeared. Her worries, her fears, her anxieties: all gone. She had no body, and no longer a brain. She felt like she was everything, and yet nothing at all. She was insignificant in this infinite space, but at the same time, the space was her.

She continued to sink, plunging into God knows where, but she couldn't see where she was going, if she was going anywhere at all. Not darkness, nor even complete blackness, but just, nothingness. Nothing.

Although, maybe something.

A shape, slowly appearing. But at the same time, not quite real: she had to look at it, focus on it to materialize it.

It was a letter. A green plastic letter. Like the ones you stick on a fridge. It was the letter D.

Jordane watched it come to life, becoming more and more real. Emotions came before sight: she felt that this little piece of plastic with a magnet underneath had been placed and moved by many hands. Small hands full of terror. The fear of making a mistake, the tearing anguish of having done something wrong. Of being something wrong.

Other letters began to appear, each more colorful than the last. A proud and upright I, an E with its little legs so perfectly parallel, and a U, with its beautiful round belly. As Jordane admired one letter, the next gradually materialized, as if a universe was being created by the mere movement of her eyes - and she had no eyes.

A world was created more and more quickly, as if she had opened the floodgates of the torrent of creation, and the plastic letters forming the phrase "GOD IS GREAT, GOD SAVES" were now clumsily placed on a large white board. Now that she saw the board, the entire wall was there, as if it had always been there, just waiting to be acknowledged. It was covered in children's drawings, poems, and printed texts. Then, like a cosmic sneeze, the rest of the room colored in with incredible speed: the green linoleum floor, the wooden chairs forming a perfect circle, a large desk scattered with loose papers, an area filled with children's games.

Jordane's gaze fell on one of the empty chairs, and she realized that it actually had an occupant: a man in his forties. Thick, brown hair. Horn-rimmed glasses, firmly perched on a broad nose and large ears. The man wore a flannel shirt and brown trousers. He held a book in his hand, rather as if it were fused to his hand, titled "The Bible" in golden letters. He had gentle eyes, a reassuring smile, but Jordane felt no compassion. No happiness. She felt coldness. The man wore a mask, and what lay beneath it was more abominable than the worst horror stories.

"Well, well!" exclaimed the man in a falsely beaming voice, "who sent us such a grumpy girl? Here we are among friends, and there are only happy people! So dry those nasty tears and show me your best smile!"

Jordane had no heart to leap in her chest. No throat to dry up, nor hair to bristle. She simply turned around, observing the chair next to her, and there she discovered a thirteen-year-old girl, sniffing loudly while looking at her shoes. The rest of her attire was just a thick pajama. She had long, light brown hair and green eyes blurred with tears. Jordane was overwhelmed by a deep confusion: this little girl didn't know where she was, or why. She was also very scared, not knowing what would happen to her. She wanted to go back home, back to her bed, hoping she was living a nightmare.

"Listen," continued the man, "none of this is your fault, it's the devil controlling you, and your parents sent you here to be freed, to be fixed. And your parents only want your happiness, right?"

Jordane watched the little girl lift her head: she slowly realized that her parents knew where she was. Worse, that her parents might even be behind all this.

The man laid his hand on her shoulder, and Jordane felt intense disgust, realizing it came from her, but also from the little girl. He resumed speaking:

"...Jordane, is that it? Trust me, my little one, everything will be alright."

Jordane wanted to close her eyes, escape from this room. She knew what was going to happen, everything she was going to endure. It was at this moment in her life that she decided never to trust an adult again, never to be weak again. She wanted to back away, look elsewhere, but she couldn't control any of it. She tried to focus on something else, imagine a completely different place, more pleasant; but when the scene before her blurred, the one that followed was anything but pleasant.

She found herself in the same room, but at another time. Several weeks later. The room hadn't changed, but all the chairs were occupied: a dozen children, some older than little Jordane, sat in a circle, looking at their feet or far ahead

of them. Father Donovan presided over the assembly, having traded his Bible for a thick notebook. His legs were crossed, his shoulders open, but his gaze was piercing under his thick-lensed glasses.

"Lucille, would you like to speak, please?"

Another girl, maybe sixteen years old, stood up quickly before the man could fix her over his horn-rimmed glasses, almost knocking over her chair. She had black hair tied in a ponytail, and her hazel eyes looked like those of a frightened deer. Her large sweater couldn't hide her frail body, on the verge of anorexia.

"Lucille," he continued, "what are you grateful for today?"

As Jordane observed the teenager, a wave of terror enveloped her. She listened to her speak like a robot reciting a script, but she thought that robots didn't have trembling legs and tears in their eyes:

"Today I am grateful to have a family that sacrifices to take care of me. Even though I was wrong, even though I was blind, even though I disrespected them and embarrassed them, they never stopped finding solutions to cure me. From now on, I can walk the straight path and make them proud of me."

"That's good, Lucille. You talk about healing, would you describe your illness for us?"

"I fell victim to the devil's call," she continued as if reading from a teleprompter. "He whispered ideas into my head to stray me from the right path, to get lost and leave my family behind when they go to heaven without me."

"And what kind of ideas did he whisper to you?"

Lucille answered in a whisper so faint that no one could hear her. She was on the verge of bursting into tears.

"Nobody hears you, Lucille," Donovan said coldly.

She took a staggered breath and managed to repeat, barely louder:

"He told me that I liked women."

No one in the room reacted, as if all the children had retreated far, far into their imaginations. Jordane felt Lucille's shame and infinite sadness, and each child around her tried to shrink, to go unnoticed, hoping the session would pass. Only Donovan nodded solemnly.

"And you made the mistake of succumbing to its words," he said. "Can two women join in the sacred bond of marriage?"

"No," Lucille whispered, looking at her feet.

"Who says so?"

"The holy book."

"Amen."

She stood hesitantly for a moment, then Donovan casually waved her back to her seat.

"And let everyone know that our dear Lucille has conquered her demons with strength and grace. Our savior, the father, always grants a second chance to lost lambs. She can finally go home, completely cured, ready for a legitimate marriage in the eyes of God the Father."

He scanned the assembly: all the children did their best to avoid his piercing gaze. Some curled up to take up less space in this electric atmosphere. Jordane could almost see the aura of fear preceding Donovan's circular gaze. Until it met that of little Jordane.

"Jordane," he murmured softly. "A month and a half with us, and you haven't spoken once. Some might think you're being uncooperative."

All the other children relaxed, seemingly relieved: the predator had found its prey, and it wasn't them.

"I have nothing to say," she grumbled.

"You know it's the demon speaking right now, not you, don't you?"

She just held his gaze.

"The demon can wear many disguises to reach you, but it's always him rotting you from the inside. Why don't you start by telling us how you feel?"

She forced herself to look only at Father Donovan, fixating on his cold eyes, knowing everyone else's were on her. She held out, remaining silent as an act of defiance.

"I see," Donovan lamented, opening his notebook, "perhaps I can start you off on a particular topic."

He rummaged through his notes, and little Jordane's eyes widened: Astral Jordane was struck full force by the pure aura of terror that exploded from the little girl like icy needles.

"For example," he continued monotonously, "why don't you tell us about your dreams?"

"No... no..." she lamented.

Jordane felt waves of fear intensifying further. Donovan seemed to reread his notes, then he resumed:

"You could elaborate on your dreams, where you see the so-called monster coming out from under your bed."

"You have no right... You said it would stay between us!"

"You told me," he ignored her, "that you wet your bed when you wake up, even to this day?"

"No, it's not true!" she protested, shouting, "you promised it would stay a secret! You told me to trust you!"

The other children started to snicker around her, pointing fingers, calling her a baby. Even Lucille joined in, laughing in unison with the group. Little Jordane began to cry, hiding her face between her arms as Donovan savored the scene with a smug smile. Astral Jordane watched the children mock her younger self, but she felt no joy or malice in them; just immense relief. They were all relieved not to be the victim this time, and that for a brief moment, someone was more miserable than them.

If Astral Jordane could have felt anger, she would have. A muted rage directed at Donovan, abusing his power; but in this world, she was nothing. Nothing more than an observer, reliving her past. And, as the scene blurred and she began to fall into another universe, she could only let herself be carried away.

She arrived in a large communal bathroom, the kind you find in sports locker rooms. She recognized the small navy blue and white tiled floor, the shower cubicles without doors, lined up against a wall. A simple stainless steel push button spat water from the high-mounted shower head, regardless of the water temperature in the system. She remembered taking scalding showers in the summer and freezing ones in the winter.

She saw herself showering, as were the eight other girls in the room, each in her cubicle. Her lips were blue, and she trembled like a leaf under the jet of water so cold it burned. A shadow loomed in the cubicle like a solar eclipse, and Jordane saw the school nurse, Martha, watching her with crossed arms. She was a huge woman, the kind who had worked on a farm all her youth. She wore a white uniform and rubber sandals to move around the slippery locker room floor. As with every shower session, which was once every three days, she paced back and forth along the cubicles to monitor the girls. No time to daydream, no way to recharge: privacy and time for oneself had been taken from her when she left home. The woman lingered for a moment observing the little girl until Jordane felt her discomfort.

"I need to go to the bathroom," she said.

"You're joking, right?" growled the ogre. "You just started washing."

"Sorry, but it's urgent," she lied.

The woman huffed loudly, like a bull ready to charge, and stepped aside:

"Then hurry up, and make it quick."

Little Jordane left the shower, grabbed her towel, and roughly dried herself before slipping into her pajamas, leaving the other girls to finish their ritual. Once out of sight of the minotaur, she ran down the corridor and locked herself in the bathroom. She sat on the toilet without even lifting the lid or removing her pants, simply savoring the silence and privacy. The cabin was impeccably clean - carefully washed by one of the children, as usual chores - but there was no toilet paper roll: only two small sheets placed on a plywood ledge. To get more, one had to ask an adult, and each child was only allowed one request per day. However, Jordane had only sought refuge here because she couldn't take it anymore and needed privacy. She showered in open cubicles with Martha watching, she ate with everyone in the canteen with Donovan, and god, how he hated noise when he ate! A simple scrape of a fork could drive him mad. She had her group sessions, her group workshops, and at night, she slept in a dormitory with the other girls, the door always kept open. But for these five minutes, she could finally breathe. Finally be a bit alone. Well, not really: Astral Jordane knew what was coming.

"Jordane?"

The little girl jumped at the voice on the other side of the locked door.

"Yes?" she replied reluctantly.

"It's me, Isa."



The other girl seemed hesitant, then she continued:

"Martha asked me to keep you company. It's not good to be alone, you know that?"

Little Jordane mimed a scream and pulled her hair, on the verge of despair.

"She told me I had to read the texts to you," Isa continued, "it would do you good."

While the other girl began to recite passages from the Bible in a loud voice, perhaps to ensure the little one could hear through the door, or rather to make sure Martha heard her obeying the orders, Jordan from the Astral world watched herself cry in frustration, seated on the toilet. She wanted to embrace her, to console her; but already, she felt herself losing grip, and the scene dissolved into an explosion of colors. She traveled like a leaf caught in the wind's breath, and a new world opened to her. A new memory.

She was now in another room, a rather narrow office, but very dark. The window curtains were drawn, and one could barely make out the silhouettes of several people. There were six people sitting on chairs arranged in a circle. At the center, little Jordan was also seated. Among the crowd surrounding her, two teenagers and three schoolgirls were barely distinguishable, along with Donovan, his gold-rimmed glasses gleaming in the dark room.

The atmosphere was incredibly tense; Jordan almost choked: pure terror in everyone; except Donovan, who radiated a bland desire for control, his eyes hidden behind thick lenses. Little Jordan was upright and impassive, staring fixedly at an imaginary point far in front of her.

"Begin," Donovan simply said.

At first, no one dared to move. None wanted to break the group dynamic. Then, Donovan's gaze fell on one of the children - Jordan saw the gold reflection in his glasses shift - and the boy, so scared, began:

"Bitch!" he blurted out at little Jordan.

The insult seemed to have escaped him, as if he'd forced himself to say something. The little girl didn't move, unflappable. The boy, his face barely visible, emitted an unpleasant smell of fear.

"Go to hell!" someone else shouted from across the circle, still aimed at the girl in the middle.

"You're just crazy! God hates you! You'd be better off dead!"

Little Jordan remained stoic in the face of these insults, focusing her entire being on that distant point only she could see.

"Keep going!" Donovan growled, "This exercise is very important! Don't stop!"

Then, like a rallying signal for a pack, everyone started barking out insults. The children spat their abuses, absolutely terrified of breaking away from the group, of straying from the pack. Petrified at the thought that next week, it could be them on that chair. The little girl didn't flinch throughout, motionless as a statue, even as the spittle hit her face.

"YOUR PARENTS HATE YOU!! THEY DON'T WANT YOU ANYMORE!!!"

"YOU'RE JUST A BED-WETTING KID!! STOP TALKING ABOUT MONSTERS AND GROW UP!!"

"BITCH!! WHORE!!!"

"I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!!! DIE DAMMIT DIE!!!"

"GO FUCK YOURSELF, YOU FUCKING BITCH!!!"

The insults swirled and echoed in the small room. The noise became unbearable, the shadows moved, growing as the children stood up and flailed their arms in all directions. Jordan drowned in this aura of pure violence, but what horrified her wasn't that: it was the absolute emptiness emanating from the little girl at the center of the circle, absorbing all the violence around her. Jordan tried to reach out to her, but it was in vain: her soul had no body, and the room turned over, hurling her violently into other abysses.

After a long moment alone with the bitter taste of emptiness that had filled her being so many years ago, she arrived in a larger room, recognized as Donovan's office. She remembered this scene: it was her last day at the school. After a year there. Donovan was at his desk, dressed in a dull blue suit, filling out a paper. Little Jordan was sitting opposite him, her mouth slightly open and her eyes lost in the void.

"It seems you're doing better now," he observed.

"Yes..." she replied as if sleepwalking.

"It seems the medications are working."

"Yes..."

"What do you think about your behavior before you came here? Your obsession with the devil and all these horrors?"

"It was wrong. It's over now."

"How do you feel about your parents?"

"I'm grateful. They helped me heal. I want to see them again."

"Good," he finally commented.

He waved his hand to sign his paper and finally looked up at her:

"It seems you are indeed cured. I think if you continue your treatment, you should be able to go home. Isn't that good news?"

"Isn't that good news?" echoed in Jordan's ears as the entire room disintegrated before her. The floor fell away beneath her, all shapes whirling in a hellish dance. She fell one last time and landed harshly in her childhood bedroom.

It was dark, the shutters closed, little Jordan sleeping soundly in her bed.

She saw the quilt rise slowly with her breath. She turned her head: a very faint light appeared under the door. She approached, and she began to hear whispers coming from the downstairs. She recognized her parents talking to a stranger in the middle of the night.

"I swear, we've tried everything," her mother sobbed.

"I know," a muffled voice replied.

"We tried taking her to church, seeing a priest, but she doesn't react to anything. Not even the sermons, not even the punishments..."

"The devil can have an extremely powerful grip," the voice answered, "no conventional method will work. Except mine."

"But," her father interjected, "do you have to proceed like this? Isn't it a bit extreme? She clearly said she didn't want to go to that school."

"I understand your concern, believe me. You are well-intentioned parents who only want the best for your daughter. But extreme problems may require methods that can seem extreme. But don't worry, everything we do is validated by experts and psychological studies. Not to mention the Church, which supports us one hundred percent."

"How long will it take?" the mother asked.

"Hard to say," said the voice, "I'll know more after her first evaluation. You have to be prepared for it to last several months. But when she comes back to you, she'll have no trace of the devil in her, and you'll have your little girl back just as you've always known her."

Jordan heard her mother burst into sobs and her father trying to reassure her. The little girl in the bed was still sleeping.

"Go ahead," her father said, "do what you have to do. We trust you."

"Your daughter will be in good hands, I promise," said the voice Jordan recognized as Donovan's. "With the help of our almighty lord, your daughter will be returned to you healed."

Then, she heard him give an order, and the sound of footsteps began echoing on the stairs: Jordan knew what was going to happen, and she tried to reach the little girl, to wake her up. She had to warn her, tell her to flee through the window before the men arrived. That she should escape and never come back. But she couldn't move. She couldn't scream. She could only remain powerless as the door to her room burst open. Two men dressed in white uniforms burst into the room. She saw the little girl wake up with a start and scream at the top of her lungs at the sight of two strangers rushing at her. They grabbed her by the wrists and lifted her out of bed. The little girl was terrified, kicking her legs in the air, trying to struggle or kick. The two men went down the stairs, carrying her as if it was nothing. Jordan saw them disappear from her view, her parents shouting desperately: "It's for your own good, Jordan! It's for your own good!"

The little girl's screams were muffled as Jordan heard the doors of a truck open and close, then disappear into the night along with the vehicle. Her parents were at the bottom of the stairs. Her father covered his face with his hands, slowly shaking his head. Her mother was talking to herself, leaning against the wall:

"It was for her own good, we had no choice. She left us no choice, we had to do it. For her."

They were far from her, but Jordan felt their shame and regret from there.

"What sadness," lamented a voice behind her.

She turned around, discovering a man who wasn't there a few seconds ago. He was in his fifties, with silver hair plastered on the top of his skull, worn skin, and a predatory smile he could barely hide behind his sorry look. She had seen him in flesh and blood, in her dreams, but now he had come to haunt her even in another world.

"Oswald," she said in a toneless voice.

He stood there, arms crossed behind his back. He tried to appear empathetic, as if he was on her side, but Jordan couldn't read him. The emotions emanating from him seemed scrambled, or non-existent. She looked at the ground, and she saw that she had regained her feet, her legs, and even her whole body.

"I'm sorry you had to experience that," he said.

"The monsters Inès talks about... They are real, aren't they? You're behind all this?"

He laughed hollowly at the accusation:

"Yes, they are. But I am nothing more than their servant..."

"What do they want?" she asked.

"To feast, simply. Sometimes, hunger awakens them, and nothing will stop them until they are satiated."

"The opening of the park... That was it, wasn't it? They devour the inhabitants of this town in waves. And this has been happening since the mine accident, or even before, right?"

"Yes," he replied. "I had no choice but to open the park when they came to me. I had no choice but to obey them and give them what they wanted. But their plan failed ten years ago. You saw it, didn't you? So today they are back, and this time they will get what they came for."

"What do you mean?" she panicked. "What's happening tonight?"

"You will know soon enough," he simply replied.

"Inès was right... the inhabitants are in danger! We have to do something, fight or warn them! Help me save them, Oswald!"

He burst into sinister, grating laughter.

"They would tear me apart!" he exclaimed. "They would kill me and I would be trapped in this hell until the end of time! Reliving my death over and over! There's no way! If I do what they say, they will let me go. There's no other alternative."

"How many are there?"

"In this town?" he said. "More than you can imagine. There's only one way: to give them what they want."

"And what do they want?"

"You."

She looked him in the eyes: he seemed sincere. He seemed resigned, as if he had accepted his defeat. As if he had sold his soul to the devil, if you will. Hundreds of people were in danger, and he, he had put his own self first, and had decided that the sacrifice of all these souls was much more attractive than the simple idea of fighting.

"If you're too scared to fight, then give me a way to do it. Tell me how to get back into my body, and I'll save everyone."

He shook his head, visibly dismayed.

"You won't give up, will you?"

Her determined look gave him the answer.

"Very well," he capitulated. "If you think you can make it. Without your thread of Ariadne, you're going to have a hard time getting back. But as they say, mirrors are powerful objects. They can transcend worlds, like occult doors. I would take a look in the bathroom if I were you."

He began to back away; or rather, he stayed in place, but his side of the room gradually receded, disappearing into the darkness. She saw his silhouette merge with the shadows, until only his silver eyes remained, staring at her.

"By the way," he continued, but this time his voice seemed to come from everywhere at once. "Do you want to know the cause of all this? The very little thing that triggered this whole cascade of events, leading you to this school? Leading you to me? Get into this bed, dive under the covers, and you will know. You will discover the little thing that

shaped your whole life.”

His voice became more distant, and it disappeared along with any trace of him in the room.

\*\*\*

Jordan settled into her childhood bed. The sensation was indescribable: she felt a mix of nostalgia for her little girl's universe, her room, her toys, her duvet. And there was also something like apprehension: the fact of being here again, reliving all the events of her adolescence. That night marked the beginning of a completely different life. The end of her childhood. And all for what? Because her parents couldn't bear that she didn't believe in God. No, it was more than that: they didn't like that she was different. She read comics, dressed differently. She was drawn to the world of horror. They, in their ignorance, took it for Satanism. This whole story had started because of an incident. It seemed to her that it was something like a shooting. Everyone was scared. Yes. But... Before that, there had been something, hadn't there? There had been an event, and she was almost certain she had dreamed of it. That it had something to do with it, but she didn't know. Why was she fascinated by the macabre?

She heard a scratching under the bed, but paid no attention to it.

She had always been like that, hadn't she? It was just a passion.

“Really?” a voice in her head said.

Was there a cause? Had she become like this?

Another, louder scratching.

“What's that, I want to sleep,” she thought.

Was it coming from outside? Her window was open, it was warm. It must have been a noise outside.

There was a low growl, almost imperceptible, just below her.

“What's that, a dog outside? I have school, I need to sleep!”

She heard a knock against one of the slats, and felt something press on the mattress from under her bed. She opened her eyes.

Jordan discovered small hands, and a tiny body in a colorful pajama. Her room didn't yet have all the biblical posters, texts, and religious magazines imposed by her parents. Nor even her array of horror movie posters and esoteric symbols, which they had torn down and thrown away just before replacing them. Her room, lit by the moonlight, was still full of children's toys. Jordan was six years old again, still the perfect little girl in her parents' eyes.

And something was hidden under her bed.

She heard another muffled growl, and scraping against the carpet. She began to feel scared: she lifted her duvet and got out of bed, taking refuge near her dollhouse. She was fully living the scene, and at the same time, she knew it was a memory. That all this had really happened when she was six years old, simply hidden somewhere in her head.

Little Jordan gathered her courage and approached the bed. There was no more noise, the mattress no longer moved. So she knelt down, and laid her head on the floor to look underneath. The man returned her frightened gaze, eyes wide open. Jordan jumped back, hitting her head on the floor. She wanted to scream, she felt her scream rising, it was coming, but the man rushed to get out of his hiding place, shaking the bed in all directions as he extricated himself:

“Wait, wait, wait,” he pleaded in a whisper.

He crawled towards her and pressed his hand over her mouth, miming a “shh” with his other hand, a finger to his lips. Jordan was paralyzed in front of this stranger, an adult in his thirties with a thin body and big bulging eyes.

“Please, don't scream, I beg you. Don't make noise, please!”

He seemed as panicked as she was. He had closely cropped hair, a wide skull, and a small chin.

“Idiot cramp, son of a...” he whispered.

He looked at Jordan with his big eyes, seeming to lose control of the situation.

“You're not going to scream, are you? Especially don't scream. I'm... Uh... I'm a nice monster, yeah! I hide under your bed to protect you from the bad monsters. I like being close to you, listening to you sleep, and feeling you move in your sleep. But I'm a nice monster, right? I'll never hurt you, I promise! But most importantly, this must remain a secret between us two, okay? Don't tell your parents, it's our little secret. Okay?”

Jordan was terrified, so she simply responded what he expected, nodding her head, his large hand still covering her

mouth.

“Okay, great! That’s great!” he said still in a low voice, but now reassured. “Listen, I love being under your bed while you sleep, watching over you, but I’m going to have to leave for a while. Especially, don’t say anything to your parents, otherwise I won’t be able to come back, okay? Uh... maybe I’ll come back if you’re good, okay? Or... yeah, that’s it.”

The man released his grip on Jordan and stood up, cracking his knees in the process, and he backed towards the window of the room, his eyes still fixed on her. He contorted to get his legs over the ledge, grimacing as his cramp flared up again, and he climbed down the wall. Jordan heard him land on the ground, then he started running down the street, his footsteps on the asphalt gradually disappearing into the night.

\*\*\*

“Mom?” Jordane said, shaking her mother.

“What?” she replied with a start, panicked. Then, realizing it was her daughter, her tone became irritated: “What do you want? It’s the middle of the night, you have school tomorrow!”

“There’s a monster in my room.”

“Stop your nonsense, and go back to bed! Monsters don’t exist.”

“But they do, Mom,” she insisted, “I saw it, I talked to it. It was under my bed.”

“You dreamed, sweetheart, there’s nothing under your bed!”

“But Mom, I swear!”

Her mother jumped up and began to shout, waking her father:

“Jordane! Stop lying! There’s no monster under your bed, don’t be a baby! Go back to bed right now, or you’ll be punished!”

“But Mom,” she insisted, “I’m not lying, I swear!”

“What’s going on here!” now her father growled. “Do you want me to check? Because if I go there and there’s nothing, you’ll get a spanking! If I wake up late for work tomorrow, you’ll really be in trouble!”

Jordane fell silent. She became aware of herself: she felt fear. She was terrified of her nocturnal encounter and did not feel safe. Even if she closed the window, she couldn’t erase the image of the monster she had seen under her bed. What if it came back? But more importantly, what she felt, which was harder to recognize, was anger. Yes, she was angry. Because she was being accused of lying. She had been unjustly accused of lying by her parents. Just as she had been unjustly accused of smoking at school, resulting in a suspension. She had been unjustly accused of being a satanist, of being ready to kill her classmates with a weapon.

“YOU ARE UNFAIR!!!” she screamed.

But her parents didn’t react. In fact, their bed was empty. And she, she had become a lost soul again; but the anger, it was still there. Everyone had been unfair to her, right? And to Inès too. She had been unjustly called crazy, to be like her mother, when there really were monsters in this city. That’s why she had to help her. And the townspeople, they hadn’t asked for anything. They were going to be slaughtered just to satisfy monsters. She had to right this injustice.

So, she went to the upstairs bathroom.

\*\*\*

The room she had seen for the last time a decade ago, before leaving for good, was still different from her memories: in this one, her parents hadn’t redone the wallpaper yet. The monstrously warped and blackened wallpaper above the bathtub still awaited its removal. The sink cabinet, however, was impeccably tidy, not yet overflowing with all the beauty products she had started to collect at fifteen. Her childhood clothes were neatly folded on a small shelf, ready to be worn the next morning. However, Jordane saw none of this. Her eyes were fixed above the sink, lost in another world. The one where she had left her body.

In a mirror where she should have seen her reflection, she watched a crowd move among the park’s attractions. She was surprised to see it so lively, she who had left it still deserted a few minutes - or centuries? - earlier. Oswald had told her they were all in mortal danger, but apparently, no one seemed aware of it: everyone was smiling and their faces full of excitement. Even worse: the visitors all seemed to converge in the same place. She heard some talk of a “show,” others saying “it looks like something’s happening over there.” She focused on her surroundings: on the other side of the mirror, she saw what looked like the entrance of a tent. Around the opening, two silky red curtains were hung with

a golden chain. It looked like she was inside a circus tent. On the other side, outside, she recognized the barely visible pink cobblestone alley under the feet of the crowd jostling to get there first. She was in front of another attraction she hadn't yet seen, a sort of kaleidoscope facade. And apart from that, she had no other information. She banged on the bathroom mirror in frustration, and something strange happened: someone turned towards her and met her gaze. She knocked several times, confused, and saw the man point at her, his other hand intertwined with his wife's.

"What is that?" she read on his lips.

She began to call out to him, screaming alone in her parents' bathroom. The man seemed worried and left the crowd to join her, dragging his better half with him.

He passed through the entrance with silky curtains and replied:

"Are you okay, little one, do you need help?"

Jordane felt a wave of relief, finally, she could warn them:

"You need to get out of here!" she yelled. "Something horrible is going to happen! You're all in danger!"

"What?" the man said, stepping back, now troubled. "Where are your parents?"

"What is she talking about, that one?" added the woman.

"Quick!" Jordane continued. "Run before it's too late! You all have to leave! They're going to kill you all!"

A shadow passed over the man's face, and he was about to panic. Then, his face lit up, and he laughed:

"Ha! She's an actress! I told you, honey, there had to be someone here!"

"No, you don't understand!" she pleaded, pounding on the mirror. "You're in mortal danger!"

"Is it a special event? Some kind of surprise, with all these Halloween decorations? Is that why everyone's gathering at the back of the park?"

"NO!!" she screamed back. "Don't go there, the monsters will kill you all! You have to flee!"

Tears welled up in her eyes, making the man uncomfortable; but he forced a smile, his mind probably telling him it was all a ruse.

"Yeah yeah, you're a good actress! Where are the others? Can we start the attractions already? No, we're going to see the famous show, everyone's going there..."

"NO! Listen to me, please! You have to believe me, I beg you! There are monsters everywhere, they're going to devour you!"

The man burst into forced laughter, but his wife was already pulling him by the arm:

"Come on, let's go, let's see what else is there..."

"Alright, alright, looks like they're pulling out all the stops for this show!"

They rejoined the crowd, while Jordane screamed for them to stop, to listen to her. She begged passersby to turn around, to heed her warning, but all those whose attention she could capture simply looked away with embarrassment. While she was screaming from another world, in the park, the show finally began.



## Chapter XIII: The Grand Finale

Raphaël exited the administrative building, flinging the door open with his shoulder. Night had completed its struggle with the day, enveloping the world in its starless veil. He could hear the distant buzz of the crowd somewhere far off, on the other side of the tall brick wall that separated the attractions from the administrative buildings; but the area where he stood remained silent. One thing alone stood in his way to the rest of the park, right in front of him. It was the only lit lamppost in the alley, casting on the ground the shadow of the thing swinging from the rope around its neck. All he could see was a tuft of disheveled black hair and a long, grayish dress. A dark stain spread and trailed along one of the pale legs of the thing, dripping to the ground.

The woman swung very slightly, like a pendulum nearing its end.

He stood frozen, watching the woman oscillate: the rope creaking against the metal of the lamppost filled his ears, almost hypnotizing him.

"It's Olivia, I'm sure of it. It's Crazy Ollie," he thought.

A rustling behind him made him jump: he turned quickly and his eyes fell on a pile of old, weed-covered scrap metal. There was a pale, faded pink metal arm topped with a line of multicolored bulbs, most of them shattered. Around it lay several panels and hoods of the same color, seemingly belonging to the same attraction. But a quick glance revealed no movement. He turned back to the lamppost: it was off, the thing had vanished.

And yet.

He felt its presence. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that he himself was just at the foot of another lamppost. A nauseating smell filled his nostrils: a stench of death, and more. He felt something slowly rising behind him, barely inches away. He heard the dull creak of the rope right behind his ear.

"I hate being called that," whispered the woman behind him.

He turned around slowly, very slowly. Like in a dream, simply observing a distant scene. When he faced the ghost of Ollie, seeing her cadaverous pallor and her black eyes with burst blood vessels, his legs gave way and he collapsed. She hung a few inches off the ground, that brown substance still dripping at regular intervals, her rope still firmly attached. She spoke again in a plaintive voice:

"You must leave here! He killed my baby! My dear heart! My beautiful Inès... I was so proud of her..."

"Who killed her?" he found himself asking.

"THE OTHER ONE WITH HIS CARNIVOROUS SMILE!!" she spat. "THE ONE WHO RUNS THIS PARK! HE STABBED HER, MY POOR LITTLE RAY OF SUNSHINE..."

"Oswald..."

"She saved them all that night. They used me! The thing stole my body, and look what they did to me!"

"Who? Who stole your body?"

"They killed my little girl," she ignored him, "and she's trapped here, like me! You must leave immediately, if you don't want to end up like this!"

He opened his mouth to speak: questions crowded his mind, he tried to gather his thoughts but the adrenaline was pounding in his skull, making it hard to think. He was interrupted when the ghost's face lit up with a green glow. She contorted in horror, pointing at something in the sky.

"It's too late!" she whimpered, desperate, "It's started!"

Raphaël, still on the ground, turned towards the park: he had time to see the green light ascend into the air, climbing higher, leaving a small trail of smoke behind it. It slowed down, and for a fraction of a second, it paused, high up like the evening star. Then, it exploded. He saw a swarm of bright red lights shower the amusement park with their wondrous glow, and the sound of a distant gunshot reverberated between all the buildings of the Palace of the Strange. At the second firework launched into the air, he realized what he was watching. He turned again, but Olivia had vanished. He was alone. By the fourth shot, he finally composed himself and joined the crowd.

\*\*\*

Once past the gate, he quickly found the mass of visitors all converging in the same direction. A glance over the

crowd told him they were headed towards the origin of the gunshots. He made his way through the mass, pushing some, stepping on feet without bothering to apologize. The crowded alley changed color to the rhythm of the colorful explosions, lighting up the excited faces of the oblivious visitors. He elbowed his way several meters before stopping dead in horror: everyone had gathered in front of a large medieval castle. It consisted of white granite ramparts a bit higher than him, surrounding a stage towering over the mass of visitors. Behind, towers rose higher into the sky, decorated with various tapestries and sculptures. Two cannons had their mouths pointed into the air and were firing the rockets at regular intervals, illuminating the stage with a symphony of colors.

On stage, the show had begun: a person lay in a large purple box adorned with esoteric motifs. Lying on trestles, only a head and feet protruded from each end. It was the first time Raphaël had encountered the woman who screamed to death, but he immediately recognized the family resemblance to the ghost he had just encountered. The same face, the same expression of horror. It was Inès. Her screams were drowned out by the festive explosions and the crowd's cheers, but terror was written all over her face.

Standing behind the box, with a vacant stare, Jordane held a saw in her hand, examining the sharpness of its teeth.

"Jordane!" he yelled, but even he couldn't hear himself amidst all the noise. He started moving again, pushing visitors out of his way to make a path, but the crowd was too dense. Already, Jordane placed her blade against the surface of the box, drawing applause from the crowd, and a silent scream of horror from Inès.

"This is not a trick," he thought. "She's going to saw her in half, but there won't be any magician's trickery in this box. When the blood flows, and they realize what's happening, the panic will start."

"And we'll all die," finished a voice in his head.

He redoubled his efforts to reach the stage, passing by a small group that seemed absorbed in something else. He glanced into the attraction and nearly stumbled over the man in front of him when he caught sight of another Jordane.

"Jordane?" he shouted.

No, it wasn't her. Well, yes, he had recognized her instantly, but he was now facing a little girl, no more than six years old. She had the same delicate face as his friend, identical chestnut hair, and he knew deep down that it was indeed her. He tried again to get her attention, but she didn't seem to be able to hear him. So, without thinking, he plunged behind the curtains of silky red. As he entered, it was as if everything had extinguished around him. The sudden silence pierced his ears, and he was now in an infinitely large room bathed in a deep blue light. There was nothing around him, only the perfectly black undefined floor and a ceiling endlessly high, as if lost in the confines of space.

"Jordane?" he called, but the universe simply echoed his voice. He took a step forward, and a multitude of silhouettes appeared in a line before him. He jumped, and they all mimicked him. He recognized the clothes he was wearing, his hair from behind. He slowly raised his hand, and all his doubles immediately mirrored him, a gesture that seemed to repeat to the ends of infinity. He tried to touch the nearest twin, but his hand struck an invisible wall. He groped around him like a blind man, mirrored by his followers: there was also a wall on the other side. He advanced along the corridor, and the line of reflections disappeared, before another appeared in front of him. He looked into his own eyes, and he understood where he was: a labyrinth of mirrors.

"Run! We have to leave!" he heard someone shout.

He turned, and his heart leaped when he saw Jordane. She was far, very far from him, lost in the vastness of the room, like an astronaut adrift in space.

"Jordane!" he called.

But she seemed neither to see nor hear him; she was tapping against a pane, screaming and pleading as if speaking to someone.

"You have to leave! Monsters are coming! He wants to trap and kill you all!"

"Jordane!" he shouted, but his voice was lost.

How could she be here if he had seen her on that stage? He thought back to what the apparition had told him: could Oswald have also stolen her body to create panic? Then what was he seeing? Her soul?

"Or is it an illusion?" he thought.

He didn't bother to ponder and moved forward, groping around him like a blind man. He delved deeper into the sinuous structure, sometimes hitting his own reflection, his doubles appearing and disappearing in all directions.

"Jordane!" he called, to no avail.

She turned her back on him, desperately tapping against a mirror, pleading for someone to listen. And he, trying to reach her, but unable to advance. He felt like he was making no progress, the distance between them also infinite. His

reflections watched him in two endless diagonals, as if he was the center of a hellish cross. And the ghostly light was driving him completely mad.

"Jordane!" he yelled one last time without her hearing him.

She abruptly lifted her head as if she had heard him, but her gaze fixed on a point somewhere in the void. He heard her whisper something, maybe "Inès...", and she began to walk along the mirror. She disappeared when she stepped out of the frame only to reappear a little further, as if traveling by jumping from mirror to mirror. She looked worried, as if she was following something, or someone.

"Damn, we really don't have time for this..." he thought.

He knew that outside, at any moment, panic would erupt among the crowd. And with it, death.

So he decided to go deeper into the labyrinth to try to reach Jordane.

\*\*\*

Meanwhile, in the park, Billie was having a blast: in control of a brand-new body, he sawed wood with passion. Even if outwardly, the face of his host was expressionless, he was jubilant watching Inès scream in terror. It was her punishment, for having prevented them from eating last time: they could torture and kill her as many times as they wanted, forever.

None of the spectators could see him, admire him pulling his strings with perfect dexterity. But that didn't stop him from listening to the cheers and applause of the crowd slowly quieting down, giving way to confusion: already, the girl's screams were beginning to be heard, and the faces of those who were just beginning to understand were falling apart. Soon, panic would start. And finally, blood would flow.

At the next saw stroke, he felt a snag, and the large purple box began to jerk and vibrate as Inès struggled to escape the blade. He saw his tool turn red and a smile formed on his face. He redoubled his efforts, pulling and wrapping the strings around his puppet. His multiple arms moved with precision, like a surgeon in the operating room. Blood began to flow to the ground and Inès's convulsions stopped suddenly. He hadn't noticed that she had stopped screaming. He hadn't noticed that the crowd had begun to flee in horror. He was focused on his doll, in ecstasy before its graceful movements.

But something caught his attention. In a corner of his mind, he became aware of a presence. A lost little girl.

In his world, the Astral world, the human had managed to trap the girl's soul, Jordane. He had managed to manipulate her, and she was now condemned to remain locked in the world of mirrors, screaming stories of monsters and catastrophe.

His work here was done: already, there was no one left in front of the stage. He felt the time approaching, but he thought he had just enough time to enjoy this new soul and have fun with her before the great carnage. He finished sawing the box that opened in two, spilling its contents onto the granite pavements with an obscene and guttural noise. An explosion in the sky colored the soaked ground and breathed a last note of green life into the tear-filled eyes of the corpse.

Poetic.

But Billie didn't linger on this spectacle: this girl was at their disposal and always would be. He could play with her another time. Instead, he released his control over Jordane's physical envelope and went hunting for what really interested him: her soul.

\*\*\*

Jordane was desperately pounding on the bathroom mirror, only succeeding in creating a cloud of fog on the smooth surface, growing and then evaporating in time with her ragged breathing. Why wouldn't anyone listen to her? Why was it always the same? Ever since she was little, she had been ignored.

"Because you've been living in your own hell since you were six," a voice in her head said.

She patted the mirror again with her small hands, in vain, when she heard the floorboards creak behind her. She turned around abruptly and saw a shadow pass in front of the slightly open door. A familiar silhouette, she was sure of it. She moved lightly and cautiously peeked her head into the hallway: she just managed to see the shadow disappear around a corner of the house, heading towards the stairs.

"That ponytail..." she thought.

Thinking she knew who it was, she called out without thinking:

“Inès?”

No response, but a stair creaked loudly. She decided to follow the apparition, and behind her, in the mirror, Raphaël could be seen calling her in vain.

She reached the stairs and saw, out of the corner of her eye, the silhouette disappear into another room. She followed, making the old wooden boards cry out too. She passed another mirror, placed on a table near the entrance, without seeing it: Raphaël could be seen again, now further away, seeming to struggle to reach her. She arrived in the kitchen and came face-to-face with Inès, who was rummaging in a drawer under the sink. But it wasn't her.

Jordane watched in horror the scene unfolding before her. Not the half-torn rag doll moving its hands in the cutlery drawer; she was watching Billie standing right behind it.

The real Billie.

She knew it was his true form, that of his world, the spirit world. The thing she saw was sitting on the floor, its fat, hairy legs, those of a colossus, surrounding the dirty, unstitched puppet. Above it, the monster furiously waved its long, thin, hairy arms, pulling a mass of string in which a dusty cotton heap was entangled. It must have had a dozen arms, maybe twelve, manipulating the object's limbs like a mad conductor, pulling and winding the thread with frightening speed, like a spider enclosing its prey in its mortal cocoon. She was not surprised to recognize the string in which she was wrapped: a long, thin, silvery thread.

She didn't even glance at the padded fabric hand that pulled out a long knife. Nor at its face with gold cufflink buttons for eyes, nor its ponytail of stapled fabric. She stared at Billie's face, a neckless head sunk into his broad shoulders. He wore a hood, or rather an old dirty and rotten shroud that hid his face.

“It's with you I'm going to have fun now,” he said in a hoarse voice.

He lunged at her with the knife. Jordane saw herself dying, eyes fixed on the plaster ceiling and a pool of red blood spreading on the dirty floor tiles, but a force lifted her like a gust of wind.

“What are you doing here?” the monster yelled as she was dragged into the hallway, a firm grip crushing her wrist. She was pulled into a closet that closed behind her. When her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she recognized her savior. The woman with the ponytail hiding with her in the closet was about thirty years old, the one she had seen in the Duli tunnel, the one who had tried to warn her before Oswald trapped her here.

“Inès...” Jordane exclaimed.

“Shh!” she whispered, “he's going to hear us!”

They jumped when they heard furniture crash with a bang somewhere near the kitchen.

“Where are you?” the monster roared. “Do you think you can hide for long? Show yourselves, because if I find you, you're going to regret it!”

Inès looked terrified, but her gaze returned to Jordane:

“Listen to me, you have to get out of here as fast as you can!”

“But, what about you? You're stuck here too, right?”

“No,” she replied, “it's too late for me, I belong to this place...”

“Don't worry, we'll make it. I'm not going to leave you behind!”

“You're not listening to me!” hissed Inès. “There's nothing more you can do for me! Your only chance not to end up like me is to find a mirror, and flee. I'll create a diversion, you'll have to use it to escape.”

“But...” she tried to protest.

“Drop it,” she cut off. “Save yourself before trying to save others.”

Without giving her time to react, she flung open the closet door and went out to draw the monster's attention.

“Ah,” he said, “a new toy! I'm bored playing with this rag doll, it lacks screams... Come here, let's have some fun!”

Jordane heard a terrible crash in the kitchen followed by a piercing scream, but she hadn't moved an inch, lost in her thoughts. She remembered what Inès had said: “Save yourself before trying to save others.”

It sounded like a reproach.

Then, Richard's words came back to her: “Nobody wants to face their demons, so someone has to do it for them, right?”

What did that mean? Was she wrong about everything? Had she ignored all the warnings given to her? Even Oswald had told her not to venture into the park at night. And Inès... Should she have listened to her that night in the tunnel? Who had she managed to save, so far? No one. Who had she put in danger? Ed, that teenager, Emilie, and then... Raphaël...

"What are you doing, idiot?" she heard scream from the other room. "Why aren't you listening to me? Run away!"

"Certainly not!" spat Billie.

Jordane heard Inès scream even louder, then silence. She listened to Billie's footsteps moving away, then a dresser overturning with the sound of broken glass.

"No," she thought, "the mirror in front of the entrance."

"Where are you??" he bellowed, smashing everything in his path: the walls trembled as he flung furniture and doors slammed, shaking the whole house as he changed rooms. It was only a matter of time before he reached her.

"Should I start listening to what I'm told?" she thought. "Should I trust Inès and find a mirror?"

Gathering her courage, she emerged from her hiding place and headed towards the entrance. She found the dresser where her parents used to place their keychains years ago: it lay on its side, its mirror shattered into glittering fragments on the floor.

"So, you're trying to lock me in here..." she muttered to herself.

She ascended the stairs, navigating around pieces of broken furniture littering the ground: the only other place she could find a mirror was the bathroom. Reaching the top, she was about to enter when she heard the sound of glass breaking just beyond the wall.

She froze. Silence ensued.

"Jordane, I have someone who wants to see you, with me," growled the monster from the room.

"They are very angry," it continued, "they say you're going to be in big trouble!"

Paralyzed and speechless, she watched helplessly as the door opened. A hand gripped the doorframe, white and with cracked skin. Another hand appeared, holding a large wooden ladle. Then, Jordane's mother floated through the entrance, followed by her husband, clutching a poker firmly. The two corpses blocked the entrance, hovering a few centimeters off the ground. Their skin was ghostly pale, streaked with fissures oozing black liquid. Their eyes were yellow discs, like full moons. Jordane's mother rhythmically tapped her antique spoon against her other hand. Above their heads, clawed, hairy talons moved in the shadows, nearly invisible.

"I see a naughty girl who deserves a good lesson," Billie's voice boomed from the hidden depths of the bathroom, shaking Jordane's father as if he were speaking.

She tried to back away, but her legs simply gave way, and she fell to the ground. Hundreds of tiny spiders swarmed over her parents' bodies, some dropping to the old parquet floor and now climbing up her legs.

"Why do you want to leave here?" Billie continued. "Aren't you happy at home, with your family? And if you escape, we won't be able to keep you forever and have fun with you, like we're already doing with the other girl..."

She caught a glimpse of something in the corner of her eye, and the next moment, she was thrown aside like a rag doll. An excruciating pain tore through her hip. Her mother appeared in the hallway, brandishing her ladle.

"So, you've been swearing to everyone that there are monsters in this town?" Billie mocked, "Aren't you ashamed of spreading such lies? You know your parents care a lot about what people think of them."

A sinister chuckle followed.

"It's too late, you've nowhere to run. No more mirrors. You belong to me now."

She crawled back, still on the ground. Billie emerged, blocking the corridor with his large, furry body.

"Yes," she thought. "There's no way out. Why didn't I listen in the tunnel? Why didn't I listen to Raphaël when he wanted to go back? Why did I dismiss him?"

There was a squelching sound, and as Billie advanced, she saw Inès being dragged on the ground behind him. She was ensnared in a silvery thread, like a dog tangled in its own leash. Her arms were bent at unnatural angles. Her leg was twisted the wrong way, a bone protruding from the acute angle. She was crying, but her whimpers were muffled by her mouth covered in thread.

"I've been stubborn. I didn't listen to anyone. I insulted Raphaël. I was unfair to him."



She remembered what she had said to her parents the infamous night she woke them up because of the monster under her bed, and she smiled.

“So this is my hell? I’ve been trying to find and solve injustices everywhere, and all this time, I was the one treating others unfairly? I’m going to end up like her.”

Inès’s pleading eyes met hers; not for liberation, Jordane knew immediately, but so that she wouldn’t end up like her.

“If only I had listened to you that night...” she thought.

Then: “That night...”

Suddenly, a realization struck her: “That night. I saw you too. You gave me a clue, didn’t you?”

Her focus returned to Inès, still being dragged on the ground, and she read in her eyes: “Your room.”

Yes, that was it, there was still a way out.

She found the strength to stand up, and it was just in time: she narrowly dodged a swing of the poker that embedded itself in the wall with a dull thud. Billie lost a moment trying to pull the weapon from the old brick wall, giving Jordane time to sprint towards her old room. But she was small. She was only six years old, and her legs couldn’t carry her as fast as she needed. She knew that Billie needed only one step to catch up with her, and then she would be impaled by the hand of her own father. As she lengthened her stride, time seemed to slow down. She was bracing for the blow: any moment now, she would feel her skull being ripped open from the back, or perhaps see a sharp object suddenly protruding from her chest, staining her pajamas with a pool of red. But she set her foot down again, and nothing happened. She began her next stride and heard only the monster’s growl. A second later, she reached her bedroom door. She burst in and turned around one last time to look at the hallway: Billie was still there, his two deathly mannequins still brandishing their weapons. Inès stood at the bathroom doorway: in a final effort, she had grabbed the frame to hold back Billie. Their eyes met, and both saw gratitude in the other’s. Jordane didn’t wait for Billie to scream and turn his parents against Inès; she quickly closed the door behind her and locked it with a turn of the key.

\*\*\*

“I’m going to go crazy...” Jordane thought, sitting on the church bench. It was stiflingly hot on this beautiful summer Sunday, the perfect weather for playing outside: hopscotch drawn on the sidewalk at the corner of the street, the swing in the park just a few strides away, the water jet from her neighbor Leandra’s parents... There were so many options; yet, here she was, stuck listening to Father Maxence’s sermons, which felt like they lasted for centuries. She turned to cast a pleading look at the church’s partially open entrance door, hoping for a breeze, but it seemed even the wind had better things to do than attend mass.

She felt a hand grip her thigh, and she immediately bowed her head and closed her eyes to mimic the other parishioners, to avoid the icy glare her mother was probably giving her. She tried to follow along, to concentrate on reciting the text she knew by heart to keep from being noticed, but insidious thoughts invaded her mind like flashes from a camera: salted caramel ice cream... A refreshing lemonade she could sip while playing jump rope. She fought these distractions as best she could, but the mass was unbearably boring, robbing her of precious time that she was convinced would be just long enough for clouds to start appearing.

“Jordane, what’s gotten into you!” hissed her mother.

She opened her eyes and realized she was fervently tapping her foot on the bench in front of her, likely disrupting an entire row of parishioners in their recitations.

“Uh... I need to pee,” she lied.

“You’re joking, right?” her mother whispered, hands still joined, “How many times have I told you to go before we leave?”

“But I didn’t need to go before we left!” she protested a bit too loudly.

In fact, now that she had thought about all that lemonade, she really did need to go...

She saw her mother blush as a few members of the congregation turned around with stern looks, and that was enough for her to relent. She nodded towards the exit for Jordane to sneak off to the restroom without drawing further attention. Jordane seized this golden opportunity to escape.

After making her way up the aisle, breaking the perfect silence of the large hall with her shoes – could she go to hell for that? She seemed to remember reading something about it, but she wasn’t sure – instead of turning right towards the restrooms, she cast a timid glance at her mother and, seeing the coast clear, slipped through the partially open door to escape BoredomVille.



She was first blinded by the harsh light of the outside world, but as she fully descended the marble steps, she could finally behold the radiant day before her: clear blue skies, the luckier half of the neighborhood outside, playing all sorts of games. Her mind whirled with possibilities: what should she play? Already damned to hell, she might as well make the most of it, but the possibilities seemed almost endless.

Struck by sudden inspiration, she decided she wanted to play hopscotch. She made her way up the street, keeping a low profile, then, once she was out of the church's aura, she broke into a run. She passed a bus stop where two girls were waiting for the next bus on a bench when she noticed a small box on the ground in front of them. She stopped to pick it up and offered it to the two older girls.

"Is this your box?" she asked.

"Ah, my compact!" exclaimed one of the girls in a man's voice.

Jordane's eyes widened as she realized that one of the 'girls' was actually a man. He had a huge mass of blond hair falling to his chest, wore a colorful open shirt revealing his lean, tanned body, and sported a collection of necklaces of various shapes. His jeans were torn at the knees and held up by a large metal buckle belt with complex symbols.

But what made her blush in surprise was when she saw the man's makeup. He had outlined his eyes in black with eyeliner.

The woman sitting next to him, stunningly beautiful with her long, silky hair, a T-shirt revealing two peaks on her chest, and high-waisted white pants, burst into a crystalline laugh:

"What's the matter, dear, never seen a man in makeup before?"

Jordane jumped, her mouth still agape, and she automatically replied, her eyes still fixed on the young man, "my daddy says that men who wear makeup are..." then she lowered her eyes, realizing what she was about to say. The boy, instead of getting angry, laughed heartily. The sound that came from his throat was like a philharmonic orchestra.

"Well, your daddy is wrong," said the woman, "it takes a real man to wear makeup and own it. I hope you find one like that."

"It's the Rock spirit, baby!" added the other, "you know about Rock, don't you?"

Jordane shook her head vigorously, clutching the compact in her crossed arms without realizing it:

"My mommy says Rock music opens the door to the devil!" she recited, panicked.

This time, both young people laughed in unison, and it was as if a rainbow had poured directly onto her.

"I bet your parents are in there, right?" the woman said, pointing to the church behind them.

"Yes," Jordane replied timidly.

"And do you think they enjoy it there? I mean, do they feel good? Does it uplift them?"

She thought about it: many left with smiles. Some seemed rejuvenated, as if they had drunk a magic potion that would help them through the week's challenges. But her parents? How did they leave? Happy? No, they always seemed just as afraid, if not a bit more with each sermon.

"Not them," she replied timidly.

"Playing hooky, are you?" the boy said cheerfully.

She lowered her head and looked at her shoes, shame creeping into her eyes.

"Hey, don't worry!" he reassured her, putting a hand on her shoulder. "You're so right, little one! Too many adults spend their lives doing what they think they should instead of what they really want to do, you get me?"

"It's not an easy path," the woman added, "and that's why so few take it. If you don't feel like you belong there, don't waste another second fighting against your true nature! Look, I spent four years studying law before I realized I hated it and wanted to make music." She tapped a large black case shaped like a guitar, but longer, propped against the bench. "And the same goes for my sweetheart here!"

"I never want to change another timing belt again," he lamented.

"Do you dream of going to space?" the woman continued. "Go to space. Want to become a princess? Fight for it. Raise sheep? No problem! That's the Rock spirit too!"

Jordane frowned: she didn't know what to think of these strangers talking about strange things. She just went to school. She had no idea what was after that, or what she wanted to do. In fact, she was still obsessed with the man's makeup, and what her parents would think of them. They would grab her arm and drag her back to church, screaming

that they would call the police. That's what they would do.

"You don't seem convinced, little one," the man said, "but maybe this will help. This is what we're presenting at the studio tomorrow, that's why we're taking the bus to the station."

He rummaged through his bag at his feet and pulled out a cassette player. He placed the large headphones on Jordane's head and gave her a thumbs up to ask if she was ready. Caught off guard, wanting to be polite, she returned the thumbs up, and then the man pressed the play button, laughing.

It was as if a dam had burst above her head and a torrent of phenomenal power was pouring down, sweeping away everything in its path. The bass line vibrated through her entire body, as if she was one of the strings of the instrument, and she immediately recognized the beauty of the young woman in the melody. The drums hammered her brain with their catchy rhythm and impeccable tempo, like the architect of the group. The guitars and piano joined in, and now she was surfing on the stream, carried by incredible energy. She felt certain she could climb any mountain while listening to this music. And then, the man's voice exploded in her ears. The voice of a king. She was swept away by this tornado, soaring over the entire world as if she had wings. Her worries and troubles were tiny from where she was, and she felt the strength of ten titans.

She cried at the sheer beauty of it.

When the song ended, she wasn't sad: it was like mourning that incredible experience. When the man took off the headphones, Jordane couldn't utter a word, which made the two musicians laugh:

"You know, kid, I like you," the singer said. "Keep this compact with you, as a memory. A relic to remind you to always stay crazy, always be yourself, and never lock yourself in your misery."

\*\*\*

Jordane was frantically searching her room, throwing toys across it and flinging open her cupboards in search of the old relic. Meanwhile, Billie was trying to break down the door, screaming in rage.

She leaped over her bed, opened the small drawer in her bedside table, and there it was. A small, worn black compact.

Her heart pounded as she opened it, and it fell into her chest when she saw nothing but an empty space, except for a faint blue glow. It looked like her mirror was a window to space, in a dead and starless universe. Behind her, a deafening thud sounded, and she heard the door crack.

"Let me in!" the monster roared from the other side of the door. Then, a tiny voice, coming from between her hands:

"Jordane?"

Her eyes widened when she recognized her friend:

"Raphaël?" she replied.

"Jordane, finally!" he exclaimed.

He was tiny in the compact's mirror, as if she was watching TV on a miniature screen. He seemed to be in the middle of nowhere, in a huge room with bluish neon lights; but she didn't dwell on that. She was overwhelmed with happiness. She couldn't believe he had returned, despite what she had done to him. She felt grateful, realizing how precious a friend he was.

"What are you doing in that little mirror?" he asked. She felt nauseous seeing Raphaël's head swivel and turn in all directions.

"What's this thing? A makeup kit for kids? Why was it in the middle of this labyrinth of misery?"

"It's a compact," Jordane replied reflexively, "the one I've had since I was little."

Hope returned: she knew how they were going to get out.

"I'm in their world," she explained, "they've trapped me but we can communicate through mirrors. You need to take it and bring it to my body, so I can rejoin it. Can you do it? And what did you say about a labyrinth?"

"I think I'm in the hall of mirrors, but I'll find a way out. But Jo, time is running out! They used Inès, or I think it was her mother but they wanted Inès, to try and kill everyone, and now they're using you to try their luck again!"

"I understand," she said, "I'm counting on you to get us out of here."

He seemed to hesitate for a moment, then nodded with a miserable smile.

He was about to set off when she stopped him:

“And by the way... Thank you, thank you for everything, you can’t know how happy I am to see you.”

No sooner had she finished her sentence than the door gave way with a dull crack.

\*\*\*

“How do I get out of here?” Raphaël thought, casting frantic glances around the endless room. He stood before a pedestal with an old black powder case, in which he had seen Jordane’s head. His brain was spinning in emptiness, but he felt like he had something on the tip of his tongue. An idea taking root somewhere deep in his mind, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. The more he tried to focus on it, the more it seemed to bury itself further into the back of his skull. Something about mice?

“Where are you hiding again, little mouse?” growled someone from the other world, on the other side of the small mirror. Raphaël jumped at the remark, and something in his mind unlocked.

“A mouse!” he exclaimed.

He slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand.

“The random walk theorem! The mouse in the maze!”

He was plunged into an old memory of his student days: he had started programming classes and had already discovered that he was quite good at it. The professor had given them a problem to solve: he had created a computer program with a maze and a robot mouse placed at the entrance, and the students had to program the virtual rodent to find its way out as quickly as possible.

“Each iteration randomly generates a new maze. At the end of the day, whoever shows me the fastest mouse escaping its trap gets the highest grade,” he had said.

So, like everyone else, he had thrown himself at his keyboard to start coding. He first created a robot that wandered randomly on the grid of the board; but even after optimizing his program, the mouse wasted infinite time by going back and forth through the same dead ends. Although, like everyone else, he was a beginner in programming, he was very good at math. And while he had spent his schooling hating this subject, which he considered abstract and useless, a flash of genius made him realize how useful it could be with a keyboard in his hands. He furiously struck the old keys with faded paint, and an hour later he had implemented a new algorithm: a robot that can only do one thing, turn left. After a few tests, he realized that his algorithm was much faster: this method allowed for maintaining a constant direction, thus not missing any corridor and avoiding revisiting the same places multiple times.

“Not bad,” the professor had said from behind his shoulder. “Did you come up with that yourself? Because that technique actually exists, it’s called...”

“The right-hand rule,” he finished out loud.

If you place your right hand against a wall in the maze and walk, making sure to never let go of the wall, you always end up finding the exit. That was pretty much what he had programmed back then.

He glanced in the mirror to find Jordane, but it now showed only darkness under the bed. However, he spotted something: the darkness returned his gaze. Large bulbous eyes stared at him from their lair like a frightened animal. He swallowed at this vision and forced himself to refocus on his task: the only thing he could do at the moment was to get them out of here.

He placed his hand against the mirror, meeting his double. Then another, and another, all in a line in the infinity of reflections.

“If we keep our hand pressed against the wall and keep moving forward, we should get out quickly,” he thought to himself.

“Are you sure?” a voice in his head asked.

He was about to tell them yes. That they would manage to escape in time, that they would prevent the massacre, and that everything would end well. But there was a problem. It couldn’t work. Because...

\*\*\*

“Impressive, for sure,” the professor had added. “But what if I do this? How do you get out then?”

He had opened the program and modified a few lines before relaunching the application. This time, the mouse was not placed at the entrance of the maze but in the middle. He pressed the launch button, and the mouse nestled against an interior wall: this wall was not connected to the edge of the maze, so it just went round in circles until Raphaël closed

the application, discouraged.

"You still have three good hours left," the professor said before going to see another student.

\*\*\*

"Damn, this might not work," he blurted out.

"Because we're not at the entrance of the maze, idiot, we're already somewhere inside. Impossible to know if the wall we choose is connected to the edge of this damn trap!"

But maybe he could still go for it, maybe he would be lucky...

"Wait, wait..."

He concentrated harder, trying to fully fall back into that memory that seemed so distant.

At first, he was discouraged.

He felt powerless and was afraid of finishing last. But in the end, hadn't he gotten the best grade?

"I think everyone had come around me to watch my program run," he said aloud.

"Incredible, the Pledge algorithm!" his professor had chimed in.

Yes, that was it.

He had continued to dig, and inspiration came to him: he had reinvented the famous algorithm, in that classroom filled with the panic and sweat of teenagers.

He finally regained his confidence:

"I know how to get out of here," he said with affirmation.

But no one answered: he had to hurry.

\*\*\*

Raphaël had been following his invisible thread for a few minutes, but he had no indication of his progress: for him, he was still lost in the depths of space, in a universe with long-extinguished stars, but he kept moving forward as fast as he could. He placed his right hand on a surface and moved forward blindly, like a blind man without his stick. He counted the turns in his head: one, two, one, two, three, two, one, zero. He turned left. He continued for a while, then passed his hand back over the right side: minus one, minus two, minus one, zero, one, zero, one, zero. He turned left.

This algorithm had given him a hard time, but it was thanks to it that he had achieved the highest grade: much more robust, and especially able to solve a maze already entered, it required sticking to a preferential direction – left in this case. You always had to turn left unless you encountered an obstacle. Then, you had to put your hand on it and follow it, keeping a counter in mind: if following the obstacle you had to go left, you counted minus one. If you went right, you counted plus one. If you encountered a left turn and the counter was at zero, you could turn.

The whole class had come to watch his program, and when the professor did his best to throw obstacles in the path of his mouse but she still always managed to escape in record time, he felt intense satisfaction and knew he had found his calling.

The journey through limbo seemed to last an eternity, but when the blue void surrounding them suddenly collapsed, and he faced the thick red curtains with golden seams, a lost hope filled him.

"I've done it..." he whispered.

He looked at the scene where he was: Jordane was on the ground. He ran to join her.

\*\*\*

He found the entrance to the castle, a heavy wooden door, and thanked his guardian angel when he realized it was already ajar. He rushed inside and crossed the large stone hall. There was equipment scattered here and there, but he paid no attention: he had spotted the only staircase leading up to the open stage, and he climbed the steps two at a time. He opened the powder case with a flick of his wrist, and his heart raced when he still didn't see Jordane. The thing under the bed had disappeared, and he even realized that it lay on its side, overturned. He continued on his way, and once upstairs, the first thing he saw was the large purple box with silver patterns lying on the ground. From one half,

two feet protruded. From the other half, a meter to the side, Inès stared blankly at the sky. An explosion sounded above her, but she didn't flinch, despite the yellow light filling her pupils. The streak of blood drying on her chin remained red.

The second thing he noticed was not Jordane, lying on the ground; it was the man standing above her.

Raphaël took a step forward, and the stranger turned around in surprise: the man must have been in his forties, and he was tall, very tall. He was blonde and sported a thick mustache. Confusion was evident in his eyes: how could one blame him, after all that was happening. But what was he doing there, right next to Jordane? Why hadn't he left like everyone else?

"Hey," the man said after a moment, "I think she's not breathing anymore..."

Raphaël ran to join him, panicked: as he approached, he noticed that the stranger seemed to have a wound on his leg, and a bloodstain spreading on his pants. But he paid it no more attention, worried about his friend. He crouched beside her, dropping the mirror without realizing it, and placed his finger on her neck to try to find a pulse.

"Jordane!" he shouted in vain.

"What's happening here?" lamented the man behind him.

No pulse. Was she dead? Or was he not placing his finger correctly?

"I don't understand," continued the other behind him, "what does this mean?"

Jordane's face was pallid. He screamed her name several times, but she seemed asleep.

"What's happening to me," the man muttered as if to himself. "Is it because I let her escape? Is it a punishment? Or have my fantasies caught up with me... Now I'm a prisoner in my imaginary world..."

Raphaël ignored him: by repositioning his finger, he had just found a heartbeat. Weak, but it was there. He called Jordane, shook her, but she didn't move.

"Is this real, or am I dreaming? Have I gone mad?"

Raphaël continued to shake her.

"And if I kill her, once and for all, everything should sort itself out, right?"

He froze: not because of what he had just heard, but because an insect had just stung him in the back. Maybe a wasp. He turned around: the man was upon him, a screwdriver in hand. Covered in blood. Raphaël, sitting on the ground, passed his hand over his back and felt something warm and viscous. He then brought it to his face, and a new explosion above him illuminated his bloodied fingers: that's when the pain hit. Then he understood. And he screamed.

\*\*\*

Jordane watched the door explode from her hiding spot under the bed. She quickly made sure her powder case was well hidden under her dresser: if the monster found it, she was sure it would be the end of her. She saw the two pairs of slimy feet floating above the ground, dropping tiny spiders that scattered in their path. Then, the monster came dragging a red, almost shapeless mass wrapped in its silver thread.

She didn't waste time watching it approach and turned to gaze into the darkness at the back of her den: she concentrated and thought hard about what she wanted to see appear.

"Where are you hiding again, little mouse?" Billie said behind her.

She tried to ignore him and imagined what she had seen so many years ago: after all, even if it wasn't her world, it was her room, right? There had to be a possibility that it would work, that she could act just once in this nightmare.

The footsteps drew closer, and she felt something settle on her blanket.

"Under the bed, really?" Billie continued. "Come on, Jordane, don't be childish and come out from there..."

This time, she didn't even hear him: in the black mass of darkness under her bed, right in front of her, the two bulbous eyes stared at her. An irrational fear invaded her mind, urging her to flee, but even if she had wanted to listen, her body would not have followed; she felt it completely contract, and she began to tremble.

"Come on, I'm counting to three," Billie announced, "if you come out quietly, I'll be nice to you..."

The creature detached from her just a moment to see where the other voice was coming from, then its eyes returned to Jordane, like those of a frightened animal. She grimaced involuntarily as the memory of that fateful night, twenty years ago, began to resurface. How she had heard the little noise. How scared she had been, but still went to look under her bed. And the terror when the man emerged.

"Hey," she whispered.

It seemed the creature had recoiled even further against the wall.

"Hey, you. I know you're there."

It blinked, perhaps in surprise. A shiver of disgust ran through her, but she forced herself to continue.

"One..." the voice above them began.

Jordane flinched, but the creature did not take its eyes off her.

"You're a monster, right?" she continued. "A nice monster, you told me. I need you today. Right there, there's a bad monster. You said you'd protect me from the bad monsters that night, remember?"

"Two..." the bad monster grew impatient.

The creature didn't move.

"Go on, attack him. Defend me, or he'll kill me. He'll kill us both."

Still no reaction.

"Attack him, or I'll call my parents, and I'll call the police. You'll end up in jail."

This time, she thought she saw the round eyes widen even more. She almost swore it had glanced at Billie's feet, but it still didn't move.

"Is this going to work?" she wondered to herself. "If it doesn't, I'm doomed..."

There was no "three" in the countdown. No warning. Just the poker piercing the mattress and appearing right in front of her face. She screamed, but Billie's laughter filled the room. She backed away, but he had already withdrawn his weapon and stabbed randomly through the bed again. She heard the fabric crack and the metal rod appeared to her right.

"You want to play, let's play!" he growled.

She rolled to the side, and this time when the mattress tore again, she felt something touch her leg.

"Was that the sound of the mattress fabric or my pajamas?" she panicked.

She stepped back, bumping her head against a slat, and the weapon plunged just beside her ear, eliciting a scream from her and a giggle from Billie. With his other hand, he was now using the revolting corpse of his mother to rhythmically beat against the metal bed frame with a large spoon. She moved further back, until she felt something behind her. Something that shifted. It was like an animal emerging from its burrow. At lightning speed, the thing lunged at Billie, knocking the bed over in its path. Jordane saw her parents, their yellow discs in their eyes and the little creatures crawling on their white, parchment-like skin. The silver wires stretched in all directions, skillfully manipulated by the monster's hairy arms.

"What the..." Billie screamed as the man grabbed his arm, emitting a ferocious yell. With a nimble finger movement, he spun Jordane's mother around to deliver a violent blow to his face, knocking out a tooth in the process. With another gesture, he directed his other puppet to strike him in the throat with the poker. Blood sprayed to the ceiling, but Jordane wasn't even looking. The diversion had worked. She was firmly holding something in her right hand. She gazed at the bloody heap and thought she even saw a wink: without consulting each other, they had understood. She nodded her head, and lunged at the window to open it with her free hand.

Behind her, Billie let out a shrill laugh as he pulled the poker out of the unfortunate victim's belly, entangled in his entrails. "Do you think I can make you my puppet too with your intestines?" Jordane heard as she finally managed to open the window. She climbed onto the ledge, still clenching her fist. Raphaël was looking for a way to bring her back to his body, but it wouldn't be immediate. He would succeed, she knew, but in the meantime, she had to buy time, so she jumped.

No sooner had she left the ledge, she seemed to freeze in mid-air, as expected. Outside, the moon bathed the neighborhood in its benevolent aura. She smelled the warm concrete a few meters below her. She heard the grass whispering in the wind.

"You really think you can escape us?" she heard Billie's voice inside her head. "I'm going to give you a taste of the hell that awaits you, you'll see."

Then it was as if her entire body exploded. She lost all sensation, her heart stopped beating when it vanished, she stopped breathing when she lost her lungs. She struggled to keep her concentration on the thing she held in her right hand while her soul was exposed once more. Everything darkened around her as she shifted realities. Traveling further



into the Astral world. But she didn't let go of the object of her thoughts, clutching it even tighter with an invisible hand. If she let go, it was the end. Or rather, the beginning of the rest of her eternity, here in Duli.

When a kitchen slowly appeared around her, a terrible dread clutched her throat with its sharp claws. The emotion almost made her lose consciousness of the object, but she managed to hold on; however, something was wrong in the room. Intense terror seized her when a woman appeared in front of the sink.

"Why isn't he breathing why isn't he breathing why isn't he breathing..." a voice echoed in her head.

The woman was screaming into the phone. She was gasping, but not out of anger; out of fear.

"... he just drank his powdered milk how can it be what happened it's not true it's not true it's not true..." She looked at the countertop that had just appeared: a baby lay there, motionless, but he was not sleeping; there was no emotion emanating from this little being. He was dead, white foam at his lips. The woman's words now drowned in her sobs, while for her reality began to hit. Fear slowly gave way to despair. She had just lost something irreplaceable. This pain tore Jordane apart, but despite this, her thoughts were occupied with two things: the object she had brought with her, and Raphaël's voice. She had heard him speak, at some point. Something about people who had come to see his "program": so now, she remained listening, waiting for the moment he would call her. And only then, would she use what Inès had managed to give her.

The woman had now collapsed onto the tiled floor. Next to her lay a bottle, dripping milk into a small puddle. Jordane saw death hiding in the liquid: arsenic. She was in Duli, thirty years ago. And somewhere not far, the mine had caved in.

"My baby, my sweet baby..." the woman lamented, holding her lifeless son in her arms.

But already, everything was blurring around Jordane. The infinite sadness grew more distant, and the scenery changed again: vertical bars gradually appeared. Cold, rusted bars. On the other side, in a small room containing only a bed, a desk, and a toilet, a man cried. He had torn a strip of cloth from his blanket and was now wrapping it around his neck.

"Why me I don't want to I don't want to I don't want to..." he wept.

Jordane felt his fear, but she looked at what was on his desk as he tied his makeshift rope to the bars of his cell: a small glass bottle, and a parchment. A message was written on the paper, in a monstrous handwriting.

"I don't want to relive that, I don't want to relive that... Why did they choose me? I can't do this..." he continued.

The message was addressed to a certain Eustass. They were asking him to "trigger the next catastrophe" ...

Suddenly, the man let himself fall, caught by the now taut fabric, and at the same time, Jordane was sucked into an endless abyss.

She emerged in a setting she already knew this time: the faded pink cobblestones, the attractions rising around her like menacing silhouettes.

"Shit! It was supposed to be you!" the man in front of her yelled. "You screwed everything up! What's going to happen to me now!" Dull and flabby thuds sounded at each syllable: "WHY... DID... YOU... OPEN... THOSE... DAMN... GATES !!"

When a younger Oswald by ten years dropped his bloodied knife, Inès was dead.

"Why did it have to be that woman who entered in your place?" he spat, "if it was you on top of that lamppost, no one would have opened the doors!"

Jordane observed the man filled with as much fear as rage, but she didn't think about what she had under her eyes. She simply listened to a familiar voice that soothed and reassured her. Nonsense, certainly, but she clung to it now: "... one, two, one, two, three, two, one, zero, ..."

She absentmindedly watched the man responsible for their recent woes vanish like a dream. Inès had been manipulated, just like her. She was still paying the price, but Inès had given her the keys to salvation. All she had to do was hold on. Hold on long enough for Raphaël to regain his physical form.

"If he even makes it, otherwise it's all over," a voice in her head said.

No, she trusted him. She knew they would make it.

"The carnage is imminent," another voice said behind her.

She turned around: in the central square of the Palace of the Strange, Zoltar had come to life. His mechanical red eyes lit up behind his cherubic angel mask. With one hand, he caressed his crystal ball, glowing with a black light, and in the other, he still held his butcher knife.

"The stars predict a great feast tonight," he continued. "Do you want to know your future, young girl?"

There was a mechanical scraping sound, and a card emerged from a slot on the front of his machine.

"Come and get it," he taunted.

Jordane couldn't see what was on the paper from where she was, but she didn't move towards it; she couldn't move. She was focused on Raphaël: "*minus-one, minus-two, minus-one, zero, one, zero, one, zero...*"

"Come now..." the monster began, then: "Huh."

His eyes shone as bright as lasers, and she felt the uncomfortable sensation of being scrutinized. She felt him rummaging in her soul, powerless, until he found what she had brought with her.

"Impossible!" he spat. "Why do you have that with you!? It's not yours!"

He began to agitate in his glass cabin, and his crystal ball glowed brighter.

"What do you think you're going to do? Get away with it!?"

He raised his knife and slammed it down on the glass, shattering it into a thousand pieces. The shards of glass rained down with almost musical tinkle, flooding the cobblestone ground with their shiny reflections. The monster leaned forward and planted his knife into the ground. With a grunt, he pulled on his mechanical arm, and the entire machine began to advance towards Jordane, scraping the ground. She wanted to use the object to escape, she wanted to pull on the silver thread Inès had given her to return to her room, but on the other side of the silver filament, she felt Inès's energy telling her it was too early, that she had to hold on. She was saying Billie was still busy shredding the intruder, but if she returned too soon, she would miss her chance.

She had to wait for Raphaël.

Zoltar planted his weapon again and pulled himself closer, now barely more than two meters in front of her.

"Where did you get that?" he raged. "Do you think you're going to deprive us of another meal?"

He advanced again, now very close, and Jordane still couldn't move an inch. Just focus on the silver thread, on Raphaël, and hope. The monster raised his knife to attack her, but only sliced the air, still too far away. He moved one last time, and this time, he was close enough for Jordane to see what was written on the card:

*"A faithful friend is a powerful protector: whoever has found one has found a treasure."*

The monster raised his knife. She closed her eyes. And she heard it: "Jordane! Jordane!"

She exerted all her energy on the silver thread: on the other side, Inès received the message and pulled on it to bring her back. The universe disappeared faster than Zoltar's knife and his roar of rage was carried away like everything else in a whirlwind of darkness. A moment later, she was teleported and found herself in her childhood room, in the physical form these monsters had given her to play with her. Her hand still gripped the silver thread leading to Inès's broken arm. Billie was still in the same place, his puppets engaged with the man she had sent him. For a few seconds, he remained dazed, as if he didn't quite understand what was happening. That was enough time for Jordane to dive under her dresser and grab the object she had hidden. She opened the compact, and intense relief flooded her: she saw herself in the small mirror. Her body, at her adult age. But she saw herself lying askew, the compact as if fallen on the ground and lying on its side. Her heart sank in her chest when she saw the person grabbing her: Richard.

But was she afraid of another monster in her path?

"One more monster," she thought, "I'm going to make it."

Then she threw herself into the mirror: it was like being sucked into a tunnel as thin as a pinhead, accompanied by Billie's mournful wail realizing the situation, but when she emerged, a fiery ardor roared within her like a lion.

\*\*\*

When Jordane opened her eyes, she found herself face to face with Richard. His warm breath burned her skin, and all signs of intelligence had left his eyes: a gaze so empty it made one wonder if he was simply dead, frozen in his ultimate desire for murder like a wax dummy. He was brandishing the tip of his screwdriver directly at her, but she wasn't afraid. Not even when a firework exploded above them, casting a crown of purple light around his head.

Perhaps he was caught off guard when Jordane suddenly woke up. Maybe he was startled by the explosion in the sky, or saw something in her eyes that destabilized him. The absence of fear?

Whatever the reason, his hesitation - a few seconds at most - was long enough for Jordane to grab his hand and direct the screwdriver right into one of his eyes. The sharp tool plunged into the eyeball as if it were butter, and Richard let out an animalistic scream that seemed to echo throughout the entire park. He rose, bringing his now bloody hands to his face. He writhed in pain, staggering like a drunkard. Jordane got up in turn, appreciating having regained her

woman's body, and she lunged at the killer, striking him with all her weight. The giant, unbalanced and half-blinded, tried to catch himself but only managed to grab the end of the cannon's barrel pointed skyward. He tipped over and crushed Richard: they fell onto a wooden crate that cracked under the weight of the man and the fire-spewing machine. Small red tubes scattered around them, rolling away, and when one of them stopped against Jordane's foot, she mimed a "shit" with her mouth, and she started running to join her friend.

"Raphaël!" she cried, throwing herself on him.

A red stain had spread across his t-shirt, but it wasn't big enough to come from an artery.

"Get up!" she urged, trying to shake him without finishing him off, but he didn't respond.

She turned his head and tapped his cheek. His eyes were half-open, but he still didn't react.

"Come on! We have to get out of here," she shouted, trying to lift him.

She looked back: Richard was trying to get up, panting like a caged lion, but his hands were rolling on the red tubes, causing him to fall back, further enraged.

"I've been telling you this for a while, and it's only now that you realize it..."

Her gaze returned to Raphaël, who had come to. He tried to give her a pitiful smile, but could only grimace in pain.

"Raphaël!" she exclaimed, relieved. "Can you get up?"

He placed a hand on the ground and rose painfully, with Jordane's help.

"I'm going to need help walking," he grumbled, "I'm in fucking pain."

She put his arm over her shoulder, realizing just then that he was heavier than he seemed, and they started moving towards the stairs that would take them back down the park alley.

"Holy shit, what's happening to him?" Raphaël yelled.

She followed his gaze and saw Richard at the edge of the stage, still sprawled over the crate debris. He was gripping the screwdriver handle with both hands, and they just had time to see his eye leave its socket as he pulled the tool out of his skull, where it remained stuck. A spurt of blood shot from his empty socket, and he let out an inhuman scream that sent chills down their spines. The cannon's muzzle was still positioned over him, preventing him from getting up, but he began to grab it to free himself.

"Why isn't it firing?" Jordane whispered to herself.

Raphaël wanted her to repeat, but he was interrupted by Richard's cry of rage:

"JORDANE!!! I WILL KILL YOU!!!"

He grabbed the muzzle of the cannon, but the cylinders still in the crate made him lose his balance.

"Why hasn't it gone off yet?" she lamented.

Raphaël was about to ask her when his eyes fell on one of the red objects rolling on the ground: a firework. Then, he looked at the muzzle of the cannon, aimed straight at Richard: was it every two minutes? Or was it random?

He didn't have time to ponder further: the shot simply went off. A yellow burst briefly illuminated the entire scene, even Richard's empty socket, and it was as if a fairy flew out to bury itself under his arm. Then nothing. They remained motionless for several seconds, all more stunned than the others. Richard was the first to react, but his scream was instantly drowned in a formidable shockwave that passed through all their bodies. The noise tore through the sky, and they were blinded by a white light, leaving only the silhouette of Richard visible. The explosion spread into hundreds of sparks that crackled in turn. They heard an agonizing scream grow louder and louder, and Jordane finally snapped out of her daze: she pulled Raphaël towards the stairs, and they hurried down the steps to escape. When they emerged from the castle, they heard another detonation. Then another, and yet another. They circled back along the stage, and gunfire cracked in all directions, sending multicolored sprays in every direction, like a grand finale on a festival night.

"Where are we going, Jo?" Raphaël yelled, muffled by the whistles and bangs, mesmerized by the sparks shooting up from the stage like a tornado.

"To the exit!" she shouted, pointing with her free hand to the central alley.

Black smoke began to rise from the castle. She pulled Raphaël, still half over her shoulder, and they set off. They left behind the noise of the colorful explosions, and as she cast one last look behind her, she saw a tall, thin shadow slowly emerge from the light of the stage: the black silhouette walked slowly, seemingly unaware of the chaos surrounding it. As it stepped over the edge without flinching or slowing, like a zombie, Richard's body crashed to the ground like a doll.

He lifted his head towards them, his face now nothing but a surface of charred embers, two black holes staring at them from afar, then it fell back to the ground, the long red flames consuming the rest of his body.

\*\*\*

The mass of flesh crashed against the doors of the Palace of the Strange like a raging ocean. When one pushed from the back of the crowd to try to make a way, the force moved through the assembly like a shockwave, rebounding against the sealed gates before returning to its sender, further compressing the unfortunate ones who, for some, could no longer even breathe. Each man, each woman became one, a great reptilian brain governed by panic with only one idea in mind, to push to get out. Even their bodies merged into a singularity, all fused into a suffocating mass of flesh. Everyone wanted to leave, yet, the Palace of the Strange was finally awakening. Something was emerging from a deep sleep, hidden in the depths of the park: behind the windows of each attraction, in the dark corners of every street. The true owners of the place were summoned for their feast, long delayed: each missed heartbeat, each lung emptied of air was a delicious awakening, gradually rousing them from their slumber.

Someone vomited in the assembly, their organs starting to fail. A few screams of terror could be heard tearing through the night, but most could only utter groans. The few lucky ones who had managed to find refuge high up extended their hands to pull the weakest from the crowd, but even the strength of Hercules would not have been enough to extract them from the mass.

It only took one thing: a fall. The first person to fall would knock over their neighbor, who in turn could only crush theirs. A chain reaction would begin, and once the dominoes collapsed, the trampling would start.

Raphaël and Jordane looked at each other with concern when the cries for help and shrill screams began to emerge from the corner of the main alley. They continued arm in arm, moving painfully with Raphaël's injury. Then, they passed through the gaping mouth of the mad scientist, accompanied by the sinister moans echoing along the wall with peeling paint. But when they emerged, nothing had prepared them for the sight that awaited them.

It was like arriving in hell.

Human beings with faces distorted by pain, or fear. Arms reaching out from the crowd trying to grasp something to escape, but fists clenched in emptiness. They wanted to turn back. Find another way out, hide at the other end of the park, anything but not stay here; but behind them, the black smoke had transformed into a threatening storm cloud: the entire park was burning.

Jordane took the key to the gates in her hand and placed Raphaël against the large decorative panel illustrating a futuristic city.

"What are you doing?" he worried.

"You came back to save me earlier," she replied, "now it's my turn to make sure."

"And Inès?"

Jordane stopped and answered softly:

"No matter, all that matters is that we both get out of here."

Raphaël nodded, and she headed towards the crowd, firmly holding the key in her fist. She reached the last row, but when she tried to make her way through, she was brutally pushed back, as if she had been hit by an electric shock. She placed her hand on a man's shoulder to ask him to move aside, but he turned to her with a savage growl, foam at the mouth. She tried to pull towards her a woman with half-dropped glasses and a bloody lip, but she received an elbow strike that almost knocked them both over.

"Shit," she cursed, drowned out by the cries of the tormented. And something else too, like the crackling of fire.

Her mind went back to the scene she had seen during her astral journey. How she had followed Inès, when she had opened the door. She had sneaked in, but not just any way. She advanced in a zigzag.

So she slipped between two people, sinking into the mass. She moved diagonally, passing between people at an angle, but it was like making her way through a river of sand. A river that was slowly contracting. That almost prevented her from moving. That almost prevented her from breathing. She continued, someone grabbed her hair, but she managed to free herself by scratching their hands. Every face she met had wide eyes, some with a vacant look. The visitors in the back were still screaming, but the deeper she went, the more they became silent, beginning to concentrate all their efforts to get air into their lungs. And it was hot. Terribly hot, a real furnace. She was sweating. She found herself against a family crying, the father carrying his child on his shoulders: he pointed at something behind them, horrified. She couldn't follow his finger, her head completely blocked between the chest of a woman and the shoulders of someone else, but she knew he was pointing at the fire approaching.

She couldn't get through them, so she changed direction. She headed left, still diagonally. Someone grabbed her blouse sleeve and tore the fabric to her shoulder. She didn't make two meters without being blocked again. She was hot. She was overheating. She couldn't cool down despite her panting. No, she couldn't breathe anymore. The crowd was compressing her. She continued her zigzag by changing direction again: she almost fell when her leg got stuck, but she managed to free herself, leaving one of her shoes on the ground. She looked up and saw someone floating in the air. No, he was sitting on the ticket booths.

"The door! she thought, I'm not far now!"

She wanted to scream at everyone to move aside, but when she opened her mouth, she realized with horror that she could no longer speak. The man on the roof extended his hand towards the crowd. Instinctively, she wanted to approach him to grab it, but several people imitated her, and she received an elbow strike in the nose, quickly feeling the coppery taste of blood rolling on her lips to invade her mouth. She wanted to bring her hand to her face, but she couldn't extract herself: in fact, she realized that her whole body was numb. Someone behind her screamed: "SAVE ME! I DON'T WANT TO DIE!" and the person pushed everyone. She felt the wave pass through her, then her front neighbor. The wave spread to the gates, tearing terrifying screams from the front row, then rebounded back in her direction. This time, her bare foot tripped over something, and she lost her balance. She fell on someone, and he toppled in turn. They were all too compressed to fall, but if the shockwave spread, they would start to end up on the ground, and that would be the end.

"Jo, you can do it..." a voice in her head said.

She believed it was Inès' voice, but perhaps it was just her inner voice. Maybe she was beginning to run out of oxygen up there. She continued zigzagging for a few more meters and couldn't believe her eyes when she saw the heavy iron bars. At that moment, she was thrust against the grill, as if charged by a bull: she was so compressed that she couldn't catch her breath. She looked around: dozens, if not hundreds of arms, were reaching out towards the parking lot, seeking someone to come to their rescue. Some were hanging or at odd angles, probably broken or dislocated as the unfortunate ones were tossed about. She looked at the parking lot: everything was so calm, just on the other side of the bars. The moon was beautiful, illuminating the countless cars parked side by side. The forest behind began to blur. Her vision started to cloud: she still hadn't caught her breath.

She looked down, and to her left, at hip level, she found a lock. She just had to stick her right arm through the bars, pass the key to the other side of the lock, and she could get out. She tried to move, but she could no longer feel her arm. She didn't even know if she was still holding the key. A shock wave crushed her against the grill, and she thought her head would break to pass between two bars. She focused on lifting her hand, but it felt like the grill would slice her skin or break her ribs. She still couldn't breathe, and her heart now seemed to have stopped beating. Everything turned black around her.

She could no longer see the parking lot, nor hear the groans and moans around her. The curtains had been drawn. On the other side of the grill, right in front of her, stood a little girl. The child she had been so many years ago, the one who believed in monsters under her bed. She was sure she was dying. Jordane seemed to be drowning, sinking into black water. She contemplated the child she had been. Perhaps more accurately, her inner child, the one she carried with her every day. The one afraid to express her feelings, who didn't want to show her flaws, her weaknesses. The one who judged others so as not to be judged. The one who rectified others' injustices because the world had been unfair to her.

"Are you scared?" Jordane asked her inner child. She timidly nodded her head. "It's OK to be scared," she continued. "But we'll get through this, I promise." She seemed a bit reassured. "It's thanks to Raphaël that I'm still here. So, we're both going to get out." Jordane looked down at her right hand, and the little girl followed her gaze. "Can you help me?" she asked. "I can't do it alone, I need your help." The little girl hesitated, then took Jordane's hand in hers. She pulled it towards her and directed it towards the lock. "Thank you," Jordane thought just in time, and the click of the key in the lock brought her back to reality.

The world around her lit up again. She was back in the Palace of the Strange, still choking against a grill crushing her face and lungs. Her hand had passed to the other side, and she held the key in the lock. She turned her wrist, and the lock unlocked. The door swung open, and she was propelled out of the park like a cannonball. She crashed to the ground but managed to take a gulp of fresh air, which re-energized her. She managed to stand up and faced the door of the Palace of the Strange: it was wide open, but no one had come out. The crowd was screaming, arms stretched forward, but each person was so compressed that they couldn't detach themselves. Behind them, flames began to show, and the other smoke escaping in clouds made her feel like she was looking at a painting of tortured souls trapped in hell.

She threw herself at the mass of flesh and grabbed random arms, trying to pull them out. At first, she didn't succeed, and she thought they would all be consumed by the fire right there, unable to escape despite the removed obstacle. But when she managed to extract one person, it was like she had created a crack in a dam: drops began to escape, then the flow streamed out of the park entrance. Some visitors sprawled on the ground, catching their breath, crying. Some didn't even look at her and ran straight to their cars. She moved aside to avoid being trampled, and the crowd flooded the parking lot. She heard engine noises, people shouting names, but she looked on the other side of the fence, worried.



On the other side of the grill, she finally saw what she was looking for: Raphaël. He hadn't moved, still leaning against the wall. He had made a makeshift bandage with his jacket. But he was absorbed in something. He was looking beyond the gaping mouth of the mad scientist. She followed his gaze, and she saw it too: in the distance, at the end of the alley, they saw Oswald lying on the ground. His hands were flailing, trying to grab anything, but the thing dragging him by the foot was too strong. Once the crowd had evacuated, the calm returned enough for them to hear his last pleas: "WAAAAAIT!!" he screamed in the distance as he disappeared into the flames. "GIVE ME ANOTHER CHANCE!! PLEASE!!"

\*\*\*

Raphaël barely had time to step out of the park when Jordane jumped on him to embrace him.

"Ouch, ouch, ouch, you're finishing me off," he grimaced.

"I'm so glad we made it!" she exclaimed, hugging him even tighter.

And that was exactly what she felt: joy and relief. Sharing it filled her with a strange, but positive feeling. Raphaël brought his hand to his bloody nose, frowning.

"Are you going to be okay?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied confidently. "I will be."

They moved away from the park and leaned against the old white car that had been abandoned for years. Raphaël slid to the ground with a grimace.

"I hope the firefighters arrive soon," he said, pointing to the fire that was already beginning to die down. "It's starting to hurt a lot." They watched the last visitors leave the parking lot in panic: there were no cars left, only the wreck against which they leaned, so no one had died.

"There won't be a feast tonight..." Jordane thought.

But they saw someone, unlike everyone else, heading towards the park. Their eyes met, and the person came towards them.

"Fuck!" the woman exclaimed, "Are you okay?"

They nodded, and she looked at the park almost entirely gone up in smoke: "I have to go in there," she said, "there might still be people."

"No, there's no one left," assured Jordane, "and the firefighters will take care of the rest, it's safer to stay here."

"You can't know that," she retorted harshly, "and the firefighters are lazy, they won't arrive in time. It's up to me to take care of it, it's my job."

The woman pretended to leave, then addressed them one last time: "And I hope you didn't scratch my car by lying on it, it better be spotless when I take it back at the end of my shift tomorrow morning."

Then they watched Inès rush into the empty park: the one who had been there that night, the one who wandered in this park every night since her death, ten years ago. Jordane thought that no one could help her, and that she would continue to guard the park every night until the end of time, but that it was her responsibility.

She rested her head against Raphaël's shoulder: "Thank you again," she said, "if you hadn't been there, I would still be in that park."

He nodded in response.

"I'm sorry for everything I said."

"No worries," he whispered.

"I'm grateful to have you by my side, and I hope it lasts a long time."

She felt him smile, and they both started laughing: already, they could hear the sirens in the distance, on the other side of the forest.

"Will you have enough space in your magazine to write everything that just happened?" he asked.

"No," she replied, "I don't think this story is meant to be told."



## Epilogue

Jordane blew on her hot coffee, her mind elsewhere. In front of her, the computer screen had already switched to sleep mode, granting her a brief respite from the dizzying job search. The first thing she had done upon returning home, after of course indulging in a long, very long hot bath, was to draft her resignation letter from Tales of the Crypt: she had tossed her article draft into the trash bin, and this time inspiration had come swiftly for her farewell letter. Indeed, she hadn't needed long to decide she wanted to mourn her terrible experience in Duli, which included turning the page on several aspects of her life that had become, in the blink of an eye - the duration of an evening -, trivial.

No more playing the competitive game to secure a few miserable pages in a magazine, no more thriving in an environment that didn't suit her just to prove she could handle any kind of pressure. No more investigating mysterious and nonsensical stories - though, in her quest for monsters, she had indeed found some...

However, as thrilling as this wind of change and opportunities was, she had to admit she felt mostly terrified: she would have to question herself, adapt to the unknown, and, worst of all, prepare for possible failures.

She heard a knock at her apartment door: probably the delivery person bringing their enormous sushi platter. He was early, and she imagined the chef furiously slicing fish, thinking he was serving four people. She turned to look at Raphaël, who pretended not to hear. He lay on the couch, working on his laptop resting on his stomach, typing slowly. If one thing hadn't changed, it was that he was still by her side, and if the nightmare they had each endured taught her anything, it was to appreciate her luck and feel grateful.

She tore the page from her notebook, which bore only a small list of crossed-out publishing houses and magazines, rolled it into a ball, and threw it across the room towards her friend. It arched beautifully over the glass coffee table and crashed onto the laptop's keyboard before falling to the floor.

"You just deleted the entire payroll database of the multinational I'm auditing," he said nonchalantly.

"You told me if I called, you'd get up to fetch them!" she laughed.

"Come on, Jordane," he replied, "you can't make guests do the work, can you?"

She rolled her eyes and volunteered to open the door. She crossed her living room, always impeccably tidy and carefully arranged, to reach the entrance hall. Her stomach growled as she touched the door handle, which she opened without further ado.

No one.

She peeked her head into the building's corridor and looked both ways: the building was empty and silent. Had he already left? No, he hadn't had time to reach the distant stairs, even if running. Was it a prank?

She looked down at her feet and saw a small object on her doormat. A glass bottle with a rolled-up parchment inside. She picked it up, opened the cork, and pulled out the paper. Unfolding it, she read the note in silence:

YOU HAVE RUINED OUR MEAL  
AND WE ARE VERY ANGRY  
WE WILL GIVE YOU ONE LAST  
CHANCE TO SURVIVE  
TONIGHT WHEN THE MOON IS AT ITS HIGHEST  
YOU WILL BE IN DULI  
WAITING FOR INSTRUCTIONS  
IF YOU REFUSE  
YOU WON'T SPEND A NIGHT  
WITHOUT SEEING US IN YOUR DREAMS  
YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO BLINK  
WITHOUT CATCHING A GLIMPSE OF US

OUT OF THE CORNER OF YOUR EYE  
THEN OUR PATIENCE EXHAUSTED  
WE WILL EAT YOU

**THE END**

## Notes from the author

Acknowledgments: First and foremost, a huge thank you for reading my book to the end! I sincerely hope you enjoyed the story!

Next, I would like to thank my sister for being my beta tester and helping me construct the digital version of my novel.

About the Novel: I drew a lot of inspiration from real events in writing the story of Duli - it's true that reality often stranger than fiction - and you might recognize some of them. In general, I think I was greatly influenced by Stephen King, my favorite author, as well as possibly by Silent Hill, which could perhaps be considered a big sister to Duli.

Regarding the writing process, writing this book was pure pleasure for me. As a developer, it allowed me to do something other than writing code, to have a more creative process, but also, integrating it into an NFT enabled me to use my professional skills wisely. As a technician, I was reassured to be able to rely on an analytical method to build my story, titled "Story Grid," which I found very interesting. To create my characters, I loosely based them on theories about soul wounds, and even if one doesn't fully subscribe to this concept, it at least provided me with a "coherent" framework upon which to base my characters - you might recognize certain wounds and masks in the characters of the story.

My story is, of course, open to interpretation, but I wanted to convey a message and illustrate my idea that we are often drawn to what we fear most and condemn ourselves to repeat the same mistakes over and over, as if we were creating our own hell. This is what my characters experienced, and what all the faceless souls of Duli live through.

This book is also another type of experimentation: first, as an employee in a traditional company, I am used to working on a project with compartmentalized tasks. If I develop a product, it's because there is a study manager beforehand, a salesperson afterwards, human resources, documentalists, accountants in parallel, and an entire hierarchy of bosses above. If I had proposed my book to a publishing house, it would have been corrected by one employee, translated into English by another, there would probably have been no illustrations, and the cover would have been designed by yet another person. There would then have been a whole legal, advertising, distribution process managed by an entire industry. As a fan of horror stories, I grew up reading "creepypasta" found across the Internet, distributed by the community, for the community, and that's what I wanted to recreate with this story. Firstly, AI was decisive in helping me with various tasks: correcting spelling mistakes, creating illustrations, and translating into English. Then, Web3 allowed me to distribute my book in a new type of monetizing experience through simple gas fees. In a way, these two technologies allowed me to manage my book from A to Z and include it in a purely community-based economy.

Finally, I wanted to distribute my book for free for a simple reason: to pay homage to Open Source. I have worked in the industrial field for a long time, and the grip that proprietary software distributors have is incredible. There's simply no place for Open Source in this environment. When I discovered the first free and open-source tools, I was amazed by the leap forward they offered, both technically - they were of incomparable quality to my proprietary software, decades ahead of them - and ideologically - this notion of participatory and non-exclusive. I don't want to go back.

I find that the literary world operates in the same way: it's a permission-based system - you have to go through a publishing house - and closed - buying a physical or a digital version subject to a license telling you that you have the right to read it but it does not belong to you.

Web3 is a revolution that brings us a permissionless, uncompromising ownership, and open system. While the obvious example is finance, I wanted to experiment with this ideology in the world of art, and thus make my work open as well.

I chose to create an NFT of my book because, on one hand, it's time to prove that they can be much more than simple images, and on the other hand, I find it an interesting system to create a community economy where anyone can choose to compensate an author for a work they appreciate.

I would be very grateful to receive your opinions or suggestions for improvement, you can contact me at:

<https://warpcast.com/mehdib>

My books can be found in various formats at:

<https://github.com/mehdi-d-b>

As for me, I'm eager to start writing again. There might be a little room for a volume 2, otherwise, I plan to explore other terrifying stories to tell you.







